

Chapter 11

Yesterday is not ours to recover, but tomorrow is ours to win or lose.

—Lyndon B. Johnson

Basque Territories

Legion of the Mountain Pony - Camp II

Mari entered the commerce room with her typical disdain for all things stride. At twenty-six, she was the youngest department head in Corvus. Routinely scanning the five civilians around the heavy African blackwood conference table, she stalked over to her seat. Inset paintings from 19th-century impressionists cast multi-hued shadows on the walls. The Degas hanging behind her chair was a gift from Tertius for her extensive intel work on the Parthian Legions.

She didn't know how Tertius discovered her secret love for ballet, but she was astounded that he did. It was one of her most guarded secrets. She thought it fitting he would display such extravagance in this room. Sniffing derisively, she knew these greedy beggars would shit if they found out the paintings were actual. Acknowledging no one, she collapsed into a chair, putting a long, knee-high boot on the seat next to her where Rene Cervantes, the Master of Trade, did little to hide his contempt.

“Well, spymistress, that was certainly lacking grace.” Cervantes quipped, admiring her slim, lightly clothed figure.

Unzipping one Chelsea boot, she leaned back, placing a bare leg on the table. Head down, she had little to gain in responding to such a base antagonist.

“Come on now, tradesman,” Guildsman Morris added playfully, “She’s obviously exhausted from all that work she put into her looks. Either that or she’s been attacked by a flock of angry birds.”

Mari closed her eyes and, shutting them out, swiped tangled brunette locks over her face.

Now holding his forehead with one hand, the fat Guildsman was trying desperately to leer at her without being noticed when the door flew open. The Major, dressed in an immaculate forest green military tunic, smartly entered the room. His purposeful stride seemed out of place in the presence of the civilian agents. He knew better than to expect any military courtesies from that rabble. He noticed a uniformed man—*boy*—had stood to attention. Looks like Mari had another tough night, and that pig of a guildsman is still leering at her as usual. One day I’m gonna drag that lecher out of his chair and have him flogged.

“At ease.” He mumbled before taking his place at the head of the table.

He understood the necessity of these weekly meetings, but he still hated them nonetheless. They reminded him of the frivolous IT meetings he used to attend in corporate—he really hated those too. It was his job to manage these rouges, give them the free reign they were accustomed to, without letting them get too flippant, the balance teetered on a level of respect. They were a loose conglomerate of dissociated characters whose idea of authority was limited to how much they got paid. In other words, mercs.

“We seem to be missing Mr. Wagner . . . again.” He referred to the IT representative of the group.

“He was up all night fixing an issue with the new food dispensers,” The fresh-faced Corporal nervously stood. “I was sent here by staff to ODR—uh . . . observe, document, and report, sir.”

“Are you up to date with the current issues?”

“I have been briefed, sir.” He flushed at the looks he was getting from other members.

The Major allowed a slight smile, casually motioning for the greenhorn to sit. “Tradesman, you were to do a follow-up on the sudden price increases last quarter. What was the cause?”

“Excessive skimming from the new overland transport company. Apparently, a couple of drivers banded together with some French union boys, joining a kickback scheme already in place. In some areas, they were dragging upwards as high as forty percent on all fueling and maintenance. Well,” He chuckled imperiously, “After we had a few ‘accidents’ and replaced a few drivers, they are all now back in line.”

“Any double-dealing out of the head office, Mari?”

“No, they’re clean like we thought. Only the drivers and some dip-shit girl in records were complicit.”

“Anything pop-up on cross-check?” He looked up, “Any diversions or off-threads?”

“None.” She took her leg off the chair and ran a hand through her hair, exposing puffed red eyes. “Excuse me, Major, I’ve just returned from Turkey, where Lord Faustus had pulled me from the French investigation on a special run—I’m a bit lagged. I would’ve had Alisha stand in today, but the Lord ordered me here personally.” Spreading her legs, she pulled the other boot off, thrilling the Guildsman to the point he lost all track of the immediate.

The Major repeated, “Guildsman . . . your progress report?”

“Yes? Ah . . . yes, Major.” He flushed. “Well, it’s been a busy week in the northern latitudes, just the other day . . .” He went into a long-winded report on the various construction projects handled by third-party contractors, the usual labor disputes with Canadian unions, material shortages, and constant logistical problems in Canada.

Although the man was a self-glorifying windbag, the Major had to admit his grasp of the complex factors involved in the construction trade was remarkable. Under the economic upheaval of the last few years, all projects were still, by and large, on time and under budget. Forty minutes later, he got to the Spanish Geothermal plant, oversharing issues with secrecy, outside contractor vetting, and cost of material problems.

“. . . by then, the price of concrete had increased so much—*if* there any was to be had—I decided to import a Costa Rican firm to make it on-site. Now, since the cost of materials needed was so excessive to get delivered on-site, I devised this technique that . . .” He trailed off when the door opened.

Lord Tertius entered with one of his Giants in tow. They all shot out of their chairs, formally bowing. Over the top of the enormous guard, the Major caught a glimmer of trepidation from the man trailing them; the guy had to be the darkest black man he had ever seen. That must be Dr. Okeke, Trios’s replacement. The file on the man was sparse, only that he came highly recommended from the V Africana. The Major didn’t trust him as he’d flown the coop once already.

“Excuse the interruption, gentlemen,” Tertius turned to Mari, addressing her with a barely perceptible wink. “Lady, this is the good Doctor Okeke from the Congo. He will be replacing Dr. Trios at our sister camp. I’ve asked him to join this informal gathering to get accustomed. Doctor,” He waved to a chair. “Please go on with your report Mr. Morris; I’m always interested in your, shall we say . . . unconventional riggings?”

“Yes, milord, forgive my ramblings; it’s . . . nothing of consequence.” He nervously bowed again before quickly sitting down.

“Don’t be so pedestrian. Explain how you solved the shoring issue for the new geothermal plant.”

“Sire. I . . .” He was shocked the Lord would personally take an interest in his dealings. “We purchased a couple of recycled aluminum loads, with the help of Rene here,” He nodded to the logistics man, “and shredded them into filings. Mixing this into cement, we compressed the mix with a makeshift centrifuge to make air-entrained lightweight concrete. We then poured it into keyed molds ribbed with fiber rods to form 8” 4’x4’ blocks for handling that two men could easily lift into place. Using the same system for the deadmen, we built a fifteen-foot retaining wall without staging or digging placement pits for the crane.”

“Because you no longer needed one, right?” The Leprechaun added, waving his hand for him to elaborate.

“That is correct, sire. We managed to trim weeks off the schedule. The cost in workforce and equipment was reduced by 26.7%” He paused, dramatically recalling from memory, “Amounting to a saving of . . . around 700k, Canadian.”

“Moral of the story Dr. Okeke” Lord Tertius explained. “Is that the men in leadership positions are all selected for their resourcefulness,” Tertius let a little pride show for the audience.

The giant guard brought over a “mini-throne,” as the staff called the unique chairs specially made for the Leprechaun. Climbing the short ladder into the chair, he waved his hand in dismissal.

“If all of you would excuse us, I would like to discuss some aspects with Mari and the good Doctor here.” “Ah, Major—not you—you remain.”

The members turned to leave the room as the Major bowed, smiling as he retook his seat. He could not read his liege, but he seemed a bit taller today. He must have been awarded the legions he’d been scheming for the last two months.

“Major? Is there something distracting you?”

“No, my liege . . . just doing some internal calculations.” He cursed himself for the lapse.

“Doctor,” Tertius turned to Okeke, who seemed frozen in time, “Doctor, you can take a seat.” He laughed lightly, “We are here on a mission of scientific discovery, not an inquisition. The Major here will have some questions for you.” With a simple glance from his Lord, the Major understood what tactic he wanted played.

“Doctor Okeke, I’ve read your file.” The Major began, taking on the role of the interviewer. In an Eastern-style interrogation, the principal always took the role of an uninvolved listener. It was a tactic of the Leprechauns the Major was all too well familiar with. He began with the usual approbations. “You come highly recommended by the V Africana. The OIC called me directly, touting your ability to cope with some of the more . . . *unusual* aspects of cloning procedures. We even have a commendation from Dr. Moss.”

“Thank you for the words, sir.” Okeke projected indifference.

“More than just words, Doctor, I’m well aware of what transpired during the Munroe-Gamma Jump. This is why you were assigned to this legion.”

Okeke nodded just once, moving impatiently in his chair. “I . . . what else do you wish to know?”

The Major was having trouble reading him. “We understand that all people have their limits. I know that when I’ve overreached, I’ve taken a leave of absence. It’s completely understandable. We are at a critical stage and require your help. Lord Tertius has selected you personally to join his legions, and that places you in excellent standing.”

Okeke turned to Tertius with a slight bow of thanks. “How may I be of service, milord?”

Tertius put it directly. “By helping us with these spirits infesting our clones.”

Okeke inwardly shuddered, the word infesting hitting hard. “What do you already know?” He quipped. Eyes now alert.

The Major picked up an e-paper, “Reading from your report: They can look into our memories, channel personalities, and have knowledge of others.” His eyes met the Doctor’s challenge. “The first two I am familiar with, but this last bit about knowledge of others? What did you mean by that, Doctor?”

“I . . . I simply meant that they seem to know things they shouldn’t. Did you *read* the transcript from the jump?”

“He’s lying.” The words croaked out from Mari, who appeared to be sleeping through all of this. “I can hear it in your voice, doctor.”

“You have nothing to fear from us, doctor,” The Major used a gentle tone, careful not to expose any insincerity.

“No, it is not *you* that I fear.” He looked at the Major with a strange intensity he had not seen before, and that chilled him. Okeke was not looking at the Major; he was looking through him back to when he had hidden in the kraal of his Mitsogo clan.

The moon had just risen over the trees when his sister-in-law Rahyana sent the familiar woman Urella-Nadege to escort him to their village’s Mbandja. He was surprised to see that the temple was almost an exact replica of the one he had visited in the forest. The Shaman, the Kombo for the village, greeted him at the door.

“Thank you for meeting with me,” Okeke slightly bowed, taking his hand. “Are all Bwiti temples like this?”

“Yes, they are all fashioned in the shape of a man lying on his back. The door is his left foot, those canopies on the ground are his legs, and the back area, where the sanctuary is, represents the head. The firepit is his heart.”

They walked over to a pillar, where Okeke saw another bicycle wheel suspended sideways from the rafters, a piece of wood slat hung against the outer part of the spokes. “I saw the same thing in the forest temple; what does that represent?”

“It is the navel, where all spirits are connected to God.”

“Then, this pillar must be his . . .” He smiled, and recognizing the phallic symbol, he ran his hand over the intricate carvings. “These images, they are all synergetic with nature,”

“Yes, it is the link between the heavens and the earth.” Sitting at the “heart”, the Shaman was all business mixing Iboga powder into a vessel. He poured in water and, drinking it in one gulp, dropped pieces of aromatic tree bark onto the coals. The thickening smoke, pleasantly sweet, oddly penetrated only the immediate area. The heat from the smoldering coals was pleasant in the fresh, damp night air—time seemed to pass lazily. Okeke was becoming anxious. From the Shaman’s behavior, it seemed as though his friendly openness was evaporating from the fire heart. Okeke held out his hands, surprised at their slight tremble. “That feels good.” He said, looking for anything to cover his nervousness; he held his hands closer to the fire. The Shaman’s lips moved as though he was conversing with someone, but only the hissing bark spoke.

It must be some kind of incantation, Okeke thought as the room seemed to draw in close. He looked up at the sound of clicking as the bicycle wheel began to slowly spin—click, click, click, click, click. He was drawn to the hypnotic sound as the smoke clouded the room, deadening all sensory elements.

“He is near. I cannot conceal him much longer.” The Shaman reported in a mix of language Okeke barely recognized. It was not clear who he was talking to.

A sharp chill brushed over him as the smoke around him began slowly swirling, lowering as it condensed. The Shaman began to rock as though he were striding. Okeke’s eyes narrowed as curiosity overcame apprehension. Whirling like a lasso, the movement of the smoke cloud was rhythmically mesmerizing. Synchronized with the Shaman and the bicycle wheel, all timed to the clicking of the spokes. As the thick grey ring of the smoke cloud encircled them, the Shaman gradually stopped moving before opening his eyes—they were milky white.

The Shaman grinned impassively. “Well met Doctor. Did you really think you could hide amongst my own people?”

Okeke sat back, stunned. He’d heard that greeting before. “Who are you?” He whispered meekly.

“Let’s not play games, Doctor. I cannot hold this vessel for long. You must return to the legion. You have a debt to pay.”

“Munroe? It can’t be . . .” Okeke gasped, trying to gain control. “How is it you are here?”

The spinning circle of smoke picked up speed as it rose above their heads. An image of the betrayed man Rene appeared, his face superimposed over a blurred skull. The image shifted to other faces of his past victims, all filled with the hopeless look of the betrayed. They were the victims in his dreams.

“What you have stolen from these people, you must repay.” The shaman now spoke in Ngala. “All are held accountable.”

Anxiety robbed him of his breath. With his heart pounding through jugular arteries, he tried to breathe deeper; get more oxygen. He was suffocating, and his panicked mind wanted to flee,

but there was no response from his muscles. Trapped in the light of penetrating revelation, he willed himself to not care; expunge all concern. He began to, As he had done many times after a selfish act, he emptied his inner struggles. “Conscience is only an emotional response.” He spoke the assuring words aloud. I must calm myself; something in the bark’s smoke is affecting me. With that realization, his fight for control lessened, and with it, the anxiety. It’s some drug he’s using to make me hallucinate—that’s got to be it. These images are in my mind, that’s all. This is bullshit!

He closed his eyes to concentrate, willing himself back into the now. Calmer, he regained his courage and looked to the Shaman. He could feel his skin tingling with apprehension. Then suddenly, the Shaman lashed out, grabbing his arm. It felt like being burned by a torch. Looking down, he saw a snake holding him, its mouth locked around his wrist.

“See me.” The Shaman hissed.

Looking up, he saw the dragon staring back at him in the Shaman’s eyes. It was filled with hatred. Thinking this could not be just some lucid dream, he began to fear. “*You will be held accountable.*” Spoke his mind. Shivering violently, he grew cold.

The Shaman spoke. “Do you need any more convincing, doctor?”

Unsure, Okeke could not respond.

Then, a new voice spoke. “Search your memory. What drug can do this?” Okeke could not look away from the disappointment on the Shaman’s face. “I expected more from you, my brother. Our family sacrificed much for you to become a doctor, but you squandered that, and the family was forsaken.” The voice became urgent. “Repay while the opportunity exists—you must atone.”

“I’m sorry, my brother. I tried.” Repressed feelings of regret surfaced with great force. Now sobbing, he trembled. “I don’t understand this.” A wave of emotion crested as tears streamed down his face.

“You must pay your debt.” The voice weakened, sounding vaguely like his brother’s voice. Overdubbed in a chorus of many others, it no longer held urgency.

Unnoticed by him, the smoke began to clear, and as it dissipated, Okeke’s breath returned. Through tearful eyes, the distorted surroundings were blurred in the painfully bright torchlight. The smoke, now evenly dispersed, tinted the air with grey. No longer localized, the light returned to its raw intensity. Okeke noticed the Shaman regarding him, taking a moment to refocus, his eyes filled with great pity. Okeke’s breath came in gasps of involuntary shudders. The bicycle’s spokes no longer clicked, and the room filled with warm, moist air. He felt terribly weak and disorientated.

“You must cleanse this spirit from you.” The Shaman spoke softly, kindly. “You must ask the Creator for forgiveness and repent from the evil within you.” The words were honest, with no accusation in them.

Time passed in reflective silence. Okeke was grateful for the Shaman’s presence. Gathering strength from his emotional serenity, he looked down at his wrist where the snake had bitten him—there were no marks. “What was that . . . that which held you?” He croaked out, voice foreign in his ears.

The Shaman looked confused. “There was no holding of me, only a momentary distraction. I felt its purpose and returned quickly. The Shaman looked at the fire to gauge how much time had passed. It had been many minutes.

“It spoke through you . . . I mean, they, there were more than one. Could you not hear them?”

The Shaman considered this for a moment, then closing his eyes, he searched past events. When he finally opened his eyes, it was apparent he had come to a resolution.

“Whatever it requires of you must be an atonement. Otherwise, the Creator would not have allowed it. I must ask you, what did it seek?”

“It wanted me to return to the legion, precisely the thing I was fleeing.”

The Shaman nodded and sat in contemplation for many minutes. “Then you must go. But first, you must cleanse yourself and ask for forgiveness. Only then will we take the iboga journey, ask the forefathers if they can see what is to come.”

“What does this have to do with the legion?” Okeke was trapped and had no intention of participating in the entheogenic ritual. One hallucination trip was enough.

“Only you can seek that meaning. Will you do as I suggest?” The Shaman did not need a response. Refusal and denial were written all over Okeke’s face.

“I . . . I don’t think . . .”

“Then you travel at your own risk. Without belief, none can help in this journey you must take. Go with God.”

His return to the kraal was a blur. Time did not seem to pass. He felt heavy, as though he picked something up and was carrying it. When he focused on it, the pressure weight increased almost to the point of unconsciousness. Dazed, he emptied his mind concentrating only on the cold cassava cakes left by his sleeping roll. Three hours later, he was captured, drugged, and returned to the V Africana Legion trussed up like a goat. Expecting to be killed, or at the least publicly scourged for desertion, Okeke tried to mentally prepare for it. As the House Guard escorting him neared the V Africana base, the thought began to terrify him. He wasn’t scared because he was too valuable to be permanently damaged, so he could deal with whatever they dished out. His only fear was meeting the Munroe-Gamma.

Placed in a holding cell at the legion's base, he expected the Munroe-Gamma to appear at any moment. He dared not sleep, knowing the spirit would also be waiting for him there. The next three hours were agonizing, his imagination overly active. He was concerned there had been no punishment or disciplinary hearing, nor was there any effort to debrief him. After all, they brought him back for some reason. Then the cell door opened.

"Here," A sergeant tossed Okeke a uniform. "Get yourself cleaned up. You leave in twenty minutes." He turned to leave.

"Wait," Okeke pleaded.

The sergeant turned back, staring coldly at the Doctor. "I have no answers for you other than you are not to be scourged. You've been transferred to the IV Hispania in Spain. Now get your ass ready, or I *will* thrash you." Okeke's arm felt the sharp sting of his crop. Escorted by the sergeant to Spain that evening, he was significantly relieved there would be no further contact with the Munroe-Gamma—at least for now.

Two hours into the flight, he sat in the lightly cushioned seat of the cargo plane, noting that the guard was sound asleep. Since there were no windows in this section of the aircraft, he had no idea where he was. Well, not much I can do about it anyway.

The last statement by the Shaman had really shaken him, the idea of atonement with a Creator—like there really was one. He reasoned that these superficial forest theologians have obviously been corrupted by the Church. Only through the unbiased lens of science can we know truth.

The whole experience was unnerving him. Much like the clone Jumps, he was experiencing things *A priori*—firsthand. These things could not be easily explained through the model of classical objectivity—but they did occur. The Munroe-gamma spirit spoke to him through the shaman gateway, the same with his brother’s ghost. That part of the experience seemed real but not as tangible as the fear he felt, a fear he could still taste.

Why atonement? What compensation was the spirit demanding? I don’t even know how to do such a thing, even if I wanted to. I’m to pay back with what? And now this Shaman says I need to ask forgiveness. Forgive me for what, being human? It’s preposterous. I am an animal in a social jungle, the most dangerous jungle on earth. Only the quick and the clever survive; I didn’t set the rules; they were established long before I was born; I merely recognize them and work within them.

As Okeke’s eyes regained their focus on the Major at the IV Hispania, a sudden thought occurred. I need to figure out what these spirits really want if I’m going to survive. Survive for what? He mocked himself. Stop it! I cannot afford to despair— if I lose it here, I lose everywhere. I must learn about them and become a hunter; these men will help me do just that.

“No, Major, I do not fear this place or those within it. I will not succumb to their parlor tricks again. I am here to pay a debt of my own making.” He turned to Lord Tertius. “I will do what I can with these spirits; they have no hold over me.” Still weakened, he began to feel confident again.

Tertius, correctly reading the change in Okeke, glanced at the major who spoke next.

“This is enough for now, Doctor. You’ve had a long trip, and when you are more rested, we can resume this . . . investigation.”

Okeke looked at Tertius, who nodded slightly.

“Doctor, you may go. An orderly will meet you outside. He will show you to permanent quarters.”

Taking a deep breath before pushing himself out of the chair, Okeke carefully measured his stride. It took all of his concentration to walk out without faltering.

“What do you think, Major?” Tertius asked in the vacuum of Okeke’s presence.

“I think he’s barely holding on. That was not only exhaustion weighing him down.”

“Mari?”

“There’s more to him than just duplicity. I recognized at least three internal contradictions. This is a dangerous man.”

“Suggestions?”

“Can I get back to you? I’d like to sleep on it,” Mari said with a faint smile at the double entendre.

“Of course. Major?”

“Why not stick him with Wilhauser? You’ve been looking for a reason to get him out of the clone transfer research program without wasting the asset.”

“An excellent proposition Major. Make it happen.”

“Sire.” The Major’s tone signaled his intent to depart.

“Major,” Tertius held him at bay.

“Sire?” He canted his head.

“What is the emergence time for the Okeke-blanks?”

“They are at least six weeks from standard —more like eight.”

“Any way we can accelerate that?”

“Not without risk, sire. I would have to check with the V Africa on their mental state, but I believe they have at least another six weeks of spatial adjustment.”

“Who is handling the therapy?”

“One of Dr. Moss’s techs, most likely. I’d have to check, sire. Accelerating the process poses some difficulties.”

“I want his blanks transferred here immediately.”

“Sire.” This time the Major’s tone was neutral. He remained in place for a few moments.

“That’s all, Major.” Tertius waved his hand in dismissal. “Mari . . .”

“Sire.” She sat upright.

“Get the hell out of here and get some sleep.”

Smiling, she curtsied like a duchess at court, “The Gauguin was exquisite, my lord.” then she became serious. “Sire, the personal data you requested on Lt. Orhan will be difficult to obtain. Are you looking to recruit him?”

“No, Tertius said with a grin; I’m thinking about promoting him to Gamma,”

The explosion at Al-Aqsa was devastating. Two days later, a thorough examination by the Israeli army discovered trace chemical elements all over the blast site—the explosion was no gas leak. Within barely an hour, news of this discovery was leaked to the press. The fact that only the US and Israel use that explosive was repeatedly broadcast by news networks all over the globe. On the same day, Sunni and Shiite Imams in six countries called for Jihad as angry protesters marched in many major cities worldwide.

Reprisal attacks were made on several western churches in Egypt and Africa, prompting a group of moderate Muslim clerics to call for verification. They argued that neither Israel nor the US had anything to gain from such an outrageous attack. Many moderates were soon labeled as collaborators and silenced.

Jordan's Crown Prince released a statement to Al-Jazeera denouncing all terror activities that have long plagued the Holy Land. Naming the Iranian-backed Hezbollah as one of the chief instigators, he announced the formation of an anti-terror coalition that would launch its own investigations. They would guarantee that whoever was behind the attack would answer dearly for this act of desecration.