

Chapter 9

Data is like garbage. You'd better know what you are going to do with it before you collect it.

—Mark Twain

Rome, Italy

Arriving on the red-eye from Bilbo, Mark went out to grab some cheap microwave dinners as Daniel crashed out in their cheap motel on Rome's west side. It was a functional double-bed room with a small kitchen, scant utensils, and no cookware. A single light stood on a side table between red bedcovers that, oddly, set off the gaudy golden-flecked wallpaper; the carpet smelled faintly of mildew.

There had been little conversation during their travel. While Mark was all business handling the transport details and accommodations, Daniel was relaxed, unburdened with travel complications. After their quick dinner, Mark started the conversation.

"I've been thinking." He began while bundling up the trash, "Remember that numismatics guy I talked about?"

"Yeah, you said something about his ideas on the Book of Revelations, as it pertained to that coin you and Arazola were discussing—if I remember correctly." Daniel grabbed two cokes from the mini-fridge, tossing one at Mark.

"Well, remember that he guessed correctly about the name Corvus."

"What about it?"

"That coin. It's a unique, a . . . signet badge, I believe the guy called it, a recasting of a coin during Domitian's reign. The original coin commemorated his son's rise as ruler of the world.

“That’s right, but the kid died. Is there any pepper in this place?” Daniel rummaged around the cabinetry until Mark tossed him a couple paper packets of pepper before continuing.

“On the back of the coin was a picture of the kid sitting on a globe reaching out to seven stars. There were only six stars on the redesigned signet badge, and the letter C had replaced the letter F, which he said stood for filial, meaning son. He figured the letter C to be the name of the Emperor’s family bird omen thing.”

“Bird omen thing? You mean augury?” Daniel grinned at his friend, “The Raven, which we know is Corvus in Latin.”

“Yup, that’s it.” He laughed, “You know, *I* had to learn how to shoot before I learned how to read—but anyway—that it’s a sign of things yet to come.”

“Alright. Where you going with this?”

“Bear with me.” Mark cracked the coke, which overflowed onto the carpet. “He talked about that Revelations Book, where the first Beast was the rise of the Roman Empire from the sea of Gentiles and shit. The second Beast was a crimson one that he figured was the New Emperor, but he also said a woman was riding on it. Could that woman be a metaphor for Israel?”

“Yes, I think so. For most exegesis scholars, it seems pretty clear in Revelations that it does.”

“Ok.” Mark shook the excess soda off his hand. “So what does that indicate. I think it means that Israel will somehow back the new Emperor. I was just reading this article on the plane about how the construction of the Third Temple may play a role in the ‘last days’ and that it’s supposed to be the place where this prophet guy speaks from.”

“And somehow, this Corvus has a hand in it?” Daniel was pretty sure where this was leading, “I guess that’s not too much of a stretch. The Temple’s relation to God as a place for

sacrifice to Him is no longer necessary as the Messiah has already made the final sacrifice. The Temple they're building now is for humanistic considerations. I guess it would be the perfect place for a false prophet to make prophecies. We are told in the Bible that the lawless one will gain accreditation with Israel through false miracles.”

“Lawless One?”

“Yes, although there have been many anti-Christ, the last one is described in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 as the man of lawlessness. He declares himself as a law unto himself—declares himself as God.

“Why does it have to be a sham? He’s a demon spirit—right? Or possessed by one; Father Stempora said they can move inanimate objects and such.”

“Perhaps, but I think it will be something a little more substantial than a circus show.”

“Like rising from the dead.” Mark pointed at him, “That was my thought too. After Markander explained the whole soul-jump thing, it would not be all that difficult to kill him and, three days later, have him ‘resurrected’. My bet is that that would be pretty convincing.”

“Yeah, I bet it would to most. I think any knowledgeable Christian would not be so easily fooled, but yeah, Jews and Muslims are still awaiting the Messiah. ‘My people are destroyed from a lack of knowledge’—Hosea 4:6.” Daniel gave Mark an exaggerated wink.

“Maybe,” Mark laughed, “We still don’t know the meaning behind the six stars. I wish I had my phone; my coin pics were on it—for all the good that does us now. I wanted Arazola to have a look at the real thing.”

“I’m sure he looked it up online.”

“I know, but maybe not *that* particular coin; it *was* quite unique. So why would the religious types of Israel even consider listening to this false prophet-dude.”

“Because they do not believe the Christ, the Messiah—meaning the chosen one by God—has already come.”

Mark shifted his stance, “So that’s it, huh? That’s what the whole new Temple thing is about?”

“Yeah. Christ was the ultimate and final sacrifice to God. That’s why he’s referred to as the Lamb of God. From that point, God no longer requires sacrifices; hence, no Temple is necessary.”

“Understandable. I think we just might be witnessing your theory of a world religion coming to be—this new Temple seems to be it. Will there be a false Christ?”

“Well, I don’t think there is a false Messiah if that’s what you mean. Jesus warns that there will be many claiming to be Christ, which also happened quite a bit in the first century. It does talk a lot about the false prophet.”

“Still, I wish I had my phone to look this shit up.”

“We have a few days to kill until Arazola returns, and I know of a place we could get all the data we need. It’s in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.”

“How’s that?” Mark rubbed his forehead.

“The Vatican Library.”

“Oh, right. You got a card or something like that?”

“Yes,” Daniel laughed, “We’ll need a pass from Arazola’s secretary. I think you will like the place—it’s quite amazing—and uh, try not to shoot the guards, they’re Swiss. We don’t need an international incident on our hands.”

“All I can do is try.”

Three days later, they finally met up with Arazola—who found *them* in the library. They had been in the numismatics area, but the earliest Roman coin on file was from 897, so Mark lost interest and went off to gawk at the ceiling art. Daniel moved to the periodical reading room to check out magazine articles on current geopolitical threats to Israel.

“Daniel, my son. I heard you were back in Rome.” Arazola placed his hand on Daniel, hovering over an article at a table.

“Your eminence,” Daniel looked up, surprised. “It is good to see you again. Your travels must have agreed with you. You look well.” Daniel stood.

“You flatter an old man, but yes, it was querulous though quite enlightening. I am surprised to see you so soon.” He grabbed Daniel by the arm and led him away, speaking in a low voice. “I may have some additional insight into your, uh . . . assailant.”

“Yes, I too, have much to tell. We happened to run across that fellow Asker again.”

Arazola stopped in his tracks, looking keenly at Daniel. “Really?”

Daniel only nodded.

“And by we, I assume your friend the detective was with you?”

“And still is.” Daniel looked around the vast library, “He got bored and wandered off somewhere . . .”

“I will have him brought to my offices; we have much to discuss. This way, please.” As Arazola set off, Daniel noticed a stoop he had not seen before. Looks like the old Archbishop is carrying quite the load. The trip to America must not have been all that great.

Once seated in Arazola’s simple office. It took almost thirty minutes for Mark to relate the events of the clone attack at Daniel’s residence and the incidents in the cave. Arazola was mainly

silent throughout the story, only inquiring about Markander and Walter and their experience with the “Messenger from God”. He was amazed that it could manifest through a clone.

Daniel only pitched in to relate the soul jump experience Markander had discussed. It explained how John Asker and the Scarecrow kept battling for the spot-of-conscious at Daniel’s church. The concept of the SOC was consistent with their observations.

As they related the trials of the past week, Daniel was amazed at Mark’s ability to recall the events with so much clarity. Mark wound up discussing Prophecy, and after he sketched a well-detailed picture of the signet coin for Arazola, he compared it with one from an online site. The dissimilarities were obvious.

“Any idea of the meaning of these stars?” Mark asked. “I still can’t align it with these events, it may mean nothing, but I wanted to be sure.”

“I’ve been looking for a meaning for three days,” Daniel added, “And I keep coming up with some possibilities, but nothing makes sense.”

“What is your strongest possibility?” Arazola asked.

Daniel looked over at Mark before responding. “It’s from Revelations 17:13.”

“Yes,” Arazola recalled, “The ten horns that are ten kings without a kingdom who give power and authority to the beast,”

“Yeah, but that number does not line up with the coin’s six stars. We postulated that the figure on the earth is the Beast, but even if we take that figure into account, it’s still seven,” Mark added.

“Do you think the coin has something to do with Prophecy?” Arazola asked.

“Well, from what I’ve read,” Daniel replied, “The Arabs are threatening the Jews again, and this time the Russians and Iran are involved. The Chinese are maneuvering to assist Iran in

dominating the area to cut off Israel's Kurdish oil supply. Iran has just purchased another 150 J-10 Chinese fighters. The times seem to be rapidly darkening for Israel."

"Are you referring to the Tribulation persecution of the Jews?" Arazola asked.

"Yes," Daniel turned to Mark, "It's when nations go against Israel, and things get so lousy they cry out for the Christ, the Messiah, to appear."

"We have been reading about the Apocalyptic Prophecies," Mark said, shifting a little in his seat. "Apparently, the president of Iran also believes that attacking Israel is the precursor to the appearance of the Muslim Messiah—the Mahdi."

"Apocalyptic Prophecy? You believe these clones have something to do with the end times?" Arazola asked, leaning into the conversation.

"Well, last time we met, we discussed the possibility that these clones may be heralding it," Mark offered tentatively.

"And that this might be a prelude to the time of Jakob's distress." Daniel pressed the point.

"I believe that time has already passed, at least Biblically." Arazola calmly replied.

"But what about the warning from Jesus in Matthew 24:21?"

"I believe that had already happened during the 1st century when Rome crushed the Jewish revolt under Vespasian and then later under his son Titus, who destroyed the Temple." Arazola sat back, "I believe the reference to 'Jakob's trouble' in Jeremiah 30:7 is during the Assyrian conquest. I understand that many people place these events as occurring in the future during the Tribulation period. I don't discount that theory."

"But you don't seem to advocate it either," Mark observed.

"Well, in both Biblical references, the Temple, which lies at the very heart of the Jewish theological and sociological being, is destroyed. The 'great distress' might be the Roman siege of

Jerusalem. The historian Josephus records women cooking their own to avoid starvation and the political destruction of a proud nation not seen since the Assyrian conquest. In both instances, the destruction of the Temple scatters the Jews. As to the Second Coming, remember that not even Jesus, nor the Angels in heaven, know the time of his return—only the Father knows.”

“Then, these references do not point to a Third Temple?” Mark asked.

“I do not believe that is so. Much has been written recently about the importance of the Third Temple and its role in the Tribulation. The third Temple is pretty much a statement of humans to humans. It has no real biblical meaning. The Temple was a tabernacle, a house for God to dwell when visiting the earth. This is why animal sacrifices for sin were made there. When God was in the first Tabernacle, a cloud was present, and at night time, a fire was within the cloud to let the people know, He was still there. The scriptures tell us that God came to Earth in Christ Jesus, who made the last sacrifice for all sin—for all time.”

“When did the Temple become insignificant, before or after it was destroyed?” Mark looked over at Daniel.

“Immediately after Christ’s death on the cross, the curtain into the sacrifice room was torn in two, signifying the sacrificial rites were no longer required or accepted. Jesus had stated that the Temple would be destroyed, and he would raise it in three days. Here, he is obviously calling himself the Temple, and if he is the Temple of God, what could a man-made structure represent? Renewing the sacrificial rites would be a false sacrifice and an insult to God because any action in this manner would suggest that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was insufficient.”

“As you said before.” Mark was suddenly saddened by the weight of the conversation.

“Mark has been trying to tie in what role the cloning Jumps may play.” Daniel explained, “It’s been bothering him.”

“There is no reason to despair, young man. Proverbs 3:5 tells us to: Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.”

“Human understanding is all I have,” Mark countered brusquely. “But I must admit, there is no way to sort out all these Prophecies—at least not with my simple understanding. I do understand one thing, though. These spirit-enhanced clone-things are now being placed in positions of authority within the legions.”

“How did you draw that conclusion?” Arazola asked.

“When we were in the cave, the commander of the troops was the Asker-clone.”

“Huh . . .” Arazola sat back, the lines on his forehead deepening.

“Yes, and we think they may be able to control other clones; maybe affect humans as well,” Daniel colored it in. “Markander spoke of a visit to some spiritual therapist in . . .”

“He called her a witch.” Mark interrupted.

“Ok, a witch. At any rate, during a séance in Philadelphia, Raphael—the spirit in the Novak clone—commanded the woman to be silent, and she was struck mute.”

Arazola rubbed two-day-old whiskers on his face. “Gentlemen, these occurrences are most alarming. I believe my greatest fears may actually be coming to light. I would like you to meet with Archbishop Bechou. He is the Apostolic Nuncio for the EU, amongst other things.”

“I am not familiar with him. Is he a part of the Vatican Police?” Daniel looked over at Mark. They had discussed that Vatican Intelligence might get involved.

Arazola caught the meaning of Daniel’s look. “Not the police, but I think you understand.”

Mark rubbed his forehead. “Are we to relate all this again? I mean, do you trust this guy’s a . . . position?”

Arazola laughed at Mark's expression. "Well, he doesn't wear a cloak and dagger if that's what you're alluding to. Archbishop Bechou was initially from the tiny country of Gambia. He rose quickly in the church due to his ability to think on his feet and identify emerging political machinations. Once, when a long-standing African leader, removed by a legitimate democratic vote, refused to abdicate power peaceably, Bechou met with the man and convinced him to abide by the political process—he was nineteen at the time. He's been instrumental in a few exchanges of power." Arazola stood to refill his tea.

"Wow," Mark exclaimed.

"Indeed. Bechou's been successful working with UN forces during many a crisis. That's what eventually brought him to his current position. He is officially known as the Vatican's International Relations Advisor, unofficially known as our Director of Intelligence."

"In light of the current events, you can understand our caution." Daniel politely clarified. "What about the possibility of foreign agents in the Vatican?"

It was an appropriate question. Last year, after uncovering the identity of Corvus in an in-depth study of Church historical documents, Arazola discovered a 16th-century plot to destabilize the church's authority in Spain, a critical time for the spread of Christianity. Had Corvus succeeded, Catholicism may never have taken root in Spain, or for that matter, any of the Spanish holdings in the New World. There was even some indication that the Vatican itself was infiltrated.

"If the Vatican could have been compromised then, it may very well be compromised now. With the current influx of personnel, it's hard to say." Arazola nodded. "Shortly after his ascension, Pope Francis purged most of the Vatican bureaucracy during the last few years, replacing them with Parish members from all over the world. The vetting process has been fairly tight; however, several new laypeople are also in key positions."

“Was Bechou part of this new . . . shake-up?” Mark went straight at it. “I mean, can you trust the guy?”

“I have much confidence in him. We’ve had a few dealings together in my role as Librarian.” Arazola stood with finality. “In light of your past events, I would prefer you both take residence near the Holy See until we can sort this out. We have a couple of discreet apartments that are available.”

Mark and Daniel were escorted back to Archbishop Arazola’s office three days later. A grey-haired man was sitting on the couch wearing a simple black clerical shirt. Mark was surprised at his small stature; the guy had to be five-foot-tall if he was an inch. His ebony skin held so few signs of aging; the grey hair puzzled Mark. After some pleasantries and introductions, the Ambassador/DIR Archbishop Joseph Bechou, who always thought best on his feet, stood to begin the briefing.

“I would like to thank you both for taking the time to meet me.” Bechou began pacing, “Mikel has expressed the significance of these ongoing issues, and I have some grave concerns over recent events that you have been a party to.”

Mark right away picked up on Bechou’s commanding presence. “And we appreciate your time, sir. I feel lost in this sh . . . a, a snowstorm.” He smiled candidly.

“I get your drift,” Bechou winked at him. “I will begin with what information I am privy to—it’s a good place to start,” Walking over to the desk, Bechou aimlessly picked up Arazola’s favorite pen. The 24k gold fountain pen was given to Arazola by Pope Paul VI in 1975 for assisting with the Pope’s research on *Evangelii Nuntiandi*—the Pope’s seminal work on evangelism and proclaiming the Gospel. The gift implied the Pope’s high regard for Arazola’s abilities.

“Mikel brought me to date on findings of the Lead Books of the Sacromonte and an ancient organization trying to destabilize the church in the 16th century. Certain indications reveal that they may still be at work today, and the evidence was *so* compelling I’ve assigned a team to work on the leads.”

“It’s quite possible the ties to the Church at that time may have come from the Crown and not Corvus,” Arazola added. “Granted, the hidden message to the Archbishop of Granada from Corvus remains a smoking gun.”

“There is some additional research that still needs to be completed.” Bechou tapped his tablet with the gold pen. “We looked into the early 17th-century document that Mikel provided. It was from Don Francisco Gómez de Sandoval, the 1st Duke of Lerma, a chief administrator for the Court of King Phillip the III. The document contained information detailing a certain property transfer in the Basque region of Spain. As no sale was recorded, it was apparently granted to an obscure group called the Merchants of the Brotherhood for the Raven. Coincidentally, Sandoval was given his Cardinalship just after this transfer. Anyway, after some discrete investigation, we discovered the title is still held in that name—which is *most* unusual.” Setting the tablet down, Bechou began to pace.

“There are now two large clubs occupying that land, privately owned and not open to the public. Because the private use classification is not subject to annual code inspections, little is known of their charter. One of our representatives attempted to casually discuss the club’s activities with the Minister of Tourism and Industry but was stonewalled.” Bechou stopped pacing for a moment. “He got zero information on them, which is also highly unusual—to say the least. Due to this shroud of mystery, no further overt investigation was attempted. We are now looking into it by other means.”

“Has any other historical evidence been uncovered about these Merchants of the Raven?”

Mark asked.

“After Arazola’s initial work, there have been over thirty hits on the words Raven Merchants dating from the ninth century—all dealing with property exchanges.”

“And the coin?”

“Yes, the coin. A similar one was uncovered during an archeological dig in Syria dating from 700 AD. They found it still pressed into a wax tablet. Much like a signet ring, it was used as a payment marker for services performed or to be performed.” Bechou paused in thought. “I tried to recover the coin from the curator who handled the items from the dig, but it had been ‘misplaced’ with no further information offered. I can assume it will not be recovered anytime soon. The fact that this coin was quite rare and not documented is also highly unusual. Even more compelling is its recent occurrence in Chicago. Again, retained as a payment marker. Anyway, after some investigation, it became apparent that Chicago was not the only city to have this payment marker appear. I understand, detective, that you are to thank for the background information on the coin and its other circumstances.”

Mark laughed nervously. “Yes, sir. I have friends in other departments—no formal influence, though.”

“Well, we investigated it. From the beginning of the numismatic exchange, only two such coins have turned up, both in France. They were sold through agencies at sealed-bid auctions for undisclosed amounts. These coins were identified by description only. So oddly enough, the picture Mark provided is the only one available. For a rare coin such as this, that is also quite unusual.”

“Excuse me, sir, I was wondering if the coin I discovered was found to be legitimate?”

“It is nearly impossible to tell from a photo. However, that being said, if it’s not, then it’s a remarkable forgery—or so I’ve been told.”

“Yes, sir.” Mark looked over at Arazola. “As I said, the professor spoke of some aspects from the Book of Revelations about the coin. Have you had an opportunity to discuss this?”

“We have,” Bechou responded before Arazola could answer. “But for the time being, I would like to keep our focus on the facts as they represent themselves; would that be ok?” The statement seemed terse to Mark.

“Of course, sir.” Mark sat up straighter. “Please continue.”

“I am also aware of the attack on Daniel in his church office by what the autopsy reports as a cloned Zaragoza native by the name of John Asker.” He turned to Mark, “Representing Interpol, I understand you were the lead in this case. The authorities in Spain are concerned that after you took over, the investigation has been what . . . put on pause, I think you Americans word it?”

“We were called to Rome. My orders—direct from Interpol—were to cooperate with the Vatican on this case; you should know that.” Mark stated, somewhat defensively.

“Yes,” Bechou tightly smiled as he walked behind the desk. “And after you returned from Rome, then what did you do?”

“We were attacked the same day we landed, which you also have knowledge of. Due to the sequence of events, I have not had the time or the capability to file a report on this, but I’m sure the PCs assigned by Interpol must have. PC Simkins has documented my involvement at each step. That is until he was wounded in the line of duty.”

“Yes, we’ve been informed of the incident at Daniel’s residence and the wounding of PC Simkins.” He read from his tablet. “I believe you were directly responsible for the shooting deaths

of two Spanish civilians, including three so-called human clones, and the capture and subsequent torture of an American citizen. I have read his statement. My information ended with your last check-in when you logged some venture with Father Daniel to some undisclosed, unscheduled meeting in Arrasate. There the trail grows cold until you show up here one week later. Interpol is concerned that you have not bothered to check-in in almost two weeks since the incident at Daniel's residence." Bechou looked up from his notes.

"What is this?" Daniel interjected hotly, turning to Arazola. "What does he mean by so-called clones? Were they not clones?"

"Quite a busy day, I'd say." Bechou held up a finger to pause any backlash. "The Spanish authorities are cooperating with Interpol on this so far, but more information has been requested. Interpol has promised to follow up with a debriefing report but has not been able to reach you by phone. The Spanish have requested that if you show up here, we are to detain you for questioning.

"It's clear from the autopsy reports that all five victims were shot in the head. Ballistics confirmed that all rounds were from your weapon. One Spanish official has gone so far as to call it a massacre." He looked up dispassionately. "The results of your debriefing will decide if you both are to return to Spain for formal hearings. They will determine what charges are warranted."

Mark laughed, "I've been a detective far too long to fall for this cheap melodrama. The attack on Simpkins and the weapons found at the scene clearly indicate my actions as defensive. This evidence alone vindicates us against any possible assumptions of wrongdoing. I should be trumped up on excessive force if you want to press the issue. That, at least, may have a chance—although a slim one at that. So, what's your game here, spymaster? A little duplicity can go a long way?"

Bechou smiled thinly at the inference. “Then you would agree that a little probing into your involvement is warranted. You are, after all, a completely unknown element.”

“Apparently not to this guy,” Mark thumbed over at Arazola, “He’s the guy who dragged me into this shitstorm.” Mark’s gaze was unwavering, expression stern.

Daniel was hot. “What is this about?”

Mark caught a look pass from Arazola, who remained quiet and impassive. He clearly wants Daniel to stay out of this.

“Then, Mark,” Bechou calmly continued, “I will need you to focus. I want you to understand the situation as it exists. What happened after you returned from Rome?”

Coolly, Mark sat back, detailing the events after he landed at Bilbo until the arrival of the air ambulance for PC Simkins. Holding no opinionated nuance, his depiction of the events was direct to the point.

Bechou listened for inaccuracies. “When the men were shot, Simkins was already incapacitated and therefore was in no position to elaborate. So I need you to tell me about the shootings.”

“Not much to tell. The clone attack on Simpkins used shouted commands and anti-ballistic shielding; it was a ruse. Once the attack started, two civilian-clad men appeared out of nowhere and seized Daniel. I believe this was the primary attack. Daniel here recognized the clones were trained to respond to Latin commands and ordered them to drop their shields, which they did. When I motioned for them to drop weapons, they didn’t comply—so I shot ‘em.”

“You believe the verbal commands were only a diversion?”

“During their next attack in the cave, I did not hear any verbal commands given because those troopers were all helmeted; the ones at the residence were not. That’s why I think it was a diversion. The clones in the cave moved with purpose; they didn’t wait for instructions.”

“Before we get to the cave, did any of these troopers seem odd in any way. Like the Asker clone that disappeared from the hospital.”

“You mean the disassociated schizoid thing? The only inconsistency was their refusal to disarm, even when I head-shot them, one at a time. They had either remarkable discipline or didn’t possess plausible threat recognition.”

“Yet, you shot them.”

“Yeah . . .” Mark sat back, calmly crossing his legs. “So I did.”

Bechou glanced over to Arazola.

“Daniel,” Arazola began, “Did you have any problem with Mark executing these so-called clones?”

“I don’t know if I would call it execution. The clones seemed to be responding to the verbal commands, yet their refusal to disarm made them still a threat.”

“Yes, but did you have a problem with the killing?” Bechou pressed.

“I did at first, then we met the guy who made them, and I think I get it now. So no, no problem.”

“Daniel, you are in conflict with your faith.” Arazola challenged.

“I don’t see it that way, sir.” Daniel turned his full attention to Arazola. “As history has borne out, the destruction of evil is directly in line with God and the Church.”

Bechou asked curiously. “You see these clones as a basic evil?”

“Not all. Markander and Walter discussed the nature of the first clone, which was not evil and had a Messenger of God speak through it. I considered the clones as Dr. Markander described them—fully grown and morally undeveloped. Again, as history has borne out, the morally uneducated can be deceived and grow into monsters.”

“That sounds like a parroting for eugenic engineering, advocating forced sterilization upon the morally unworthy.” Bechou countered.

Daniel smiled. “That is not my meaning. When these soulless clones are used as weapons for evil, I only point out that destroying them is not evil. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand - Mark 3:25.”

“And if a soul is transferred, like Asker?” Arazola probed further.

“I’ve thought a lot about this.” He looked over at Mark for assurance. “I now agree with Dr. Markander that these are empty clone vessels filled with spirits. Look to the nature of the spirits infesting these clones; only then will we know if their intentions are for evil.”

“Truly . . .” Arazola looked at Bechou, “Anything else, Joseph?”

“One more thing.” He turned to Mark again, “I was interested in what transpired during your harsh interview with the trooper you captured. From the high quality of their equipment, we can assume they are not only well funded but are recruiting ex-military.”

“Yeah, he said he was in the Coast Guard and that most of the men in his cohort were ex-military.” Mark recalled, “He talked a lot about how happy he was there and how well they treated him and such, but most of the stuff I got from him was pretty useless.”

“Yes, you said he called the unit a cohort,” Bechou recalled. He looked over at Arazola, who had just raised his eyebrows. “Too bad we lost the chance to interview him further, detective.”

Mark was confused by this statement. “Why, what has happened?”

“After his hospital admittance, Sergeant Cooper was found dead the next night from a coronary arrest.” Bechou returned to his datapad, “The left anterior descending coronary artery had neointimal smooth muscle cell hyperplasia, which caused a 98% blockage by fibrous plaque.” He set the tablet down, pausing for a few moments. “Since the swelling was unnaturally localized, the underlying cause of the blockage remains undetermined. Considering the boy’s age, this sudden death is, well, a little too convenient.”

“Were you able to get any background on the sergeant?” Bechou asked Mark.

“Not really; we weren’t there for tea.”

Daniel stepped in. “The legion must be held at the same two camps in the Basque Mountains. It’s hard to believe an organization that large could go unnoticed for this long,”

“Unnoticed or ignored,” Bechou stated plainly. “In the cave assault, were these men from the same legion, from the same cohort?”

“You know . . . I never asked. We were a bit preoccupied.”

Bechou remained stoic. “Of course, I meant no slight.”

“Frankly, it never occurred to me to ask. However, the soldiers were in the same uniforms except for the clones. This Asker guy seemed to be the OIC - uh, Officer in Charge.”

“I’m familiar with the term.”

“He was wearing this black and silver-trimmed uniform that looked straight out of Nazi Germany. He’s the one Daniel recognized. Right?” Mark looked over at Daniel, “That Asker guy.”

“Yes,” Daniel addressed Arazola, “The selfsame one I killed at the Church.”

Bechou sat in expressionless thought for a moment. Mark could see that something had knocked him off balance.

Bechou resumed. “Mark, you said that the OIC seemed . . . buggy, I believe, was the word you used. What were your observations?”

“Only that it was quick to temper and prone to raving. The sergeant definitely did not like being under its authority.”

Moments passed. Mark noted that Bechou was looking more and more uncomfortable.

“Anything else to add, gentleman?” Arazola asked.

“Only that Mark has some ideas about the rise of these things.” Daniel offered. “We have been researching possible meanings as they relate to prophesy.”

“Do you feel confident enough to make any solid predictions?” Bechou asked.

Mark thought this an odd comment.

Daniel just shrugged. “I don’t know if I would go that far . . .”

“Well, perhaps we can table that for now.” Arazola said kindly, “There are some things we should address before getting into exigent possibilities.”

“I think that next, the best course of . . .” Bechou began, interrupted by a discreet knock on the door. It opened a crack.

“Excuse me, sir?” Arazola’s assistant Carmela now opened the door wide. “There is some news I was told to pass on immediately to Archbishop Bechou.”

“Yes, Carmela, is it a private communique?” He began to approach her.

“Not really, sir. I’ve been informed that an explosion has completely destroyed the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount.”

Bechou stood aghast. “Do we know the cause?”

“They are attributing it to an undiscovered gas leak. Your office felt you should be notified immediately.”

“Yes, they were correct in doing so. Gentlemen, I must take my leave of you.” He paused in the doorway, turning to Daniel. “I was going to comment that now was not the time for speculation. Perhaps that was a hasty assumption. Gentlemen, could you make yourselves available on short notice in the coming days?”

“Then, we are not to be detained?” Mark stated conspicuously.

“No,” Bechou laughed, his eyes softening, “Why on earth would we want to do that.” He winked at Arazola before hurrying out to prepare for the looming political storm.