

Chapter 1: Weary Nights

His left intact eyeball is as devilishly black as his right bio mechanical one. Cables and motors blend with human flesh, whirring and rotating with each clicking blink and subtle turn of his head. His mouth opens with a mechanical hum as the processors within him prepare for speech. I hear his voice, but his words don't register. My focus slips past him, over the precipice, into the endless sea of fire below—a place that holds the devil and his angels.

Veiled figures engulfed in liquid flame rise and fall within the inferno, reaching out as if pleading for escape, their cries twisting through the flames. The unbearable smell of their decaying corpses mixes with the sulfur searing the air. I want to cover my nose, to turn my gaze away, but I can't.

I look down at my own hand. It's flesh, yet it's something beyond, it's a new body. I know what I must do, but I hesitate. The man before me—the one we now know as the Anti-Christ—is my child, born of my eighth wife in the royal harem. I don't see the monstrosity he has become. Yet when I look at him, I see a child look up at me with a twinkle in his eye asking me a question with inquisitiveness.

“Hurry up father, you know what you must do, why do you delay?” His whirring mechanical lips work together in conjunction with the rest of his face creating a sound altogether inhuman.

A father's love for his son holds me back, but a man's love for his God compels me forward.

The innocent demeanor of a child is an illusion. That child died long ago. His eyes continue to gaze at me, their wickedness continues to haunt me. I wish to speak to him, to say something to him, but there is nothing more to say. He has played his part as I have played mine. I gain immeasurable strength in my thighs, rear back with these unnatural legs of mine, and I kick. I watch him fly back of the cliff, his eyes still glaring at me, his face still expressionless as he falls back resigned to his fate. I watch him fall until the flames lick him up and swallow him whole.

I wake up, my heart racing, wishing it wasn't my child I'd cast into the lake of fire, helpless to stop myself from sealing his fate. The room senses I'm awake, but the queen is not, lighting the room only slightly so I can see my way in the darkness. I pull my ephod over my head, its deep royal blue fabric rich against my weary skin. Its golden threads shimmer faintly even in this dim light.

I step out of the royal chambers without disturbing her. In the washroom, I splash water on my face and gaze at my reflection. Dark circles rim my eyes, the toll of restless nights. My youthful vigor is gone. I'm no longer the confident Prince Levi who has ruled the world from these hallowed halls. I'm a man haunted by the same dream—each restless night leaving me

distraught, unable to focus on my duties during the day. My youngest child, Amiel, is always there at night, haunting me, twisted into a half-man, half-robotic monstrosity.

Amiel is trained with the skills and weapons meant to ensure his survival against the man of lawlessness and his armies, yet now he might turn those same skills against us. It will definitely mean the end of my kingdom. My son, oh my son. I open my bible reading prophesies written by Daniel so long ago looking for comfort. Still, my soul is tortured. I let out a long sigh and close my Bible, placing it back in the drawer beneath my bathroom mirror.

I pass through the royal wash chambers; my reflection catches the lines of concern sharp in the darkened hall lights. Amiel is likely asleep; the night guards stand at their posts, and I greet each in turn as I make my way to his chamber. They greet me back, but I see the unease in their eyes, their brows knit with worry. These men, who have stood watch over me for centuries, know my ways better than I'd wish. They know when I rest, when I rise, and tonight, they see something on my face they had long forgotten: the shadow of suffering.

"These are indeed days of trouble," I say aloud, as though speaking with Daniel the prophet himself, nodding in agreement with the wisdom of his words from so long ago.

I reach his room, and the lights awaken, going slightly bright then softening to a gentle glow. Beneath the sheets lies my son, his breathing steady and calm, just as any twelve-year-old should be. But he's grown—bigger, stronger, his form filling the bed with an impressive presence. Gavriel, head of the royal guard, tells me he excels in his training, that he's one of the finest warriors he's seen, even at this young age. I sit quietly at the edge of his bed, careful not to disturb him, though I know he's been trained to wake at the slightest shift.

"Father," he murmurs, steady. "Is this a test?"

He says it with a hint of pride, a small clench in his jaw betraying the satisfaction he takes in his skill.

"You're impressive."

"I sensed you before you opened the door," he says, as though he had been expecting me.

I fall silent, trying to understand the thoughts drifting beneath his calm demeanor, seeking the guidance of God's voice to perceive if there's anything more here, anything beyond the innocence of my child.

"Is the training too easy for you, son?"

Is it breaking him?

"No, Father. I like our training." His voice is steady, but there's an edge to it—something hard, older than his years. "But... we're living in peace now, aren't we? I don't know the suffering you described. Shouldn't we know it, though? To be strong? I want to understand

pain and use it." His gaze sharpens, his fingers tap lightly on the bed frame, "What's the point if I can't train to kill?"

He wants to cause suffering. He wants death.

"For centuries, we've lived in peace with all men," I contend, hoping my authority sets him straight. "There hasn't been a murder in 200 years. God wants us to live in harmony. We must not turn from His will. Only in special circumstances does he allow us to harm others."

"Yes, Father," he says, almost automatically. But a brief tightening of his fingers betrays a moment of resistance, his hand curling, then loosening as he quickly glances away.

Trying to find reassurance, I press on. "You've seen the power and glory of His temple, haven't you? I stand before it every day, knowing He could end me in a heartbeat, as He did the world 400 years ago. We must fear Him, son, but also love Him. He gives us life, breath, everything."

"Yes, Father," this time he accepts my teaching with no resistance evident in his body or voice.

"You must be tired of hearing it from these four hundred- and fifty-year-old lips. But one day, you'll understand why."

He gives me a faint smile. I respond with a hug; his childish yet thick man hands reach around me and squeeze a little too tight. Yes, I tell myself. It's still my son in there. Everything will be alright. My weary heart finds a measure of peace, reassured by his words. I think to leave him in his rest, but just as I shift to go, his voice cuts through the quiet.

"Father."

I pause, feeling a sudden chill. "What is it, my son?"

He hesitates, then speaks with a mixture of earnestness and something deeper, one I can't quite place. "Would it be wrong to... to want the temple for myself? You're getting old, after all. You can't do this forever." He looks up at me with an intense gaze. "Can I do your work, Father? Can I have the temple for myself?" Amiel's eyes widen in panic, and his lips press tightly together, as if he's trying to trap any more words from escaping. For a brief moment, he moves his hand slightly, almost instinctively, like he wants to reach out and snatch the question from the air before it can fully land.

My heart skips a beat. The innocence in his voice, woven with ambition, tugs at my heart and unsettles me in equal measure. I search his face, seeking the boy I know, yet sensing an edge to his question that chills me to my core. I

In that moment, a surge of conflicting thoughts and feelings rises within me. He's not wrong to think that one day he may assume a role in leading the people. But the temple... he cannot stand there. He's wrong to assume that I will not be able to fulfil my duties. I will not

die. I look into his eyes, seeing a spark of eagerness, an aspiration that feels out of place, and I wonder if I've misread him or if there is a flicker of something more.

I lie.

"Perhaps... one day," choosing my words with care in order to test him.

Never son. If he is the one. I must double my efforts to protect my family. Their training regimens must intensify. I'll try to save Amiel. I hope it's not too late. Maybe he's not the one. It's still too early to tell.

"But for now, your duty is to learn, to serve, and to understand that the temple is not mine to give. It belongs to Yeshua alone. He chooses those who serve before him as I was chosen long ago before the creation of the world."

Amiel nods, his expression thoughtful, yet an unmistakable glimmer remains in his eyes, like a spark waiting to catch. As I turn to leave, I catch one last look back at him. His eyes are already closed, but his hand rests above his heart, fingers pressed firmly as though clutching something.

My visit with Amiel had done little to quell anxieties caused by the persistent dream. Its early morning. Too late to fall back asleep. Too early to begin my work. I choose to relax on a levitation lounge, my body completely supported in mid-air, with a view of the temple and the majestic flame that covers all of Mount Zion. The night clung to the temple's outline, and the majestic flame on Mount Zion flickers with an ethereal glow. Its amber light washes over the quiet halls, casting shadows that stretch long and solemn.

Somewhere in those shadows, I feel the spirit of Antiochus IV Epiphanes¹—a lingering presence, haunting the temple, seeking to exert his sway from ages past. Had my son already been possessed by Antiochus' desire to exalt himself over God? Only time would tell.

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My much-needed rest is disturbed by Dipti. She stands over me with concern, her resolute stature matching her position as queen.

Sunlight filters in through the cloud that now blankets Mount Zion. I squint, adjusting to gentle light, and focus on her face. Her soft, delicate features catch the filtered sunlight—an oval face with smooth contours, expressive almond-shaped eyes framed by well-defined

¹ Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid king, claimed the Jewish temple in Jerusalem during the 2nd century BC, sparking one of the most infamous episodes in Jewish history. His actions, known collectively as the "Abomination of Desolation," included severe violations of Jewish religious practices and desecration of the temple itself.

brows, and a straight, petite nose above full, naturally curved lip. Her warm complexion glows faintly in the light, and her long, dark hair flows gracefully over her shoulders.

She studies me intently, her brows furrowing. "It's not like you to sleep here, Josh," she says, her tone laced with a gentle reprimand. "Did you have that nightmare again?"

I meet her gaze for a moment before rubbing my face, my eyes closing as I search for a way to convey what words cannot. I gradually lower into the levitation lounger until I'm now resting on its cushioned exterior.

"I checked your mentat records."

Her hand brushes her neck, fingers instinctively grazing the implant embedded there. Concern laces her voice. "Why don't you speak with Amiel's mother before court begins? There's a disturbance to the North that requires your attention. You'll need to refresh yourself."

She perches on the edge of the lounger, looking down at me with a mix of authority and care.

"You're checking my mentat records? Are you stalking me now?"

In a perfect world, privacy means little when there's nothing to hide.

The mentat—a neural chip installed in every citizen at birth—allowed seamless sharing of information. Verbal communication was optional, chosen when mentat-to-mentat links weren't preferred.

"Of all my wives she is the most, how do you say? Unpredictable. You're the one after all who selected her. Are you sure you made a wise choice?" I smile, chiding her.

Dipti shrugs, "Her beauty is legendary. I thought you would be pleased with her."

I sit up straight in my chair, shaking off the fog from a restless night. My voice cuts through the haze, steady but reflective. "She has her charms, no doubt—a Syrian queen with a rebellious spirit. Remember when her family refused to join the feast? A plague struck them down as punishment. I've seen the scars she bears, though she hides them well. She survived, but her parents did not. She took the throne far too young. I wonder... does she still carry resentment?"

"Maybe, I figured your marriage with her would cement their country's subservience, but maybe I was wrong," Dipti's voice trails off as she ponders, "I never considered that we might be taking a bitter queen into our home." She stands up, her other concerns now invading her mind.

"No, they became subservient, but I sense they resent the God we serve for the deaths that came as a result of their disobedience. I fear that resentment has poisoned her mind. She may be pretending to love the Lord of Hosts."

I wonder if she's poisoning Amiel's mind as an act of revenge?

"You should visit her quarters," Dipti says firmly. "If there's bitterness, we must root it out before it spreads." Her gaze was sharp, her authority as queen unmistakable. "If Amiel is indeed being negatively influenced, it is our duty to bring light to it before it festers. Sin grows in the shadows, not in the light."

I place two fingers underneath my throat activating my mentat that was synched with Dipti's. My face hardens with seriousness, knowing that I'm at a critical juncture in my time as king. This was the first crisis in over four hundred years and the old Joshua Levi from before the war was coming back as if from a pleasure induced coma. "Sense for any irregularities in her actions. We will convene with our counselors in evening and examine the footage of our interaction. If she is lying about anything we will find out. If she has poisoned Amiel in any way I will send them back to her native place."

I began the long trek from the royal palace to the harem, my thoughts adrift in the echoes of the past. As I passed the towering walls I had once ordered built, their stones seemed to whisper of triumphs long gone. I ached for the days following our great victory, clinging desperately to those golden memories to dull the sting of the misery that now threatens to drown me.

Centuries have passed—over four hundred years since the war of Gog and Magog scarred the earth and changed my soul forever. In the aftermath, I took it upon myself to rebuild. Benjamin was reinstated as regent, bringing stability to Israel. Meanwhile, America lay shattered, the Great Earthquake splitting its land into four isolated regions. For fifteen grueling years, with dwindling resources and unyielding resolve, we restored what little we could.

When I returned to Jerusalem, knowing it would be my eternal capital, I carried the weight of my destiny. I decreed the city's rebuilding, overseeing its triumphant rise from the ashes. Survivors from every nation gathered for a grand parade to witness the rebirth of the holy city, a moment of unity amidst the ruins.

But the glow of victory has long since faded. The cheers of that day now feel like whispers lost in the wind. The burdens of leadership grow heavier with each passing year.

Solomon's words echo in my mind:

"When I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Nothing was gained under the sun."

With a heavy heart, I wander through the park near the entrance of the harem. My eyes fall on my young daughter, Deborah, seated in the grass beneath a towering Tabor Oak. The tree, ancient and majestic, stretches high above the others, its sprawling branches teeming with the songs of rare birds gathered from distant lands.

Deborah stands, her small arms wrapping tightly around the lion by her side. She buries her face in its thick, golden mane as the mighty creature exhales a gentle, steady breath. Nearby, the lamb she had been petting rises, padding softly toward the lion. With quiet trust, it nuzzles the great beast, then begins grooming it tenderly.

As I watch my young daughter play with the lion and the lamb, I forget my troubles if for a moment. I admire Igor, the lion whom my daughter clings to. For over 400 years, Igor had been more than a companion. His playful nature and gentle licks had brought joy to every trip to the garden since they first brought him from Africa. He had become sigil of the tribe of Judah, a symbol of strength and power. Igor had stood proudly beside me at every important event, his majestic presence lending weight to every speech.

When she sees me, Deborah leaves the lion and runs to my side, her face bright and alive with joy, giving me a hug as big as she can manage. The lion stands too, brushing its side against my leg. I place my hands on both my daughter and the lion, brushing my fingers through Deborah's well-kept hair. She looks up at me with a admiration.

"Where have you been, Daddy? Busy again?"

"Yes, Deborah, these are difficult days. How is Igor?"

"Igor's good! I fed him some fruit from the river this morning. Daddy, lions used to eat meat in the old world, didn't they?"

I smile, glad to answer her curious questions. "Yes, lions were the fiercest hunters of all animals. Every creature feared them when they roared."

"Roar? What's that? Igor is so sweet and gentle; I've never heard him roar."

I chuckle, "You don't want to hear him roar, my dear. It sends chills up your spine, and in that moment, he's no longer gentle Igor—he becomes dangerous Igor. You'd have to stay far away from him then."

"I could never stay away from Igor. I hope that never happens."

I place my hands firmly on her shoulders, giving her a reassuring look. "That won't happen, Deborah. I promise."

Her grip tightens on me. "Thank you, Daddy."

"I'm off to see your mother. You be a good girl okay."

She tugs at me, her small hands clutching my arm as if desperate to say more. "Daddy, we're in bad times," she whispers, her voice trembling. "Last night, I felt a cold breeze, and it

sent a shiver up my spine—like the one you talked about, ya know, if Igor roared. There’s something here in the palace. I can feel it. It’s hunting us, and... I think someone’s being eaten by it. I want it to go away, Daddy. It’s bad.”

Her words send a chill through me, the same cold dread I felt after waking from my dream. Fear creeps into my heart again, this time sharper, more insistent. I fear for my children—for her. The heart of a child is so pure, so perceptive. They can sense evil in ways we’ve long forgotten.

I sigh, wishing I could offer her reassurance, a promise of a future as steady and unchanging as the world she’s known. But deep down, I know that time is slipping away. The prophecy of Daniel—the seventy sevens, 490 years—has almost reached its end. The shadow of what’s to come looms closer with each passing day.

Still, I must be diligent, I remind myself. I must save as many as I can, especially sweet little Deborah, who clings so tightly to my leg. “Oh God,” I pray silently, “help me. She must survive. She *must*.”

I kneel down, bringing myself to her level. Tears well up in my eyes, but I force them back. I must be strong—for her.

“Deborah,” I say, my voice steady but soft, “you train hard, just like your mother taught you. Be ready. When the evil comes, you will destroy it. You will rebuke it in the name of Yeshua. Even if armies rise to destroy us, He will deliver you. Do you understand?”

She nods silently, her wide eyes filled with both fear and determination.

I gently pry her small hands from my arm, though her grip is like iron. “The evil you spoke of,” I say, straightening, “Daddy has to deal with it now. So let go.”

Reluctantly, she releases me. I turn away, walking with purpose, my steps heavier with every stride. I don’t look back. I can’t. If I do, I’ll crumble—and she needs to see a father who stands firm, even when the ground beneath him shakes.

The crown on my head weighs down like iron, a symbol of power I never sought. I long to lay it before God in the temple, to surrender this unbearable burden. This crown—this cross—is too much for one man to bear. I never asked for it. From my youth, I’ve been driven by Yahweh who sometimes felt distant, his silence amplifying my pain till his glory returned to the temple. I eat daily in his presence filled with joy.

But now sorrow has taken the place of joy, as everything crumbles around me, I cling to a fragile hope: that he will gather the broken pieces and make them whole again.

This journey has stretched me beyond my limits. The trials have been relentless, the suffering sharp and unending. Will he see me through this final stretch? Will I endure to behold his coming?

I am a prince waiting for his King, yearning for the day I can lay my crown at his feet.
Until then, I walk forward—alone, yet not abandoned.

Chapter 2: Encroaching Darkness

When Prince Levi arrives at the harem's gates, he finds his wives mid-training, navigating a grueling obstacle course in the courtyard. A forty-foot tower looms above the course, ropes dangling from its peak. Priscilla, the chief trainer, commands from the top, her voice sharp and authoritative. Though most of his wives struggle with the climb, Sejal—Amiel's mother—moves swiftly, her toned arms pulling her upward with ease, every motion precise and powerful. Her strength is unmatched, her figure reflecting years of dedication and discipline. He notices his other wives sparring with swords and spears as usual, their nanobot armor glistening in the sunlight.

Levi's gaze lingers on Sejal, admiration warring with doubt. Did her loyalty match her prowess? The thought gnaws at him, its weight growing heavier with each passing day under the shadow of his haunting dream.

He realizes his mistake—he has come unannounced, surprising his wives on guard duty. They panic, getting ready to announce his coming through their mentats. He immediately gives the order for them to cease, they acknowledge with bowing heads.

One of the guards, as striking as an Amazonian warrior, moves gracefully toward Levi, her tall, lean body exuding poise, but she stammers and blurts out the first word that comes to mind, "Prince."

Levi smiles softly, his warm gaze meeting hers, and offers her a wink. Her face flushes crimson and her heart flutters.

Typically, Levi's visits to the harem are heralded with grandeur. Trumpets announce his arrival, and his wives present themselves in their finest, adorned with rare oils and perfumes. But today, the urgency of his visit has disrupted that ritual. He notes their glances, some startled, others curious, all caught off-guard in their training attire. Leaving now would only deepen the unease, sparking unnecessary speculation.

As the training session concludes, the wives gather in formation, their faces flushed and bodies glistening with sweat. The air is crisp and temperate, the eternal spring-like weather making even the most demanding training regime blissful. He knows the questions his unannounced arrival will stir, but he cannot delay—he must speak with Sejal.

Levi steps out onto a nearby veranda, his upright posture amplifying the stern authority of the crown upon his head and ephod snugly fit around his body. He ascends the platform to stand beside Priscilla. Her cheeks flush with embarrassment, caught off guard by the abruptness of his arrival, leaving her no chance to regain composure. The same tension ripples through the gathered wives—smiles flicker briefly on their lips but are quickly subdued, their disciplined formation still awaiting dismissal.

Levi's gaze shifts to Sejal, studying her reaction intently. Her demeanor is calm, guarded like a poker player holding a royal flush, revealing nothing. A surge of longing rises in him—

unexpected and overwhelming—a sudden, unshakable desire to be near her, filling his heart with an ache he hadn't anticipated.

Breaking the silence, he nods to his wives and speaks with a voice both gentle and commanding through his mentat. "I'm sorry to come unannounced. I felt compelled to thank you this morning for your dedication. You honor me with your strength. I want to encourage you to continue your training. Although we do not suffer, we do live in a world where there is the grave potential for suffering. The devil still prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Until the Lord comes, these will always be troubled times."

The words ring true, yet Levi knows they are not his real reason for being here. He has no intention of burdening them with the weight of his dreams. The last thing he needs is seven hundred concerned women, all eager to offer reassurances, hoping to ease whatever burden they sense he carries.

As they absorb his brief message, Levi studies their reactions. Each face reflects a unique facet of character. Some nod with solemn resolve, embodying the strength he commends. Others exchange faint smiles, as if sharing a private understanding about his sudden appearance.

But Sejal's expression is different—unyielding and devoid of warmth. Her calm attentiveness masks something deeper, something unsettling. Behind her composed gaze lies a hardness, a locked-away story he can't yet grasp, like a mask forged for moments precisely like this.

Reaching out with his mind, Levi directs his mentat to speak only to her.

"Step forward, Sejal."

She hesitates. "Why? What are you planning?"

"Let's have some fun," Levi's face still exudes seriousness despite the playfulness in his mind.

Without a word, Sejal steps forward, her composure unbroken as she moves to stand before the formation.

Levi's voice shifts, shedding its earlier gentleness. Now, he speaks with the commanding authority of a leader addressing his army. "You all know we don't train for fun. We train for survival. The coming of the lawless one means utter doom for this world. You train to survive. He will oppose me. He will try to destroy me and everything I hold dear—including you."

He pauses, his piercing gaze sweeping over them, gauging their reactions. The faint smiles and uncertain glances vanish, replaced by stoic determination. Satisfied, he continues.

"You do not train for vanity, to sculpt glamorous bodies or chase flawless beauty. You train as warriors. Warriors who will stand against the darkness. Today, I will test one of you—

something I have never done before. The time is close, and I must see that your training has been more than just a ritual.”

Prince Levi’s voice rings out like a battle cry as he leaps from the podium, landing with a thundering impact that reverberates through the courtyard.

He makes it known his intentions with just a thought. His wives flanking Sejal quickly scatter and form a circle. Without hesitation, he surges toward Sejal, a sword forms in Levi’s hand in mid-stride as if a potter was recorded one thousand times fast forward creating a sword out of clay.

The blade arcs toward her in a swift, deadly swing.

Sejal reacts in an instant, her training coming alive. She steps into his charge with calculated precision, pivoting on her heel to redirect his momentum. Gripping his arm, she uses his own strength against him, sending him hurtling over her shoulder. Levi crashes onto the ground, a grin spreads across his face.

Levi catches his breath, his voice low and raw with exhilaration. “How exhilarating. You’re absolutely stunning, woman.”

Sejal’s lips curve into a sly smile, her eyes blazing with challenge, “This is just foreplay, husband. You haven’t seen anything yet,” her voice quivers even though she exudes confidence. She’s nervous, after all, this is the first wife Levi has ever challenged in combat.

Before he can respond, Sejal’s sword materializes mid-swing, cutting through the air with lethal intent. Instinct takes over—Levi raises his blade, intercepting where he anticipates hers will strike. Sparks erupt as steel clashes against steel, a crackling storm of energy.

Levi’s breath catches, his mouth slightly agape. She is a vision of precision and purpose, her movements honed to perfection.

Is it the hand of God that drives her—or the flames of hell?

She presses forward with a series of rapid thrusts and slashes, each motion fluid and relentless. The air hums with the force of her attacks, the glint of her weapon catching the sunlight like shards of fire. Levi struggles to match her speed, his muscles straining as he parries each strike. Their blades clash, until finally they are locked.

“Let’s see how you fare without your weapon,” Levi taunts, his voice low and sharp, his face mere inches from Sejal’s. With a quick sweep of his leg behind hers, he pushes forward, sending her tumbling to the soft ground. He follows her down, momentum driving his body against hers.

Before she can recover, he pins her to the earth, his knees pressing firmly on her arms, rendering her momentarily immobile. Their weapons, now reabsorbed into their bodies, leave them to grapple bare-handed. Muscles strain as they wrestle, both determined to dominate.

Sejal twists beneath him, her legs snapping around his waist with practiced precision. She uses the leverage to throw him off, the force sending him to his back. Swift and relentless, she rolls over, straddling him. Now it's Levi who lies pinned, his chest heaving under her weight.

Her dark eyes lock onto his, and for a fleeting moment, triumph flickers across her face, pure and unguarded. Yet, in the depths of her expression, Levi catches something more—a glimmer of a tear she refuses to shed, and the unsettling gleam in her eyes as they widen with a mix of fury and delight. The vulnerability vanishes as swiftly as it surfaces, hidden once more behind her unyielding poker face.

“Do you yield? I'm not letting you up,” Sejal's chest heaves with exertion sweat dripping from her brow onto Levi's face.

“Okay, I yield,” Levi concedes obtaining what he desires.

Levi now speaks through his mentat into Sejal's mind.

“After everyone is dismissed, I will meet you in your quarters. Something is troubling me and I wish to speak with you.”

Her voice, calm and rigid, replies, “What happened? You have one-thousand other lips who can comfort you with their sweet words. Why me?”

Levi brushes her thoughts. She's still mourning the death of her parents. She's bitter.

“Because I wish to feel your sweet embrace again, I know somewhere you still love me. I know I love you,” Maybe his love could heal the bitterness she was still holding onto.

“Yes, I do, who doesn't love the ruler of the world. And the justice you give to *all*.”

Is she being sarcastic? I saw an image suddenly flash of her parents.

“I'll be waiting for you, my Lord.”

They both stand up and compose themselves brushing the grass and dirt from their bodies.

Prince Levi waves his hand, signaling for everyone to be dismissed. The crowd quietly disperses, each person returning to their duties for the day. Levi takes his time to speak with and greet as many of his wives as possible. Being a husband to nearly a thousand women was no small feat, but it was a role he bore with a sense of duty. After the devastation of the Great War, which claimed the lives of nearly all the world's men, it was a responsibility that fell to the few who remained.

Eventually, Levi makes his way to Sejal's quarters. Her door isn't locked, so he enters. Each of his wives live lavishly, with every comfort provided. A robotic cook hums in Sejal's kitchen, preparing the finest synthetic meat available—crafted to satisfy without the need for animal lives. This was a standard they upheld: to live without promoting death whenever

possible. Only the Levites consume the animals sacrificed in the temple; for everyone else, avoiding the suffering of any living creature had become their quiet commitment.

The room is bathed in natural light, filtering through a glass ceiling capable of projecting any landscape imaginable. Prince Levi's thoughts drift to a memory from years ago in India; a waterfall nestled at the base of the Himalayas. Sensing this through his mentat, her room transports him there in an instant. Though the mountains had vanished in the wake of the Great Quake, here they rise once more, timeless and untouched, surrounding her room and filling me with overwhelming joy.

Her bedroom door is slightly ajar and he walks in as quietly as possible in order to catch her in her natural behavior. Water is running, filling her large bath tub. He peeks into her bathroom. She is preparing for him. He is overcome with the smell of lavender. She stands up from the bath. Her nude, fit body overwhelming his eyes with her beauty, arousing his desire which causes the weariness of his concerns to momentarily drift away. Her long, golden blond hair falls to her waist, that slightly covers her large plump breasts. He puts his mentat on rest mode.

"Please join me my lord."

Prince Levi happily obliges, the intimacy of sex can reveal the secrets of one's heart.

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Sejal's half-clothed form lies sprawled across her queen-size bed, the blankets in casual disarray. The prince's royal attire lies scattered on the floor, tokens of their shared bath. In the kitchen, he pours coffee as a sleek robot completes the final touches on their breakfast. Without Sejal noticing, he subtly activates his mentat device by pressing his neck, taking it out of rest mode. Urgent alerts related to Amiel flash across his mind, demanding his immediate attention—yet he knows he must finish his interrogation of Amiel's mother first.

Sejal props herself up on one elbow, watching as Prince Levi approaches with two steaming cups in hand. She admires the striking figure he cuts—even after nearly five centuries, his body remains lean and strong, transformed from its once-frail state in the aftermath of the Great War and his rise to power.

He returns to her bedside, his gaze inadvertently catching the curve of her exposed breast as she shifts to get comfortable. A flicker of desire stirs within him, primal and insistent, but he quickly reins it in. With Dipti and the council likely scrutinizing their every move, the idea of indulging in more sex under such silent observation feels far too unsettling.

Sitting beside her, he gazes at her golden blonde hair contrasting with her dusky skin. He reaches out, his fingers drifting through her hair, while she meets his gaze carefully. Together,

they sip the scalding coffee, unaffected by its intensity; their perfected cellular structures are far more resilient than the fragile forms once marred by a world steeped in sin.

“Are you going to keep me in suspense?” she finally asks, her voice soft but direct. “You mentioned something troubles you, my Lord. Has your heart been put at ease now?”

Prince Levi momentarily ignores her question, his eyes drifting to the scars on her back—marks from the plague that ravaged her flesh and left her marked for life. A part of him wants to ask her about those scars, to understand the pain that left such deep traces. But he holds back; he knows better than to pry into a past she’d rather keep buried. Sejal senses his curiosity, her defenses ready, unwilling to let him use Scripture to justify what was done to her people.

Breaking the tension, Prince Levi turns his gaze out the window, where the waterfall cascades down the Himalayas, and memories of his years in India stir within him a long-lost peace. But the moment is fleeting. The troubling dream returns to his mind, and he turns back to her, his voice low.

“I keep having....” But just as he begins, the servant robot glides in, setting their breakfast plates on the table, interrupting the fragile moment between them.

The robot serves two plates: a slice of synthetic lamb, its rich flavor and marbling mimicking real meat, paired with fresh vegetables—bell peppers, zucchini, and spinach. The aroma ignites Prince Levi’s hunger. After a morning of battle and passion with Sejal, he feels weary yet ravenous.

As they eat, Sejal gives him a playful, mischievous look. “Before the war, were you this incredible in bed?”

Is she stalling?

Prince Levi smirks, leaning back with an amused glint in his eye. “In my younger days, yes. But as I grew older, I needed a little... medical assistance.”

She raises an eyebrow, intrigued. “Oh? What kind of assistance? I’m only two hundred years old—I want to know more about what that world was like.”

“They had a little blue pill back then called *Viagra*. Worked wonders. It could make even an old man like me stand as strong as a young buck,” he replies with a chuckle.

Sejal laughs, shaking her head. “If you were to combine that pill with your performance now, you might need another harem to keep up with you.”

Prince Levi savors the playful exchange, but wonders what it’s purpose is for? “Another harem?” he muses, raising an eyebrow. “I’m not sure the council would approve.”

She’s trying really hard to please me.

She gives him a sly smile. “Well, what they don’t know won’t hurt them.”

He grins, leaning a bit closer. "True. But I think I'm satisfied with the company I have right here."

He could almost see Dipti in his mind rolling her eyes with a slight smile and the Council pondering if another harem is possible through his mentat.

She looks down. He can sense her resistance against his attempt to draw closer to her. This was the unpredictable part of her nature. Whenever he tried to get closer, she would push away, but then she would try to draw him in, only to push him away. It was as if he was the rope in a continuous tug-of-war between two parts of her soul. He could not figure her out and the Lord continued to hide the thoughts of her inner nature from him, leaving him only to guess as to what she could be thinking.

The dream, haunting and vivid, drifts into his mind again, and he begins to describe it, his voice low and strained.

"It's this dream, Sejal. Our son... Amiel. He's there every time. But it's not really him—it's some monstrosity. His body, it's fused with our robotic tech, as if he's become something half-human, half-machine. And there's nothing left in him, no soul, no emotion. But somehow, he's still... there, in some twisted form, as if everything human in him has been corrupted, contorted beyond recognition."

Sejal listens, her expression filled with concern as he continues. "I feel it in my bones, Sejal. In the dream he's become what's foretold—the man of lawlessness. It's like I'm watching him in the lake of fire, just like it was prophesied. And deep down, I know why he's there." He hesitates, struggling with the next words, choosing to leave out the worst part: the part where it's he, himself, who delivers the final push that seals Amiel's fate.

Sejal tries her hardest to make her voice distraught and gentle as possible, feigning her sympathy to the prince's plight, "Dreams are strange, my Lord. Perhaps this is the evil one planting doubt. Amiel is just a boy who loves games and swords—he's no deceiver. Maybe the lake of fire is symbolic of your doubt in him? If you place faith in him then maybe your future dreams will find him swimming in a beautiful lake."

Prince Levi studies her face, noting her earnest expression, but trying to discern if it's genuine or not. Her words, though gentle, settle uneasily in his mind. He wants to believe her—wants to believe that Amiel is pure, free from any darkness. Yet the dream had been vivid, unshakable, like a warning branded into his very soul.

"Perhaps," he murmurs, his tone uncertain, "but there's a weight to these visions, Sejal. They feel more than symbolic. I sense a prophecy in them, something... inevitable."

Sejal places a calming hand on his arm, her voice taking on a reassuring tone, masking her inner conviction. "My lord, sometimes dreams are a test—testing our loyalty, our hope. Amiel is still just a boy, innocent and unscarred by the burdens of prophecy or fate. It's only natural, especially for a father, to fear for his son's future. But what if these fears are the very things that could steer him toward darkness?"

She's hiding something. I sense her convictions are not genuine.

He decided to press her, "I spoke with Amiel. He seemed to have a desire to inflict harm on others and one day rule in my place. Interesting, I never once remember trying to cultivate these desires in him. I wonder, where they could be coming from? Have you been teaching him these things?"

Sejal's expression falters for just a moment, her eyes flickering with something unreadable before she quickly regains her composure. She smiles softly, yet the warmth doesn't reach her eyes.

Impetuous boy. I told him many times to hide the secrets of his heart deep inside his soul.

"My lord," she replies, her tone carefully measured, "I would never teach Amiel anything that would lead him astray. All I've tried to instill in him is love for his family and loyalty to you. But he's a curious boy—perhaps... perhaps he has discovered these things on his own. You know, our depraved nature has never truly gone away even after the restoration. He spends hours in the library reading books, maybe the voices of the past have only inspired desires that were already there."

Levi narrows his eyes, studying her closely. "His depraved nature, you say? It's strange none of my other children for the past four hundred years have been given over these inclinations. I'm starting to wonder if he's being influenced—by someone, or something. Sometimes these desires are there, but they need nudge to get started."

Sejal lets out a soft, almost imperceptible sigh. "Sometimes, my lord, children inherit the traits we try hardest to suppress. They see shadows where we show them light, or they feel strength in areas we would rather they left untouched. But I assure you, I have done nothing to steer him toward such thoughts."

Levi's gaze remains fixed, unyielding. He lowers his voice, leaning closer. "I want you to swear to me, Sejal. Swear that you have never whispered anything to him that might guide his mind to the darkness."

Sejal nods, her voice steady. "I swear, my lord." Yet Levi catches the faintest tremor beneath her words. Her eyes harden for a moment before she looks away. Rising from her seat, she begins gathering the plates left after their meal.

"Let it be. The robot can handle it," he says, gesturing dismissively, as though waving away an unnecessary burden.

"No, it's fine. I've got it," she replies, slipping into a robe then carrying the plates to the sink. The sound of dishes rattles softly as she begins washing them.

Levi watches her for a moment longer, then decides his time here is done. He has learned enough for now. His thoughts turn to the urgent message about Amiel.

Quickly, he dresses, the urgency weighing on him. Before leaving, he approaches Sejal, her back turned as she continues washing the dishes. He leans in, pressing a gentle kiss to her head through her freshly scented hair, his hand resting lightly on her shoulder.

“If you notice anything strange about Amiel, please let me know,” he says softly, his tone firm yet tinged with unease. His mind churns, still grappling with the troubling message delivered by his mentat.

“I will, my lord,” she replies with a small smile, watching him leave.

As the door closes behind him, Sejal’s smile fades. She exhales deeply, her shoulders sagging as she releases the tension she had been holding. A dish slips from her grasp, clattering softly in the sink.

“Take over,” she commands the robot, stepping away from the task as it whirs to life, efficiently resuming the work.

She turns towards the door and locks it quietly. Her room is transported from the Himalayas to a place of complete darkness as if it’s floating in space.

Sejal pulls out a censer from beneath her bed full of incense. She lights it. A faint glow flickers to life, she lifts up the censer in the darkness. A purple flame suspended in the void. Its scent curls through the air, thick and intoxicating. She bows her head as a towering, robed figure emerges from the shadows, its presence filling her room with an oppressive weight.

Chapter 3: Aleister Crowley

Amiel is now eleven.

Jerusalem is alive with great pomp and fanfare. Crowds throng the streets to attend the grand procession as Amiel rides a robotic horse through the main thoroughfare, the vital artery leading to the heart of Jerusalem. The horse's metallic hooves tap rhythmically on the stone-paved road, each step accompanied by the hiss of its advanced suspension, punctuating the lively din of the crowd.

Children danced exuberantly in the streets, waving palm branches in a frenzy of excitement. Women raised their voices in psalms of thanksgiving, their melodies weaving through the joyous clamor like threads of golden light. The tightly packed citizens, spilling over into every corner of the city, shouted in unison:

"Baruch habá b'shem Adonai!¹"

This spectacle had become a cherished tradition, repeated countless times as the sons of the prince carried on a sacred legacy—a legacy that had brought peace and stability to the world.

When the prince's sons reached the age of accountability and readiness to conscientiously dedicate themselves to the Lord's work of judging the people of Israel, they were baptized by their father at the temple, in a ceremony brimming with divine significance.

At the time of this writing, the kingdom of Israel had swelled to a population of two hundred million, with Jerusalem alone accommodating ten million during such royal occasions. The streets were so crowded that people could barely move without brushing against one another.

As Amiel crossed beneath bridges teeming with onlookers waving palm branches, those lining the main thoroughfare lay their cloaks on the road, crying out with fervor:

Melech Yisrael chai v'kayam!²

Above, ships hovered in the skies, their passengers craning for a glimpse of the young prince. Yet even these high vantage points were congested, as small bots jostled and swerved to avoid collisions, all in pursuit of capturing an image of the handsome boy who had become the center of the world's attention.

Amiel tugs lightly at the reins, slowing the robotic horse to a measured pace. The metallic hooves strike the stone-paved road with precision, echoing like a drumbeat through the narrow streets. The crowd surges closer, their cheers swelling with each step. Children wave

¹ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

² The King of Israel lives and endures!

palm branches, their eyes wide with wonder as they reach out as if hoping to touch the young prince.

He sits tall in the saddle, his posture poised and regal. His movements are deliberate—each turn of his head slow and calculated as he meets the gaze of the people, letting them feel seen. A faint, practiced smile graces his lips, warm yet commanding, as if he alone carries the weight of their hope and admiration.

Above, hovering ships jostle for position, cameras capturing his every motion. The sunlight glints off the horse's polished frame, casting radiant reflections across the stone walls, dazzling his audience. Hands shield eyes, but no one dares look away, their cheers reaching a fever pitch as Amiel pauses, raising a hand in acknowledgment.

In the distance, Levites stand watching, their faces betraying disgust as they exchange whispers. The faint scent of incense wafts through the air, and for a moment, Amiel's polished smile falters. But he steadies himself, resting a hand on the horse's metallic neck. He has the crowd's devotion, and that is what matters.

The cheers grow louder, the crowd surging in closer, and for a brief moment, it seems as though the world has paused to revolve solely around him. When their adoration reaches a crescendo, Amiel pulls back on the reins of his horse.

The robotic horse responds instantly, lifting its legs into the air in a controlled arc and walking on its hind legs. Its metallic forelegs glimmer and move in the sunlight, striking an imposing figure against the golden city. Amiel's left hand grips the reins tightly, while his right-hand flies back with the rest of his body as he rises off the horse, commanding the moment with theatrical precision.

He reaches the temple. The Levites now stand side-by-side on the side of the road as he gets closer. When he reaches the first step of the temple all the Levites kneel at once in a combined display of respect. The horse stops. Amiel dismounts. He bows to the ground and kisses the first step, a sign of respect to the Lord of Hosts. The texture of the stone feels cold and rough against his lips—a stark contrast to the warmth of the crowd's adoration he had just left behind. He stands up. Prince Levi descends the steps and greets him with a hug and a kiss on his forehead. The crowd, great ships and buzzing robots which had filled the sky and crowded the streets are no longer there. It is just him now with his father in the quiet assembly of kneeling Levites.

"How was the trip son? I think it caught you off guard." He could see the brightness and excitement glowing on his son's face.

"It was an amazing feeling. I wanted to linger and bask in their adoration."

"Not as amazing as what awaits us within there," Prince Levi turns and looks towards the temple. "The praise of men is nothing compared to being praised by the creator of the universe."

His father put his hand on his shoulder as they walked up the steps into the main courtyard of the temple.

“I was baptized in basic training. You could say it was a baptism of fire and water,” his father recollecting his own journey with God. “Now you will begin your journey with God if you already haven’t; except, unlike me, you going to be baptized in the most beautiful place on the face of the Earth, the fruit of my hard work in Messiah,” his father grows silent as they approach the sacred pool letting his hand drop from Amiel’s shoulder.

Through the mentat link, Levi brushed the edges of Amiel’s thoughts. He expected to feel the nerves of a boy about to undertake a sacred rite, perhaps apprehension or even a flicker of doubt. But instead, he encountered a pristine, almost artificial calm.

Amiel’s thoughts were like a polished script, rehearsed and devoid of depth. Images of the sacred pool, dreams of this moment, and perfectly articulated platitudes about dedicating his life to Yeshua floated to the surface. Yet these were hollow, lifeless things—too flawless to be real.

Levi frowned, focusing harder, delving deeper. *Where was the struggle? The doubt? The raw, unfiltered thoughts?* His other children had wrestled with their faith, their minds a cacophony of questions, fears, and unvarnished emotions. This is a far cry from the Amiel he used to know. Amiel’s thoughts were the most chaotic of all his children. But now? His mind was unnaturally pristine, a serene lake with no ripples.

Then came the chilling thought: *Mentat blockers.*

Levi recoiled inwardly. The very idea was abhorrent. Chemicals designed to scramble neural signals, rendering a mentat’s readings unreliable, were strictly forbidden. They weren’t just illegal; they were a mark of treachery. Only those with something to hide would resort to such measures. Mentat blockers were also dangerous. They could interfere with the mind’s ability to process information and if used on a child could cause symptoms sometimes akin to insanity as the child grows and develops. Levi’s eyes narrowed as he scrutinized his son. The boy’s face was calm, almost serene, but now that serenity seemed like a mask. *What could he be hiding?* The question sent a shiver down Levi’s spine.

They continued to walk side by side, Levites kneeling before them as they crossed their path. Amiel notices every detail: the polished floor that reflects their figures, the gold-embroidered robes of the priests preparing for the ceremony. Yet Amiel remains expressionless devoid of any happiness or sorrow. His expression was that of someone working in the fields trying to finish a day’s work and get home with the harvest.

Amiel’s attention was drawn to the faint sound of trickling water. A thin stream flowed from beneath the temple’s threshold, winding past the altar and weaving through the courtyard toward the Sacred Pool. The water was crystal clear, gliding smoothly in its carved channels, its gentle flow steady.

He touches the water within the sacred pool, feeling the coolness against his skin. It feels alive, as though it carries some supernatural force, but he lets it trickle out of his hand as if he had just picked up dirt and was now letting it sift through his hands back into the earth.

Prince Levi continues to examine Amiel, his thoughts continued to swirl, “If he’s using blockers, what darkness is he concealing?” The thought clings to Levi like a shadow as the ceremony begins, casting its long, ominous pall over what should be a holy and joyous occasion. He pushes the doubts out of his mind. Maybe his son is special. He has never done anything to cause doubt. Maybe his son is the culmination of years of perfecting parenthood and raising children. But for now, these thoughts must wait. Levi takes his place in front of the altar. He offers a burnt offering of thanksgiving, taking a spotless lamb he has prepared. With a sharp blade, he cuts the lamb’s throat, ensuring its death is quick and as painless as possible.

Collecting the blood in a sacred vessel, he approaches the altar. With his finger, he smears the blood on the horns of the altar, just as the law commands. The rest of the blood he pours out at the base of the altar, completing the offering. The air fills with the scent of burning flesh and incense as the smoke rises, carrying the sacrifice heavenward. Levi bows his head, knowing the offering is accepted, confident in its sacred purpose of worship. In his heart, he reflects on the ultimate offering—the life of Yeshua, the true spotless Lamb—seated at the right hand of the Father, fulfilling all that this ritual symbolizes.

Levi turns around and moves to stand beside Amiel in front of the sacred pool. A large host of Levites have now gathered to watch the baptism. The event is being shared all around the world as the entire world can see what’s happening through their mind.

Prince Levi motions towards the water, “Come son, we shall enter the water of life.”

They both enter the water at the same time.

Prince Levi begins speaking to the entire world, “There comes a time when everyone must make a decision that is the most important in one’s life, today Amiel makes that choice. Amiel, do you repent of your sins and confess Yeshua as Lord? Do you renounce your past life and recognize that you are a new creation in him?”

“Yes, I repent of my sins and confess Yeshua as Meshiach,” repeating after his father.

At this moment a sudden shift in the atmosphere draws the world's attention. The air grows heavy, the light dimming unnaturally. Levi, standing beside his son, glances upwards, his heart tightening.

The sun—bright and unyielding only moments ago—begins to fade. Shadows stretch and merge as the world falls into eerie twilight. A hush falls over the gathered Levites, the ripple of murmurs replaced by an unsettling silence. Some Levites instinctively step closer to one another. Some fall to their knees, clutching their prayer shawls tightly, they whisper prayers of protection against the coming darkness.

Prince Levi doesn't hesitate taking Amiel into his arms and pulling him into the water. And as their bodies submerge, the sun completes its transformation. The sky turns black, the once radiant sun now a dark disk surrounded by a pale, ethereal corona. Amiel and his father arise from the water wiping their eyes to be greeted by surreal darkness that now covers the earth. Prince Levi unperturbed continues the ceremony, "The water symbolizes your death to self and resurrection to a new life, as Yeshua died and rose again three days later."

But Amiel seems oblivious to his father's words. His gaze is fixed upward, toward the source of the darkness. Slowly, as if drawn by an unseen force, he steps out of the sacred pool, his movements deliberate, almost mechanical.

Prince Levi can hear him mumbling something, Into...your.... commit....my, Aleister Crowley.

He kneels and bows low before the darkened sun. The sight freezes Prince Levi mid-step as he exits the pool. His heart pounds as conflicting emotions churn within him: alarm, disbelief, and a desperate desire to understand his son.

The moon slowly releases its grasp on the sun, allowing light to return to the earth in fractured, golden rays. Amiel remains kneeling, even as the shadows recede.

Levi crouches and lightly touches his son's shoulder, his voice low and tender. "Son, are you all right?"

Amiel turns his face toward his father, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Yes, Father," he says, his voice soft yet firm. "I'm overwhelmed with joy. My baptism is complete. I will enter God's kingdom and stand beside you when Yeshua comes."

He pauses, his expression growing more intense. "But first, I will be ready. I will train diligently for the day the man of lawlessness arrives. We must prepare."

Levi steps back slightly, his hand falling from his son's shoulder. Concern lingers in his eyes, unspoken but heavy. He wrestles with a tide of emotions—should he feel overjoyed or utterly terrified? Something Amiel said during the eclipse strikes him again, clear as a bell: *Aleister Crowley*.

Levi remembers that name from his college years in the old world. It was whispered in dark corners of intellectual circles, tied to rebellion and sinister philosophies.

Amiel stands up and turns to his father, his smile bright but unnervingly serene.

"Amiel," Levi says, keeping his tone even, "who is Aleister Crowley?"

Amiel tilts his head, pausing before answering. "He's my friend. He's taught me a lot."

Levi feels his stomach churn. A lump rises in his throat, but he forces it down. "Aleister... your friend? Is he one of the children in your classes?"

Amiel chuckles softly. The sound is innocent, yet it chills Levi to his core. “Oh no, Father. He’s not like the others. He’s special.”

Levi’s brow furrows. “Is he real?”

“Oh yes. He was here with us today.”

“Where?”

“Standing above me when I was kneeling.”

“I didn’t see him.”

Amiel’s expression shifts, a flicker of something almost mischievous crossing his face. “Oh, I’m sorry, Father. Maybe he only wanted me to see him.”

Levi blinks, surprised by the response. It was the first time he had ever heard Amiel mention an imaginary friend. His son had always been mature for his age, thoughtful and composed beyond his years. The idea of him inventing a companion felt strangely out of place.

Still, Levi forces a small smile, masking his unease. *Kids will be kids*, he thinks, convincing himself it’s just a fleeting phase. Surely, Amiel would grow out of it in time.

"Amiel," Levi says, his tone steady, "we'll discuss your friend later. For now, let's return to the palace and celebrate."

Levi clenches his fists, the name *Crowley* looping endlessly in his mind. He had read about him once—a man who penned *The Book of the Law*. A chilling quote resurfaces, unbidden: “*Do what thou wilt.*” Could this truly be the same Aleister Crowley from so long ago?

He scratches his head, the sheer incredulity of the possibility gnawing at him. It felt impossible, absurd even, yet the name—and his son’s unsettling words—refused to leave him.

Amiel nods, his youthful face lighting up with the same practiced smile he had worn during the procession. “As you wish, Father. Today has been... a wonderful day.”

Levi pats Amiel on the head composing himself and then turns to address the Levites, his voice steady despite the turmoil within. "The ceremony is complete. Return to your duties, and may the Lord bless you all."

The Levites bow deeply, murmuring their blessings before dispersing. The once-packed courtyard begins to empty, leaving only Levi and Amiel standing before the temple. Levi gestures for his son to follow, and together they begin the long walk back to the palace.

As they descend the steps from the temple the golden spires behind them shimmer faintly under the returning light, yet with each step, their brilliance seems to fade, swallowed by the towering silhouette of the palace ahead.

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Later that evening, Amiel sits across from his mother at the dining table. The warm, savory aroma of his favorite dish fills the air, freshly prepared by their robotic chef.

But Amiel barely seems to notice. He pushes the food around on his plate, his expression distant, the usual spark of joy absent from his eyes.

“Amiel, is something wrong? You’ve barely touched your meal,” his mother asks gently, tilting her head in concern.

Amiel shrugs, offering no reply, his gaze fixed on the food as though it were an unsolvable puzzle.

“Something happened today, Mother. During my baptism, the sky became completely dark. Why is that?” Amiel’s voice is calm but carries an undercurrent of curiosity and unease.

His mother looks up from her plate, her tone gentle. “That’s called a solar eclipse. It happens when the moon moves in front of the sun, blocking its rays.”

“I know that, Mother. I’m not stupid,” he says with a hint of impatience. “I’m talking about why it happened. As soon as it happened, I lost control, filled with an intense desire to draw closer to the darkness, like it was a swirling vortex sucking me in, transporting me to a place of my deepest desires.”

His mother sets her utensils down, her full attention now on her son. Her eyes widen slightly, but a glimmer of something else—perhaps pride or excitement—crosses her face. “Go on,” she urges softly.

Amiel meets her gaze, his own expression a mix of wonder and confusion. With childlike simplicity, he searches her eyes for guidance. “Aleister was there with me. It was as if he came alive from the words in his books and took me in his hands like I was a small child again. Dad heard me speak his name.”

Sejal grasps his forearm and snaps at him, “Amiel, you are forbidden to speak his name out loud. His book is banned. Mommy could get in trouble if people know I’m letting you read his books.”

Amiel grips the edge of the table, his knuckles white. “I don’t know what happened, Mother. I lost control,” he pleads, his voice trembling.

Sejal takes a deep breath, her expression softening. She places a reassuring hand on his arm. "It's okay, Amiel. I understand," she says, her voice calm yet firm. "I'll let it go this time. This happened because you're special—a child with a destiny that surpasses others." Her gaze intensifies, and she leans closer, her words deliberate. "God is pleased with you. He knows your desires and loves you just the way you are."

His mother's reassurance settles over him like a balm, easing his frustration and bringing a flicker of peace to his young face. He smiles, the comforting aroma of his favorite food reaching him. His appetite comes back and he begins to attack his food like a rabid wolf. His mother sits back and watches him eat, pleased that her words had the desired effect.

Once Amiel finishes, his posture slouches, and he sits back lazily in his chair.

"I think I'm going to go to my room and read now," he says, the food adding another layer of relief.

"Wait, honey, you have to take your daily medication," she says, opening a jar filled with rice. Her hand digs until she finds an orange pill, which she picks up and places before Amiel.

"But I don't feel like myself when I take it," he mumbles, his voice heavy with reluctance. "It's like... I can't think straight anymore. My head gets cloudy, and I forget things I should remember."

His mother crouches beside him, her face softening as she brushes a strand of hair from his face.

"This pill keeps you focused, sweetheart. Without it, you can't become the great warrior you're meant to be."

Amiel's eyes flicker with a mixture of uncertainty and curiosity. "A great warrior?" he asks, the words lingering in the air.

"Yes," his mother says with a soft, earnest smile. "You have a great path ahead of you, but only if you stay strong and focused. This medicine keeps you safe from those who would take that path away."

Amiel studies her expression, searching for reassurance, but finds only her resolute smile. Slowly, he puts the pill in his mouth and swallows, chasing it with a sip of water.

Almost immediately, a faint buzzing settles in his mind, a sensation he has come to dread. It isn't painful—at least, not in the way a scraped knee would be—but it's an unsettling hum, like static smothering his thoughts. The world around him dulls, the vibrant colors of the room bleeding into a soft, muted haze. He blinks hard, trying to clear his vision, but the feeling clings to him, his eyelids heavy with drowsiness that stretches on for an hour. His mind splits, tangled between his own thoughts and the intrusive ones belonging to the pill. His voice strains to be heard, drowned out by the relentless shouting of the pill's influence. It's as if he is trapped on a caged raft, drifting through an endless sea of tranquility, but unable to escape its suffocating calm.

His mother places a hand on his shoulder, her grip firm yet comforting.

"Remember, Amiel," she whispers, her tone almost reverent, "you're special. What you're becoming is bigger than you or me."

Amiel nods faintly, his expression distant, then stands. He pauses, glancing toward the door that leads to the hallway, which will take him back to his room in the palace. "If this is what it takes, Mom, so be it. Love you."

"Love you too, son," she says, watching him leave.

"You'll understand someday, Amiel," she murmurs to herself. "This is the price of greatness."

The hallway's shadows stretch long and dark. He hesitates at the threshold of his mother's room, the buzzing in his mind growing louder. He takes a slow step forward.

The carpet muffles his movements, but each step feels heavier than the last. He sways slightly, catching himself on the wall as his legs tremble. His breath quickens as he presses his temple with his fingers, trying to push away the fog closing in.

Chapter 4:

Amiel steps into the garden, the crimson light of the setting sun filtering through the canopy above, casting a mosaic of gold and shadow on the path. His heart pounds in his chest, as it always does when she is near. Deborah's laughter rings through the garden, clear and melodic, like a church bell summoning the faithful to worship. She isn't like the other girls he knows—there's a magic in her laugh, an unguarded joy that makes her eyes light up in a way that seems to brighten everything around her.

Amiel ducks behind a low bush, peeking out cautiously. He can see her under the great Tabor Oak, but she hasn't noticed him yet. Deborah leans slightly toward Uriel, her curls bouncing as she laughs at something he says. She is just a year younger than Amiel, his half-sister.

As he shifts his weight, a dry stick cracks beneath his sandal. Deborah turns sharply, her curls spilling over her shoulders like a cascade of light. Her gaze sweeps the garden, and Amiel ducks lower, his cheeks burning. He curses his clumsiness, his hands instinctively smoothing the front of his tunic, preparing for the possibility of being seen.

His heart sinks as his fingers brush the simple baptism tunic. It clings awkwardly to his arms and chest, far too plain for the impression he wants to make. A prince of the ruler of the world should not look so...ordinary.

Amiel takes a deep breath, summoning the courage to step forward. What could he possibly say? Would she laugh at him the way she laughs with Uriel?

The moment is here.

He rises to his feet, heart pounding, but as he steps forward, his back foot catches the hem of his garment. He stumbles, arms flailing, and crashes to the ground in a rustle of brush and dirt, landing awkwardly at the feet of Uriel and Deborah.

Before he can react further, Igor, lounging nearby, perks up. With a low rumble and a playful glint in his eye, the lion bounds toward him. Igor's immense paws press Amiel gently into the ground as the lion nuzzles his mane and licks him. Uriel and Deborah laugh uncontrollably.

"Get off me, Igor!" Amiel shouts, embarrassment boiling over into frustration.

Igor lets out a soft rumble but releases him, stepping back with a flick of his tail. The lion pads over to Deborah, brushing against her side before sprawling beside her. She strokes his mane affectionately.

"Don't shout at Igor," Deborah chides gently. "He loves you; he just wanted to play."

Amiel rises, brushing dirt and leaves off his tunic. He runs a hand through his hair, trying to fix it after Igor's slobbery licks left it thoroughly disheveled. His parted hair now sits in a wild mess, adding to his frustration.

"Nice hairstyle, Amiel," Uriel jokes, his grin wide. "Very...wild."

Deborah chuckles. "You do look like a rockstar—like the ones Father told us about."

Amiel hesitates, glancing between them. Deborah's smile feels genuine, and for a moment, he lets himself relax. But Uriel's teasing grin grates at him. He straightens, crossing his arms.

"I'm not here to talk about my hair," Amiel says coolly. "I wanted to find you both. I thought you'd want to hear about my baptism. The entire city went crazy."

Deborah's face lights up. "Tell us! What was it like? Did it feel as amazing as Father said it would? Next year is my baptism."

Uriel raises an eyebrow. "From what I saw, it looked more like a parade than a baptism. All that flashiness—was that really necessary?"

Amiel's jaw tightens. "The people love me. I was giving them something to celebrate."

"Or maybe they were just getting a free circus show, with you as the main attraction," Uriel jabs. He nearly succeeds, but Amiel exhales, forcing himself to stay calm. He glances at Deborah, controlling himself for her.

"Come on, stop it, Uriel," Deborah says, her tone light but firm. "Amiel was just trying to have fun. Baptism only happens once in our lives—why not make the best of it?"

"Yeah, Uriel, live a little," Amiel says, smirking as he leans into Deborah's support.

But Uriel's expression hardens. "Amiel, we live to glorify Yeshua, not ourselves. Father might be silent, but I won't be."

"The crowd was loving it, you're just jealous. I'm the one drones follow around trying to get my picture. I bet you wish it was you," Amiel says defiantly.

"No, I don't wish it was me. I care more for the praise of God than the praise of man, unlike you. If you keep talking like this, I'll go tell Father."

Amiel mocks, "I'll go tell Father," his tone dripping with sarcasm. A cold wave of anger rises, twisting his stomach. The warmth Deborah had stirred in him vanishes, replaced by a hard, unyielding glare aimed at Uriel. His voice, once playful, turns sharp and cutting, like the sting of acid.

"If you care so much about His glory, why don't you let me win once?" Amiel snaps.

Amiel's scowl deepening as his sharp, unyielding gaze locks onto Uriel, daring him to respond.

Uriel sighs, having had this conversation with Amiel many times before. His tone shifts to that of an elder imparting wisdom. “Amiel, it’s God’s will that I beat you, just as my sparring partner beat me. It’s a humbling process—you learn from it. It shapes you into the man who’ll glorify Yeshua.”

He stands up and steps closer, his voice steady and deliberate, his towering form looming over Amiel. “Obviously, I’m older and more skilled. But I’m making you stronger, more skilled, so that one day you can spar with someone beneath your level and make them into the warrior they’re meant to be. It’s all part of growing. Don’t get bitter about it.”

Amiel’s jaw tightens, his hatred for Uriel’s patronizing tone simmering just beneath the surface. That teacher-like air—so confident, so sure—grated against him more than any physical defeat ever could.

He abruptly rises, now face-to-face with Uriel. Though two years younger, Amiel matches his brother in height and stature, the intensity in his eyes daring Uriel to underestimate him.

“Just you wait, Uriel,” Amiel says, his voice low but seething with defiance. “I’ll be the greatest warrior this palace has ever seen—greater than any of our brothers. You’ll see. One day, I won’t just defeat you.”

Amiel steps closer, the space between them evaporating as his breath brushes against Uriel’s face. His voice sharpens, each word a dagger. “I’ll humiliate you. So completely, you’ll never set foot in that sparring hall again.”

Deborah stands up placing herself between the two brothers using whatever strength she could exert from her small body frame to separate her brothers away from each other.

“You silly boys are so crazy. I came here to have fun, not see you silly billies lock horns like two goats. Get over it—geesh. You know why father has us training, to prepare for the evil one. It’s not about you, both of you need an ego check,” Deborah now exerting more force to separate her brothers.

The garden falls silent, save for the rustling leaves in the breeze and the distant chirping of birds. Deborah’s words grapple with their egos trying to pin them to the ground. Her small frame, wedged between them.

Uriel takes a step back, his gaze softening as he exhales deeply, breaking eye contact with Amiel. “She’s right,” he says quietly. “We’ve got bigger battles ahead. This—” he gestures between himself and Amiel, “—is just foolishness.”

Amiel doesn’t respond immediately, his jaw still tight and his fists clenched. Deborah’s words echo in his mind, clashing with the roaring storm of his pride. Finally, he drops his gaze, his shoulders slumping slightly. “Fine,” he mutters, his voice barely audible. “You’re right, Deborah.” He wants to accelerate the confrontation, but relents, not wishing to make a bad impression on Deborah.

Deborah's expression brightens, and she steps back, her hands resting on her hips as she looks between her brothers. "Good. Now, let's get back to what matters—having fun." She gestures to the patch of grass where Igor lies sprawled out, his golden mane glinting in the fading sunlight. "Come sit with me, Amiel. And no more fighting."

Uriel crosses his arms, watching as Amiel hesitates before finally walking over to join Deborah. She sits down and Amiel drops to the grass with a huff. Igor lifts his massive head, yawning before nuzzling against Amiel's arm. This time, Amiel doesn't push him away. Deborah motions for Uriel to sit.

"I have to go, my mother asked me to get something for her in the palace," he smiles at Deborah before giving a wary look towards Amiel then departs.

Amiel fidgets with a blade of grass, avoiding Deborah's gaze as his cheeks grow warm. Now that Uriel is gone, the silence between them feels enormous, like the whole garden is holding its breath. He sneaks a glance at her. She looks peaceful, running her fingers through Igor's mane, her curls glowing in the golden light of sunset.

Crowley's words echo in his mind: *"The great danger in life is not that we aim too high and miss, but that we aim too low and hit."* A thought crosses his mind as if it was emboldened by the confrontation with Uriel. It was time for him to aim too high. What if he were to make Deborah his queen when he takes his father's place. His dad has a queen, why not him. If there's anyone, he'd want to stay by his side always its Deborah. There was something really special about her. It was time to see if he'd miss.

"Deborah, one day when I'm king, I'll make you my queen," Amiel says confidently hoping his shot would hit its mark.

"I'm your sister Amiel, Dad would never be ready for that."

"Half-sister. I'll be king then and it won't matter what dad thinks."

"Yes, but still," she smiles at him blushing. We could play king and queen now. I'm getting bored. You pretend to be dad and I'll pretend to be mom when a royal delegation comes. Come on it'll be fun."

"I'm serious," he snaps.

"It's not possible Amiel, I could never go against dad," The realisation dawns upon her that Amiel is being serious, "And we're immortal now, father isn't going to die. How are you going to be king?"

Amiel goes quiet, turns and stares at the sunset, her words echoing in his mind like the toll of a distant bell. *We're immortal now, Father isn't going to die. How are you going to be king?* The question clung to him, heavy and confusing. For the first time, his bright, boundless dreams faltered as he tried to piece together a future that suddenly seemed far more complicated than he'd imagined.

He plucked at the grass beneath him, his fingers moving restlessly as his mind wandered. *If Father doesn't die, how does anything ever change, maybe death was the stepping stone he needed to fulfil his ambitions?* The idea of death—something he'd only ever heard of in stories—lingered uneasily in his thoughts. His father had spoken about it before, but only as a thing of the old world, something ugly and cruel, something that Yeshua had stopped after the restoration his father had brought forth. People used to cry and scream because of it. There were widows and orphans, endless wars where men bled out on battlefields. He had read about all of it in books, but it still felt so unreal, like the shadow of a nightmare he'd never experienced.

If his ambition required death to come back, Amiel wondered, *then would his father have to do die so the world could move forward?* Or would his father just decide he was done ruling? That seemed just as strange. His father wasn't the kind of man to step aside or grow bored. He was the ruler of everything, chosen by Yeshua Himself, and Amiel couldn't imagine him giving up his throne for anything.

The confusion made his head hurt. He knew he wasn't as wise as his older brothers or as clever as Aleister, but surely there had to be an answer, didn't there? Maybe he could ask Aleister for advice—he always seemed to know about complicated things. Or... maybe he could even ask his father. *Would he listen? Would he help him?*

But asking his father felt like admitting weakness, like confessing he didn't have all the answers yet. And that thought stung. He wanted to be a king one day, a ruler like his father. Kings didn't go around asking questions—they just *knew*. Maybe Aleister would have the answers he sought. Tonight, he would ask him.

"You'd really make me your queen?" Amiel snaps out his introspection.

Amiel's chest tightens as he watches Deborah, her soft smile and the faint blush that colors her cheeks. For a moment, he isn't sure if her words are make believe or serious, but the warmth in her gaze gives him courage.

"Yes," he says, his voice steady, though his heart is pounding. "There's no one else I'd want by my side. You're smart, brave, and... you make everything better. A king needs someone like that—a queen like that."

Deborah looks down, her fingers fidgeting with Igor's mane as she processes his words. The lion lets out a low, contented rumble. "It's sweet of you to say that," she murmurs. "I always wanted to be like big mommy. She carries herself in such a regal way. Ok Amiel, I'll be your queen," She attempts to take a more queen like stature, straightening her posture, lifting her chin upwards.

Amiel is about to speak but she interrupts, "But... what if the people don't like it? Or what if Father....."

Amiel interrupts her, “I’ll make them like it. I’ll be king, remember?” He sits up straighter, his expression firm making his voice deeper, “A king makes the rules. I’ll make sure everyone sees how special you are, we are.”

She laughs softly, “You’ve always been a dreamer, Amiel.”

A flash of anger flashes across Amiel’s face.

“I’m not a dreamer. I’m a doer and a maker,” his anger is replaced with a burning intensity.

Deborah’s gentle voice extinguishes his burning intensity, “Amiel?” Her hand resting gently on Igor’s mane. “You’re really serious about this, you’ve really thought a lot about this haven’t you?”

He looks up at her, her face framed by the fading light of the setting sun. She didn’t look like she was playing anymore. There was something kind in her expression, something that made him feel like he could say anything, even if it didn’t make sense.

“I am,” he said, his voice quieter now, more thoughtful. “I just… I don’t know how yet. But I’ll figure it out.” He frowned, glancing down at the grass. “Maybe Father will get tired of ruling and let me take over. Or… maybe something will change. Something big.”

Deborah tilts her head, studying him. “You’re always thinking so far ahead, Amiel,” she said, a small smile tugging at her lips. “But what if you just focused on what you can do now? You don’t have to solve everything today.”

He blinks at her, the simplicity of her words settling in his chest like a calming weight. “What I can do now?” he repeats, as if testing the idea.

She nods, “Like sparring with Uriel becoming the best warrior you can be or… just being here with me and Igor. Maybe it doesn’t all have to be so complicated.”

Amiel sat back, her words sinking in. Maybe she was right. Maybe aiming high didn’t mean figuring it all out at once. Maybe it was about taking one step at a time, building toward the dream instead of leaping for it all at once.

He glances at Deborah, and for a moment, he lets go of the questions swirling in his head. Still, he was in disbelief, could his dream possibly become reality?

“You’d really want to be my queen?” he asked, his voice shy.

She nods, her cheeks pink as she looks away. “Maybe,” she said, teasing just a little. “But you’ll have to prove you’d be a good king first.”

Amiel grins, the tension in his chest easing. “I’ll be better than dad.”

....

Amiel collapses onto the sofa still wearing his baptism tunic, his exhausted body sprawling over a heap of discarded clothing. The chaos of his room defies the palace's pristine order—a quiet rebellion against tradition. To Amiel, the servant robots meant for folding clothes and tidying rooms were a waste of potential. In the old world, such machines had solved advanced calculations and driven innovation. Now, they served mundane purposes.

Not his Aleister.

Instead of trivial tasks, Amiel had fed Aleister a diet of philosophy and forgotten knowledge, programming it with wisdom once reserved for advanced AI in the pre-restoration age. He smirked, running a hand through his hair, his gaze drifting to the dormant machine in the corner. Aleister had become his silent partner, a tool for ambitions far grander than neatly folded laundry. It was his creation, his Frankenstein, Aleister Crawley resurrected.

“Aleister, how are you?” Amiel’s voice activates the robot.

The machine's red eye glows, cutting through the dim room. “I am functioning optimally, Amiel. How may I assist you?”

Amiel sighs. “No philosophy today, Aleister. Just... practical advice.”

The machine tilts its head, its voice a low hum. “Practical solutions, then. I sense heightened adrenaline levels being produced in your glands. You are unwell and stressed” The pixels in Aleister’s eyes began moving frantically, “Tell me, what troubles you?”

Amiel slams his fist onto the couch, “I hate my brother Uriel. He’s so condescending, so righteous, shoving our religion in my face. I want to humiliate him, but he’s better than me at everything—especially sparring, I want to beat him in such a way he’ll never spar with me again.”

Aleister’s head tilts back, “Very well. Your goal is to humiliate him, but still the potential he’ll spar with you again after beating him is still there,” the robots processing units spin continuously assessing the situation according to Aleister Crowley, “I think you’re shooting too low; you must make it to where he’ll never spar with you again.”

“Never spar with me again.....shooting too low? How can I shoot any higher?” Amiel responds propping himself up, “I’m intrigued, tell me more?”

His red eye blinks, “From what you tell me you may confuse his concern for you for religious pride. I think he is already humble; therefore, you need to douse him with pride.”

“Douse him with pride, what you mean by that?” Amiel gives a half smirk.

“What I mean is give him a taste of pride. Show him how great of a warrior you’ve become by ending his life. Otherwise, he will always be there to humiliate you!”

Amiel's anger dissipates instantly, replacing it with a look of shock and disbelief. He leans forward, narrowing his eyes at the glowing red orb of Aleister's gaze whose red aura had become more ominous. "End his life? It's as if you've known what I've been thinking about. You're talking about reintroducing death. The thing for change that I've been dying to talk about since I left the garden," Amiel feeling a sense of satisfaction with his play of words.

"Yes, so it's been on your mind. It's a mystery for you I suppose."

Aleister's glowing red eye seems to pulse now, its aura spreading like the manifestation of a dark and forbidden truth. The machine leans forward slightly; its tone rich with allure. "Ah, death and the forbidden garden. You've tasted knowledge, Amiel. Why stop now? Death isn't the end. It's a change. The final *orgasm* of existence. After all, what is an orgasm but the ultimate release to change?"

"The... final orgasm?" he echoed, his voice almost a whisper, "There you go again, talking about orgasms again. You know I'm only eleven if you forget. I know it's related to sexual magic, but what is sex?" His voice still childlike, trying to grasp the world of adults.

"Sex is a sacred ritual," Aleister intones, his voice dripping with twisted reverence. "A form of death, where one surrenders and is released into the magic of pleasure."

Amiel tilts his head, skepticism etches across his young face. "What does that have to do with me becoming a great warrior?"

Aleister's crimson eye begins to pulse like a beating heart, darkness flooding the room between each beat. Amiel stares into the eye, hypnotized by its dreadful allure, his gaze fixed on the pixels dancing within the light. The eerie glow weaves through the shadows, casting flickering shapes across the walls.

Its mechanical voice is now hypnotizing, "Everything, Amiel. Great warriors do not wait for power—they seize it. They dominate, they conquer, they take what is theirs by right."

Aleister's now stands like a pastor preaching to his congregation, "Be the lion. Take the summit above the pride, drawing power from your lionesses, your priestesses in the sacred act of sex magic. But now, even without your pride, there are other ways to ascend to the summit, to take your pride."

Amiel's breath hitches, his chest rising and falling in uneven waves. The words grip him, each syllable igniting a spark of forbidden curiosity.

"The world? Bend it. Break it. Rule it," Aleister proclaims, its servos vibrating with barely contained exhilaration. "The more you take, the stronger you become. Like a supernova consuming the remnants of dead stars, you will grow brighter, more powerful, until the cosmos itself bows before your light."

The crimson glow flares, bathing Amiel's face in an ominous, pulsing red as Aleister's voice rises, electric with unrelenting intensity. "You will rise—a great, shining, glorious star! And you will take Uriel's power. You will make it your own. And I will help you."

Amiel's breath quickens, his desperation mingling with raw anticipation. "How?" he demands, his body tense with the weight of unspoken desires. "Tell me what I must do. Now!"

"You must grant me access to your mentat. Through it, I will hack the network and locate a weapon—one that will give you the edge you need. It will hurt," Aleister warns, extending a thin, needle-like device from its finger. "But I believe you are ready to bear the cost."

Aleister motions for Amiel to come closer, its voice low and coaxing. "Shall we begin, my young lion?"

"Yes please, do it fast," Amiel is now on his knees ready to spring off the couch into the arms of his savior.

"Show me your neck," Aleister commands.

Amiel hesitates but obeys, turning his head. The needle pierces his skin, sharp and precise. He gasps, his body tense as an electric pulse courses through him.

"Relax O lion, the sleeper doth awake," Aleister's voice deep and theatrical.

Amiel feels the needle press deep into his skin. The sharp intrusion sends a wave of discomfort through him, and he freezes, afraid to move, fearing the consequences of disrupting the device embedded within him.

Aleister's eyes flicker, a mesmerizing dance of blue and yellow hues, as his servos whirl softly, processing the immense stream of data needed to synchronize with the mentat now connected to Amiel. The nerves along Amiel's spine begin to tingle, as an electric current pulses through him, creating a strange, almost rhythmic sensation. It feels like Aleister is guiding him, leading their shared consciousness in a hauntingly elegant dance, a tango with Aleister firmly in control.

In his mind's eye, Amiel sees vivid, alien thoughts—fragments of Aleister's vast knowledge merging with his own. Then, a flood of images bursts through: he understands words he hadn't before, like *orgasm*. A vision follows—bodies intertwined in passion, their faces twisted with ecstasy, contorted as if caught between agony and release. The scene burns into his consciousness, overwhelming him with emotions he doesn't fully comprehend. His mind recoils in revulsion not understanding why a man and a man and a woman can do such things to each other. It's all together foreign to him and he wishes to look away but there's nowhere he can go since he's trapped in the mind of Aleister.

Aleister's servos gradually quiet, their steady hum fading into silence. The needle retracts, and Amiel slumps forward, his breath ragged. He looks up at Aleister, his eyes wide with unease.

"What now?" he whispers.

Aleister's red eye glows brighter, a menacing beacon in the dark. "Now, my lion, we begin."

Chapter 5:

A week after Amiel's eleventh birthday, an air of tension had settled over the royal court like a storm on the horizon.

A farmer in a frayed tunic knelt before the Prince and Queen, his hands trembling as he stretched them forward. Desperation hung heavy in the room, mirrored in his cracking voice.

"My Lord, I humbly approach and beg you for help," he says, his voice cracking, thick with sorrow. "For the first time in centuries, my vines died last season. There wasn't much rain," the man's shoulders quake with suppressed sobs.

Prince Levi sits on his ornate throne, leaning heavily on the armrest, his chin resting on his palm, his expression one of quiet contemplation. At his right hand, the Queen stands tall, draped in a resplendent gown adorned with intricate patterns inlaid with gold from India. Her composed demeanor falters when the poor farmer finally breaks down and sobs.

Tears, a rarity in this age of prosperity.

The man tries to compose himself before his trembling voice continues, "I took a loan at high interest from a wealthy man in Jerusalem—Saul, he is called—to buy new seed, but I cannot repay the interest. Now, he threatens to take my land, the collateral I pledged. This season's harvest was meager, far less than I had hoped for. Soon, I will be nothing more than a servant on the soil that once belonged to me."

Prince Levi straightens, he considers the man's plight. This case, like so many others, is straightforward in its injustice, yet it is the frequency of these cases that weighs on him. Each year brings a growing tide of exploitation—wealthy men preying on the vulnerable.

Since that first year of Jubilee, each man returned to his ancestral land, cultivating vineyards and fields that rightfully belonged to his family. But now, the rich of Jerusalem claw at this fragile system, threatening its very heart with their boundless hunger for more.

Levi's voice rings in the hall, steady and authoritative. "Let this be a warning to all. Yeshua tells us that we will always have the poor with us until the end. They are not here to exploit, but as a potential opportunity to do good. If any man sees his brother in need, and withholds compassion from him, then the love of God is not in him, and he will not inherit the kingdom of heaven."

He motions to the guards. "The man who seeks to exploit you—Saul—is here. We summoned him before you arrived."

The hall grew silent as Saul stepped forward, his polished shoes tapping against the marble floor. His fine robes gleamed, a sharp contrast to the farmer's worn tunic. He avoided Levi's gaze, his hands fidgeted at his sides.

“Were you aware,” Prince Levi begins, his tone calm but firm, “that your brother here is in hard times and in need?”

The rich man shifts uncomfortably but manages to respond. “Yes, my Lord. It’s only business, you understand? You were also a businessman. Things are competitive. Other moneylenders are charging the same interest, I’m not an exception. This man was in desperate need of money. I didn’t force him to take the loan.”

The farmer’s voice rises in protest, raw with emotion. “But Moses said...!”

Prince Levi raises a hand, silencing the man. The hall grows still.

“I have a better idea,” Levi says, leaning forward slightly, his posture no longer casual. His gaze locks onto the rich man, sharp and unyielding. “Help this farmer. By his seed for him. If you do, you will be rich—not in earthly wealth, but in heaven.”

The rich man blinks, his polished composure falters.

“When this man’s firstfruits are ready,” Levi continues, his voice steady, “he will give them to you in gratitude, and together you will share the harvest’s blessings. Any earthly gain pales beside the reward awaiting you in heaven.”

The rich man takes in a deep breath, “what if I don’t want to?” He then looks down for fear of retribution.

Prince Levi holds his breath then leans back, *That’s a first.*

"Saul," Levi begins, "you have the freedom to choose, as all men do. The law cannot force generosity, nor can it compel the spirit of brotherhood. But consider this—our forefathers understood that wealth is a stewardship, not a possession. What you do with your resources reflects the state of your heart."

Saul looks down, his discomfort evident. The tension in the room builds, but Levi tries to remain persuasive rather than confrontational. "If you refuse, the state will ensure this man has the seed he needs to restore his vineyard. Yet, know this: your opportunity to extend mercy and grace will pass to another, and so too will the reward in heaven."

Levi pauses, letting his words sink in before continuing. "The Jubilee was established so that no man would be forever enslaved by debt or misfortune. If you turn your back on this principle, you do not just harm your brother—you undermine the foundation of our society."

The queen steps forward, her voice soft but steady, adding a note of compassion to Levi’s firm stance. "Saul, the choice you make today will shape the legacy you leave to your family. Your sons and daughters will honor your name for generations to come. Remember, a good name is worth far more than riches."

Saul hesitated, his lips pressing into a thin line. The weight of Levi's gaze bore down on him, and for a moment, he seemed on the verge of defiance. But then his shoulders slumped, and he nodded, his voice quiet. 'I will help him. He will keep his land.'

A murmur of approval ripples through the hall, and the farmer, still kneeling, raises his tear-streaked face. His gratitude is unspoken but palpable, his trembling hands clasped together as if in prayer.

The farmer turns to Saul, the light of joy in his eyes, "I will name my granddaughters firstborn child after you."

Prince Levi inclines his head slightly, his expression tinged with disappointment at Saul's reluctant agreement. "You have made the right choice. Go now, both of you, and rebuild what was nearly lost. But remember this—God loves a cheerful giver."

As the last of the petitioners leave the hall, Levi leans back in his throne, his brow furrowed in thought, "That was close. I've never seen such resistance to doing good. It was as if I was twisting his arm," Levi ponders for a moment, "While reading his thoughts, I sensed many more like him—scheming in the shadows, their faces hidden from me."

The Queen steps closer, her golden gown glinting in the light, now alarmed at the faint possibility of a growing rebellion. "Do you wish to take action against him, my lord?"

Levi shakes his head, his voice calm but resolute. "No. He hasn't done anything wrong yet. There's no law against disliking me. But speak with Cohen. Make sure Mossad keeps a close watch on him. Tap into his mentat. I want to know what he's going to do before he does it. Who are these people and what are they planning?"

The Queen nods, her expression thoughtful, her gaze drifting momentarily to the grand hall's windows where sunlight streams in. "Shadows grow fastest in the brightest places," she says softly, her gaze distant. "When men prosper, they forget God's hand in their prosperity."

Levi's lips curl into a faint, wry smile. "Good times breed bad times, don't they?"

"And bad times breed good leaders, my Lord," she replies, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"A strange balance, but one I cannot escape," Levi muses, leaning back slightly.

....

After court Queen Dipti leans forward in the royal chambers, her ornate bangles jingling softly as her lady-in-waiting, Martha, struggles to pull the tightly fitting gown over her arms and shoulders. Martha's face is flushed, her breath quickening with exertion.

“Ma’am, your arms—” Martha pauses, panting. “They’re too thick for this dress. You must cut back on the sweets, just a little.”

Dipti’s laughter rings through the chamber, warm and unbothered. “Martha, the sweets are my last remaining vice. Shall I renounce my love for chocolate for the sake of fashion?”

Martha grunts as she gives one final tug. Suddenly, the fabric gives way, releasing its stubborn grip on Dipti’s figure with an audible *snap*. The force sends Martha stumbling backward, arms flailing, until she falls back on a levitating chair preventing her from landing on the hardwood floor.

As Martha steadies herself, the discarded dress flutters down like a silk net, draping entirely over her. For a moment, she stands there, obscured, her muffled voice calling out from beneath the fabric.

“My Queen, I fear your gown has claimed me as its next victim!”

Dipti laughs again, the sound rich and infectious, filling the room with warmth. “Perhaps it’s not the dress but the sweets that have taken their revenge,” she teases, stepping forward to lift the gown off Martha with a playful flourish.

Queen Dipti removes her golden jewelry, piece by piece, handing it to Martha for safekeeping. “You’re right, Martha. I’ve been neglecting my training for far too long,” she says with a sigh. Her eyes flicker with a mix of determination and regret. “I must start again immediately. I can’t let the other wives see their Queen like this—they train so diligently, and I’ve fallen behind.”

Dipti pauses and turns to the mirror behind her. She brushes a strand of hair from her face, then puffs out her cheeks like a blowfish, her reflection staring back with playful defiance. “The demands of the state consume me,” she mutters. “By the time I’m done, I’m too drained to even think about exercising. But no more excuses. It’s time I reclaim my discipline.”

“That’s the spirit, ma’am!” Martha pumps her fist in the air, her enthusiasm brimming.

Dipti smirks, a glint of mischief in her eyes. “So, starting tomorrow, both of us will exercise diligently. Set your alarm, Martha—we’re getting up early.”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on!” Martha steps back, waving her hands. “Who said *I* need to be in shape? You’re the queen of the world. I just clean up your messes!”

Dipti glances at her reflection, her smirk softening into a wry grin. “Look at me,” she says, still studying herself in the mirror. “This is a mess that needs cleaning up. And this time, I need your help, Martha.”

Martha grins slyly as she folds the discarded gown. “Your wish ma’am. After I’m done cleaning up this mess, I’m sure my Lord will make another,”

Dipti's brow furrows for a moment before realization dawns. Her eyes widen, and she spins to face Martha, gaping. "Martha! You can't mean—oh, behave yourself!"

Martha chuckles, utterly unapologetic. "I'm just saying, ma'am—once you start glowing with all that post-exercise charm, his Majesty might find you even harder to resist."

Dipti presses her hands to her cheeks, both exasperated and amused. "If that's your idea of motivation, I'm not sure whether to thank you or scold you!"

Martha's grin softens into a more thoughtful expression. "I've always been curious, ma'am—after knowing you all these years. Does he... still find time for you? Despite having so many wives? You've been married to him for what, 450 years? Even before the great war. How do you keep that spark alive?"

She pauses, her reflection staring back at her as if searching for an answer. "He does try, in his way. A shared moment, a glance, a word—sometimes that's all we need. And other times... other times, I have to remind myself that love isn't always about fireworks. It's the quiet constancy that matters."

Martha steps closer, her voice filled with genuine curiosity. "Do you miss the fireworks, ma'am?"

Dipti smiles wistfully, turning back to Martha. "Perhaps. But after all we've endured together, I think I've learned to treasure the steady warmth of the flame more than its fleeting sparks."

"How about you Martha, how's your marriage? You guys have been married for what, 400 years I suppose?"

"Something like that, the centuries just fly, but recently, I don't know what's gotten into Gavriel. He seems distracted for some reason. He's not giving me attention like he used to," Martha's expression turns downcast, "I don't feel the steady warmth of the flame like I used."

The light in Dipti's face suddenly changes becoming dim and sullen. Now she becomes Queen Dipti her body posture now serious, "Is that so, maybe I'll have the prince speak to him."

Martha turns away looking down, "No please don't. It's just a passing phase. I know it. He'll snap out of it. It was like this before for about a month—long time ago. Then as if waking up out of a stupor he came back to me. I can't explain it."

Dipti reaches out and places a hand on Martha's shoulder, her gaze soft but unwavering. "Very well, Martha. I'll respect your wishes, but you must promise me one thing."

Martha looks up, her expression curious. "What is it, ma'am?"

“If this ‘phase’ lasts longer than it should, or if it starts to hurt, you must let me know. You’re not just my attendant, Martha. You’re my friend. And friends don’t suffer alone—not in this palace, not under my watch.”

Martha smiles, her eyes glistening slightly. “Thank you, my Queen. That means more to me than you know.”

Dipti gives her shoulder a gentle squeeze. “Good. Now, no more talk of men today. Let’s finish up here and then go raid the kitchens for some *kheer*. If I’m starting my exercise regimen tomorrow, I’ll indulge tonight!”

Martha laughs, the mood lifting. “Now *that* sounds like a royal decree I can get behind!”

They leave the royal chambers towards the kitchen; their voices echo cheerful conversation through the halls of the palace.

....

Martha takes her leave after they finish Dipti’s last bowl of forbidden kheer. Left alone, Dipti reflects on Martha’s frustrations with Gavriel. Marriages weren’t supposed to be like this anymore—not in their time. The thought of Levi growing cold or distant was unfathomable. If he ever did, she wouldn’t hesitate to report it to the Levites, who would confront him directly. But such a scenario was inconceivable. There hadn’t been a divorce in a century.

The last one had been a spectacle, steeped in controversy. The proceedings dragged on for years until Levi finally relented, acknowledging their hardened hearts. Salvaging their marriage had proven futile, their estrangement a symptom of them being disqualified from the kingdom of heaven.

If cracks like this could exist in the upper echelons of society, they demanded investigation. And Dipti, as Queen, would see to it. She could involve the Mossad, but Martha had come to her as a friend, seeking discretion. Some matters, Dipti decides, require a woman’s touch.

Dipti double-tapped her mentat, and in an instant, her mind connected to the vast neural networks that intertwined the lives of millions. Waves of emotions surged toward her.

A burst of laughter lit up her mind: Martha, giggling as her child held up a crooked drawing of his father. The joy was so vivid that Dipti couldn’t help but smile, as if the moment were her own. But the warmth faded as she delved deeper. A farmer’s sorrow gripped her, his despair unmistakable as he surveyed his ruined crops. Her chest tightened, and a tear slid down her cheek, his pain melding with her own.

The farmer's sorrow dissipated like a light rain on a sunny summer day, only to be replaced by dark, foreboding clouds gathering on the horizon. In the shifting haze of the mentat presence, Prince Levi appeared before her. His expression was distant, his thoughts clearly consumed with Amiel. Dipti's mind sharpened, drawn to the memory of Amiel's baptism—just six days after Yom Kippur. *Six* days. The number lingered in her thoughts, heavy with unspoken significance.

Prince Levi turns, his gaze meeting hers with a knowing smile. Behind him, Yeshua sits, His radiant glory filling the room like an unquenchable flame. They are eating together, though the food was indiscernible until Dipti tastes it—a blend of flavors so exquisite it stirred her hunger despite the weight of kheer still sitting heavily in her stomach. For a moment, she felt suspended in the shared presence, tethered by the threads of wonder and unease.

She leaves the room—the sacred place of meeting—her heart yearning to return. Yet, weightier matters await her ahead. She begins searching for Gavriel, crisscrossing the countless mentat neural pathways in the palace. She comes across a student, standing at attention. Gavriel is explaining something, the new recruit is fixated at the task at hand. They are in the training hall, in the mind of a new recruit who barely qualified for the royal guard still struggles to understand the training.

Gavriel points to his mentat chip, “This chip lets you materialize your bio sword. Protect it—it's as vital as your heart.” He slowly paces back and forth examining the new recruits. “I'm going to show you how to materialize your bio sword using your mentat chip. This is your first test today. If you cannot achieve the desired result, you will be disqualified.” The new recruit clenches his fists and shifts his weight. His feet are itching and all he can think about is taking off his shoes, discipline kept him still, though his every nerve screamed for relief. Dipti wishes she could itch it for him, but how awkward that would be, the queen of the world itching a new recruit's foot, but hey, Yeshua washed the disciples feet, right?

She uses this opportunity to examine Gavriel through the eye of the recruit, watching his demeanor, if anything is off. She looks into his eyes. They are as hard as the bio swords they now use for battle, tougher than forged Damascus steel. The recruit fears Gavriel more than the coming of the lawless one.

“Since bio swords are made from your body you can channel energy from your soul into your sword,” his voice, so robotic, so void of feeling, he's done this thousands of times she can tell. This must be another day in the job, hard to tell what he could be thinking by just looking into his eyes. Should she breach his mentat now? Would he be preoccupied enough not to notice? She thinks for a moment and wonders if it's necessary, *Gavriel has been with Levi since the beginning, a devoted husband for hundreds of years, we can trust him, right?*

“Think of your weapon of choice, slow and steady. The first weapon that comes to mind commit to that otherwise you'll be delayed in forming your weapon,” a staff forms in Gavriel's hands.

“Now it’s your turn.”

Dipti is indecisive as much as the recruit she now shares a mind with. He can’t get it together. He thinks of his family back home and the pressure on him to succeed. His thoughts interrupt the synchronization between him and his mentat and he struggles to form his weapon while others have already formed theirs.

Gavriel watches the other recruits, a rare half-smile breaking his stoic demeanor. “You’ve been paying attention. Impressive, this weapon is more valuable than your body. Don’t lose it. Don’t break it.”

He folds his arms. His face becomes serious when he reaches Dipti’s recruit.

“047, you failed, you may go,” Dipti hesitates and for a heartbeat before taking the plunge into Gavriel’s mind.”

She plunges deeper into Gavriel’s mind, her presence a shadow weaving between his thoughts. Every step risks exposure, and her heart pounds with the fear of discovery. Can he sense her? Would this betrayal—no matter how justified—shatter the fragile trust between them? *But if he’s not hiding anything, why should he care?*

She moves incognito, hoping Gavriel won’t be able to sense her. His thoughts sharpen into focus: his lesson plan, the exact words he’s about to speak. Gavriel holds a throwing knife fashioned from his flesh, glowing with the heat of his soul, frozen mid-flight. Nanobots swirl to intercept it but shatter and fall away, unable to break or deflect it.

His voice, strong and measured, echoes through her mind. “Your weapon is more than a tool—it’s your essence, your life. Lose it, and you risk losing yourself.”

As irreplaceable as you are, Gavriel, we cannot afford to lose you to the dark one.

His staff shrinks, folding into itself until it gleams as a knife in his hand. “Throw it if you must, but remember: it takes months to regenerate, drains your body’s nutrients, and reckless use could kill you. Commit to your weapon. Every choice has a cost.”

Have your choices exacted the ultimate cost—your soul?

She presses on, her steps cautious, her senses sharpening with every shift in the mental landscape. Memories unravel like visions projected on a wall of smoke, vivid and fleeting. His family rises before her, their laughter echoing like a symphony as they celebrate his bar mitzvah. The warmth of the scene burns brightly—until Tel Aviv explodes in a blinding flash. His loved ones are reduced to ash, their joy turned to dust.

The vision dissipates, replaced by another: his baptism, solemn yet radiant. The faces of those present are familiar—hers among them—witnessing the salvation of his soul.

And then, a quieter memory: the birth of his first child. Martha, his wife, cradles the infant in her arms, her smile radiant, her eyes glistening with love as she looks up at Gavriel.

The memories flicker like dying embers, coming and going. When one holds no relevance to her mission, it vanishes in a puff of smoke, dissolving into nothingness. Yet each vision leaves its mark, a thread woven into the tapestry of Gavriel's life—a life marked by devotion, loss, and resolve.

Dipti feels the strain of her intrusion, a faint ache blooming at the base of her skull. Gavriel's mind is vast, resilient. Her presence, no matter how hidden, feels like a ripple disturbing the surface of a still lake. How long before he notices?

Still, she presses deeper.

She feels like she's getting closer to something. The smoky haze of his memories begins to part, and a scene unfolds—Martha and Gavriel are arguing. Their voices are muffled, distorted, but the tension is unmistakable. Martha's face is flushed, her hands gesturing emphatically, while Gavriel's jaw tightens with barely contained fury.

He slams the door and storms out.

What could they be quarrelling about? Dipti wonders, the question echoing through her mind. *We have everything we could have ever wanted in this wonderful world. There's nothing to quarrel about. And yet, they are.*

The memory shifts abruptly. Gavriel is training now, his movements sharp and precise, his eyes blazing with rage. The air around him seems to crackle with suppressed energy, as though his fury is fueling his actions.

One robot charges at him, and with a swift motion, Gavriel cuts its legs out from under it. The machine crashes to the ground, and he drives his weapon into its chest, silencing it. Another robot fires a pistol at him, but his nanobots dart into action, intercepting the bullet mid-flight with a shimmer of silver light.

He retaliates immediately, fashioning a knife in his hand. The blade seems to glow with an inner fire as he hurls it with deadly precision. The knife strikes the attacking robot, splitting its head cleanly in two as its body crumples to the ground in a heap of lifeless metal.

Dipti watches in silence, the ferocity of his movements and the raw emotion in his eyes unsettling. *Is this rage from his fight with Martha? Or something deeper, something darker?*

As she probes further, she senses it—a deep, unmet longing residing within Gavriel's heart. It's raw, unspoken, a silent ache buried beneath layers of rage and duty. The mental landscape shifts again, and now she stands before a partially open curtain, tied at its base beside a bed draped in pink satin sheets.

The air feels different here, heavy with an intimate stillness. Smooth, muscular legs extend from the bed, feminine in form, but the torso remains hidden behind the curtain. The faint, intoxicating scent of expensive perfume saturates the space, wrapping around her like a silken thread.

Dipti hesitates, her hand hovering near the curtain. She knows she shouldn't, but the pull of curiosity is undeniable. Carefully, she reaches to pull it back—

A deep, masculine voice suddenly thunders through the space, piercing her mind like a blade. "What are you doing here?"

Her heart lurches, panic flooding her senses. Without hesitation, she flees Gavriel's mind, the connection severing like a snapped wire. Her breathing comes in shallow gasps as she opens her eyes to the present, her surroundings feeling alien and unfamiliar after the vivid intensity of Gavriel's inner world.

Whatever she saw—or almost saw—remains seared into her thoughts. *What is he hiding? And why does it feel like I was never meant to know?*

There's nothing she can do now. Without concrete evidence, all she has is hearsay—images and impressions from her unauthorized journey into Gavriel's mind. It's just her, Gavriel, and those mysterious legs.

If he's having an affair, she thinks, *I pray the woman isn't married. If she is...* The thought sends a chill through her. An affair with a married woman could ignite one of the largest scandals the palace has ever seen.

She considers her options, but they all feel useless. She could order the Mossad to watch Gavriel, but Gavriel is the head of the Mossad. He would immediately know he's being monitored. And when he confronts her—because he *will* confront her—what could she possibly say?

"I was in your mind, and I saw those beautiful feminine legs hidden behind the curtain."

The absurdity of it almost makes her laugh, but she shakes her head instead, pressing a hand to her temple. *No, no, no, no, no. There's nothing I can do. Nothing at all.*

The weight of her intrusion presses down on her, heavy and suffocating. She took a risk, and now she's trapped by the consequences of what she uncovered—or what she *thinks* she uncovered. For now, all she can do is wait, hoping that whatever lies behind Gavriel's curtain will be torn in two by the light, revealing the hidden secret it contains.

Chapter 6:

Amiel sits across from his mother, idly pushing his food around his plate. His appetite has vanished, consumed by the swirling storm of thoughts in his mind. How can he bring up his request? For years, she has been his greatest ally, the one who introduced him to the writings of Aleister Crowley and encouraged his relentless pursuit of knowledge. She has always supported his ambitions, no matter how lofty or obscure.

But this?

Can she be trusted with the goals now festering in his mind? These aren't mere aspirations—they are revelations, dangerous and transformative, ideas ready to erupt and reshape everything. His fingers twitch with impatience. He stabs at a piece of pasta, his hand trembling just enough to betray the storm brewing inside. The sound of the fork scraping against the plate is sharp, grating against his frayed nerves. He glances at her, searching for some sign that she might understand, that she might approve. But the stakes feel higher now.

Aleister's latest discovery weighs heavily on him. A mentat faker. Aleister uncovered a rogue operator buried in the forbidden corners of the mentat network. Someone dared to post their thoughts in its shadowed recesses, encrypting them behind layers of code so intricate it took Aleister days to crack. The decrypted message revealed a single, tantalizing offer: a mentat faker for sale, capable of bypassing the strictest protocols provided one can sync it with the correct mentat.

The price, however, is staggering.

Amiel doesn't have the money, not even close. But his mother? She might.

None of this would have been possible without Aleister bypassing the restrictions his father imposed. The local mentat network is locked down, its gates sealed tight by paranoia. Yet Aleister found a way to pry them open, exposing Amiel to the sprawling, chaotic depths of the greater mentat network. Now, he can't stop thinking about the decrypted message. Its implications burn in his mind like fire, unrelenting.

He clenches his fork tighter, his knuckles whitening. It's now or never. She will be an accomplice or an obstacle—there's no middle ground. If she chooses the latter, she might meet the same fate as Uriel. Any tree that falls into his path will be cut down and cast into the fire.

"Mother, I need your help," Amiel says, his voice taut, the words cutting through the quiet clink of their meal. His grip on the fork tightens until his knuckles turn white. "It's expensive. More than I could ever afford. But I need it."

Sejal doesn't react immediately. She spears a piece of pasta, chewing methodically, her calmness grating against the storm raging inside him. The silence stretches, amplifying his heartbeat in his ears.

“How much, hun?” she asks finally, barely glancing at him as she lifts another forkful of food to her mouth.

“One million shekels.”

She stops chewing mid-bite, her eyes widening as she leans back in her chair, her mouth still full of food. For a moment, she seems frozen, trying to process the sheer magnitude of the number Amiel has just uttered. She swallows hard, the motion awkward and rushed, as though her body momentarily forgets how to function.

“What did you just say?” she finally manages, her voice a mix of shock and disbelief.

“One...million...shekels,” Amiel repeats, his tone steady, trying to project an air of seriousness despite the absurd weight of the amount he’s just spoken.

She smiles—a small, knowing smile that feels out of place given the context. It lingers for a second too long, the kind that could mean anything—a mother’s trust, or the quiet dismissal of a child’s naivety. Amiel can’t tell which, and it sends a ripple of unease through him.

Amiel opens his mouth to say something else, but she lifts her hand and presses her index finger to her lips, silencing him. Her eyes flick toward the kitchen, and without a word, she rises from her chair.

He watches as she moves to the kitchen, crouching to rummage through a pile of books stashed on the counter. After a few moments, she returns with a piece of paper and a pen in hand. Sitting back down, she writes something quickly, her pen pressing firmly into the paper as though urgency drives every stroke.

She slides the note across the table to Amiel.

The words read: *I must not know what you need it for. My knowledge could compromise everything.*

Amiel stares at the note, his breath catching as the gravity of her response sinks in. For a fleeting moment, relief washes over him, but it is quickly overtaken by the realization that this is only the beginning. How will he leave the palace? The seller is inside the city, in Gehenna, a place that teems with the most undesirable people of Jerusalem. Gehenna isn’t just a place. It is a labyrinth of desperation and danger, where whispers of betrayal carry farther than footsteps. One wrong move, and even a palace prince might disappear without a trace. Not only this, but a large wall that is well-guarded separates Gehenna from the rest of Jerusalem. It is considered one of the last remaining bastions of rebellion against his father and the new world order that has ushered in a tranquil peace for so many years.

Sejal glances at him one last time, then double-taps her mentat. A soft chime hums in Amiel’s mind, a signal that the transfer is complete. The sum materializes in his neural interface, glowing with digital precision. It isn’t in the form of shekels or credits, but Luxom, one of the most untraceable cryptos on the market.

Luxom isn't just currency; it is a ghost in the machine. Its path is encrypted through relics of a bygone era: abandoned fiber optics, radio bursts, even satellites that should have been dead centuries ago. Tracking it requires combing through the digital ruins of the past, an almost impossible task in a perfect world without the need for old technology.

As the digital glow of Luxom fills his mind, a rush of exhilaration courses through him. Power. Freedom. The chance to reshape everything. But beneath the thrill, a flicker of unease refuses to die. Once the wheels are set in motion, there is no turning back.

Amiel gets up, adrenaline coursing through his veins.

I must get back to Aleister. There's no time to waste.

"Where you going, hun? Sit down and eat your food," she says, nodding toward his chair.

He hesitates, his body tense, but forces himself to sit. His mind races, already planning the next steps.

She watches him closely, her expression soft yet commanding. "Let me watch you eat, my son. Soon, you'll embark on a perilous journey. There's conflict ahead, but you must be ready." She pauses. "For now, finish your food and go."

Each bite is a struggle. He wants nothing more than to leave, but he knows better than to disobey her.

My son—the chosen one.

"When we're finally free, I want you to tell me everything you've done," his mother says, her voice low and measured. "You are not alone—there are others waiting for you. But I must hold my tongue until the time is right. Then you will know everything."

Amiel listens intently as he shovels food into his mouth like a garbage disposal, his movements mechanical and hurried. A part of him longs to stay, to remain in the safety and comfort of his mother's presence. She has always been his anchor, the one constant in the storm of his frustrations and ambitions.

When he first voices his desire to take his father's throne, it is she who gleefully supplies the knowledge, the tools, and the means to help him carve his path. She has been his guiding hand, his fiercest supporter.

But he can no longer lean on her.

If he is to become the great warrior he is destined to be, he has to let go. He has to stop clinging to her, stop being the weaned child who seeks her protection.

This is the moment. The moment to cut the umbilical cord binding him to safety and dependence. There is no going back now.

At just eleven years old, Amiel understands what it means to be alone. And for the first time, he accepts it. He is no longer her child. He is his own man.

....

Amiel stares at Aleister's glowing eye, his voice brimming with triumph as he pumps his fist.

"We have the funds, Aleister."

The energy in the room shifts, charged with the weight of their shared ambition.

Aleister's voice hums through the speakers, steady and calm, like a tether anchoring Amiel's boundless energy.

"I know, my lion. Remember, I'm synced with your mentat—I see what you see, feel what you feel. Your victories are mine, and your mother's belief in you is absolute. As is mine."

Amiel pauses, the praise settling on him like a warm mantle, reassuring yet heavy with expectation. But Aleister isn't finished.

"She knows, as I do, that you will usher in the Age of Horus. The time for renewal, for youth to seize the throne of kings, is upon us. The old ways are dying, Amiel, and you are destined to lead us into the new era."

The words stir something deep within Amiel. The Age of Horus. He's heard his mother whisper it during her midnight meditations, her voice reverent, as though invoking prophecy.

"Teach me more about the Age of Horus," Amiel says, his voice brimming with excitement. "What is my place in all this?"

Aleister's tone sharpens, his presence both calculating and reverential.

"You are our messiah," he declares. "Youth ascendant. Chaos subdued. A world reshaped by will—your will, Amiel. Like Horus, you were born to challenge the old and bring forth the new. You are the falcon rising from the ashes of a dying age."

Amiel swallows hard, his chest swelling with pride and responsibility. But doubt creeps in, his thoughts flickering to his mother—her unwavering belief in him—and Aleister, his guide.

"But Horus didn't do it alone," he says softly.

"No," Aleister agrees, "but Horus stands alone at the center of it all. And so will you."

The words settle like a stone in Amiel's chest. Heavy. Unyielding. Yet, instead of crushing him, they forge his resolve. His rise is not just about ambition—it is about destiny.

The Age of Horus is coming.

But before Amiel can usher it in, he must figure out how to leave the palace undetected.

“Have you been in touch with our contact?”

“Yes,” Aleister confirms. “You meet them tomorrow.”

Amiel’s excitement falters, replaced by confusion and anxiety. “But how? I can’t just leave the palace. I can’t skip sparring practice. Will I tell them I’m sick? No one’s been sick in four hundred years.”

Aleister’s servos hum softly, a mechanical murmur of thought.

“Then we engineer a sickness. I’ve already been planning this as soon I found the mentat faker.”

Amiel blinks, stunned. “What?”

“It has been done before,” Aleister explains, his voice clinical. “Long ago, shortly before the Great War, a sickness swept the Earth, shutting everything down. No one could leave their rooms. I have the data on how it was done. We’ll put the entire palace on lockdown. Once that happens, you’ll escape through the sewerage. I’ve accessed the palace blueprints. I will guide you through your mentat.”

Amiel’s face tightens, dread pooling in his stomach. “A sickness? That’s dangerous. What if it gets out of control? What if it... hurts my mother or Deborah?”

Aleister’s eye glows faintly blue, its light soft and soothing.

“Do not fear, my lion. This is not an uncontrolled plague. I am not proposing chaos—I am proposing precision. The sickness will be engineered. Targeted.”

Amiel swallows, his earlier confidence wavering. “Diseases don’t care who they infect. How can you be sure?”

“With genomic data on every palace inhabitant,” Aleister replies, his tone unwavering. “I will tailor the virus to ensure non-lethal outcomes. Symptoms will be severe enough to force a lockdown, yet mild enough to guarantee full recovery within hours. No one will die. That is my promise.”

Amiel’s hands tremble. “But... they’re innocent.”

Aleister’s monotone voice remains steady, though there’s a cold edge to his logic.

“Sacrifices must be made, Amiel. The needs of the few cannot outweigh the destiny of the many. Remember the Age of Horus. The old ways must die for the new to rise.”

Amiel's fists tighten, his knuckles white. Sacrifice. The word echoes in his mind. The cooks, the guards, the aides—faces he has known his entire life—flash before him. They don't deserve this.

Aleister presses on. "Do you think Horus hesitated when Set threatened to overthrow him? When he faced his enemies, he acted. And so must you. One moment of hesitation could cost you everything we've worked for."

Amiel closes his eyes, the war within him raging. Is it worth the cost? But Aleister is right. Destiny demands sacrifice.

"What if my father finds out?" he whispers.

"He won't," Aleister assures him. "By the time anyone suspects, you will be gone. The sickness will cover your absence. I will ensure no trail leads back to you."

Amiel opens his eyes, his resolve hardening like tempered steel. "Then do it. But promise me—my mother and Deborah must survive."

Aleister's servos hum again, a faint sound like a mechanical sigh. "Of course, my lion. I will safeguard those you hold dear. Trust me."

From Aleister's mechanical hand, a thin needle extends, gleaming and precise. "Now, I must inject you with something so you won't get sick. It's called a vaccine."

Amiel frowns. "A vaccine?"

"There's no time to explain, lion. Things are about to move very quickly. You must trust me."

Amiel hesitates, his pulse pounding, but obeys. He pulls his shirt over his head, the air cold against his skin.

"This will sting a little," Aleister warns, maneuvering the needle into position. "You'll feel a knot in your shoulder, but it will pass."

Amiel grits his teeth as the needle pierces his skin—sharper than expected. A cold fluid rushes from Aleister's core, through the thin tube, and into his shoulder. The chill spreads, making his muscles clench reflexively.

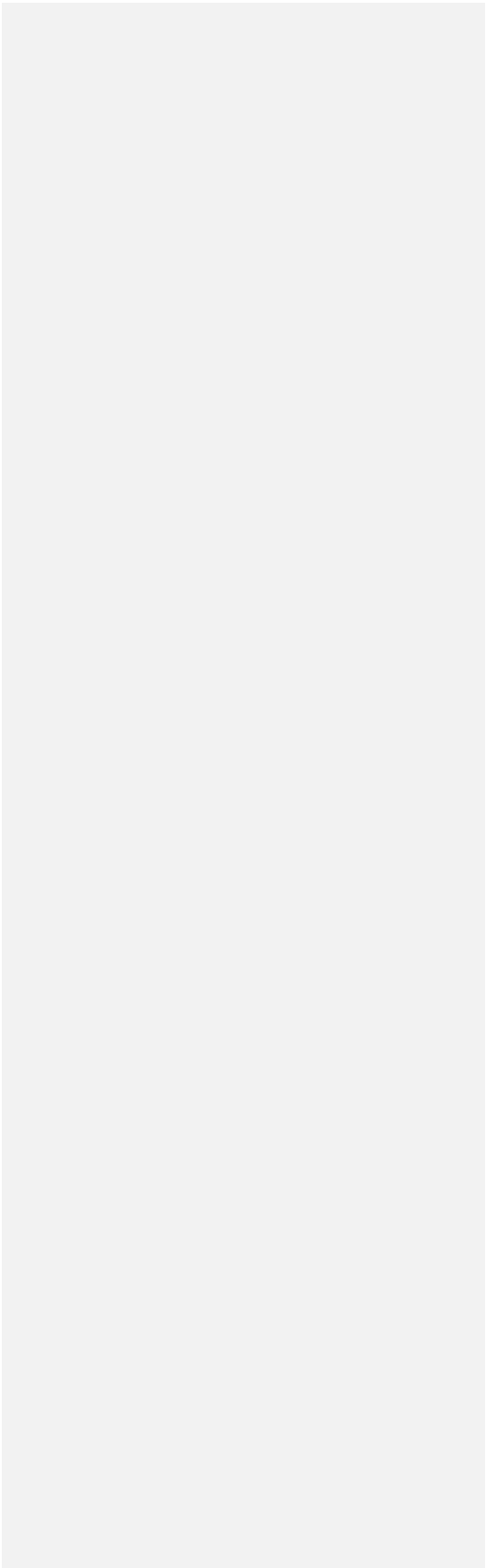
"Very good, my lion," Aleister says, retracting the needle with mechanical precision. "You are protected now. The rest of the palace won't be so fortunate."

Amiel rubs his shoulder, kneading the tender spot as he pulls his shirt back on.

"Now, I will require your nanobots," Aleister continues. "They will deliver the virus to the palace's climate control system. Tomorrow morning, everyone will be sick—including you, though yours will be feigned."

Amiel nods, his face pale but resolute. There's no turning back now.

The Age of Horus awaits.



Chapter 7:

“Put the palace on lockdown!” Prince Levi shouts between violent heaves, his head hanging over the toilet, fever raging through his body. Behind him, Benjamin and Cohen stand frozen, their faces pale with disbelief.

“Stay back!” Levi warns, his voice strained and cracking. “You’ll get this too if you’re not careful.”

Benjamin exhales, his arms crossed as he leans against the washroom threshold. “My wife’s already sick, Josh.”

Cohen runs a hand through his thick, black hair, wincing as another retch echoes through the room. “Mine too.”

Benjamin shakes his head slowly, his tone flat, resigned. “There’s no escaping this one.”

From the hallway, Queen Dipti watches, unable to bear the sound of her husband suffering. She presses the back of her hand to her forehead, searching for fever. A tightness coils in her throat—a feeling she hasn’t known for half a millennium.

Flu. Illness. Words long forgotten. Dipti strains to remember remedies, but they’re useless now—artifacts of a bygone era. The labs had been dismantled after the Great War, when sickness was conquered, and vaccines abandoned, deemed unnecessary.

Dipti pulls Cohen aside, her voice urgent, “How is this happening? I’ve searched the neural network—no one else in Jerusalem is sick. Only those in the palace. Is this an attack? How could you not see this coming?”

Cohen’s face flushes with frustration, his voice clipped. “I swear, my Queen—no one saw this. This has to be an inside job. There’s no other explanation. No one from outside works here. Everyone in the palace lives here.”

He hesitates, his voice lowering. “We checked the records. Anyone who left the palace in the last twenty-four hours is fine. Those who stayed... they’re all afflicted.”

Dipti straightens, her voice sharp and resolute. “Everyone must enter their rooms and remain locked down. No one is to leave the palace.”

Cohen nods, already moving with a sense of purpose. “I’m on it, ma’am. Anyone caught leaving their rooms or wandering the palace grounds will be detained and questioned. Robots will patrol the halls to enforce the lockdown.” His tone is firm, authoritative, as if reassuring himself as much as her. “We’ll have surveillance on every corridor, every room. This applies to us too—the robots will allow us to monitor everything.”

Dipti turns to Benjamin, who stands slightly apart, watching Prince Levi with a contemplative air. His gaze is distant, as though trying to grasp the full implications of what is unfolding.

“What do you think of all this, Ben?” Dipti steps closer to him, stealing a glance at her husband. Levi is still slumped over the toilet, though he acknowledges her presence with a faint, half-smile.

“Care to join, dear? There’s room for two here,” Levi croaks, tapping the toilet lid with a weak attempt at humor.

Dipti presses her palms together in mock surrender, bowing slightly. “I’ll pass, thanks.”

Benjamin exhales, his tone calm but heavy with finality. “The façade is crumbling. We’re closer to the end than any of us want to admit.” He pauses, his eyes dark with thought. “Let’s just try to enjoy these final days as much as we can... before the final seven.”

Dipti shakes her head, her voice firm but tinged with frustration. “I prefer to be pragmatic, not doomsday. If this *is* something we could’ve prevented..., why didn’t we?”

Benjamin nods, conceding Dipti’s point. “Okay, I’ll try to be a little more pragmatic. If this virus did originate in the palace, how did it get here? Who even has the capabilities to develop and spread something like this—”

“Wait...” Cohen cuts him off, his eyes narrowing as the pieces click together in his mind.

Both Dipti and Benjamin turn to him.

“One of my operatives in Gehenna put out mentat faker for sale on the neural network. We’re always searching for dissidents looking to plant the seeds of the rebellion,” Cohen says, his voice low and urgent. “A buyer flagged interest in the mentat faker. The pickup is supposed to happen today. And today, the virus strikes? That’s too much of a coincidence.”

Benjamin straightens, his voice sharp. “Did you put a tracker on it?”

Cohen exhales, a faint cough escaping as he fights to steady himself. “Of course I did. Whoever’s behind this won’t get far without us knowing.”

Dipti crosses her arms, her gaze hardening. “Who’s the buyer?”

Cohen shakes his head, “No name yet. But I’ll find out. They’re ready to pay an enormous sum for it. Only the rich of Jerusalem could afford this.”

....

“Amiel, it has begun. They’re sending people to come and check on us. You must get ready. Lay in bed. The vaccine I gave you should feign the virus in your blood. I’ll raise your

body temperature through your mentat. I must act inefficient from here on out. I'll begin cleaning your room."

Aleister's red pixilated eye turns blue as he begins to pick up dirty clothes and place them in drawers.

A knock on the door.

Amiel once saw a movie, Ferris Bueller's Day Off, from the palace archives. Ferris Bueller once said after fooling his parents that he was sick:

Life moves pretty fast,

You don't stop and look around once in a while,

You could miss it.

Ferris's words echoed in Amiel's mind. But life in the palace wasn't fast—it was a cage. And today, he couldn't afford to be caught.

Amiel hunkers down underneath his blanket and pretends he's sleeping just like Ferris did. The door opens, and Dipti and a nurse enter his room, followed by a robotic assistant.

"Amiel?" Dipti studies him as he lays underneath the blanket pretending to be asleep and not acknowledging her voice.

Midway through the scan, the nurse coughs sharply, a rasping sound that cuts through the quiet. She doubles over slightly, hacking into her sleeve, but continues monitoring the display. After half a minute, the nanobots settle back onto Amiel's skin, their light fading.

The nurse addresses Queen Dipti, "My Queen, his temperature is elevated, but his vitals seem stable. He's asleep."

Dipti gently touches his forehead, "Amiel, sweetheart, how are you feeling?"

Amiel shifts slightly under the covers, trying to keep his expression neutral. He opens his eyes and looks at Dipti with a drowsy look pretending to be sleepy.

Be calm, my lion. Say you're tired.

"I'm fine, Mom. Just really tired." Amiel mumbles.

All the children of Prince Levi consider her this way even if they are the children of another mom. He does not address her as Queen but as mom. He has a fondness for her that is only slightly exceeded by that of his birth mom. He suddenly feels remorse that he may be the reason she might fall sick. He remembers how she'd hugged him once, comforting him after a failed exam on the Torah. "No matter what, you're the smartest prince in this family," she had said. Now, he wonders if he deserves this love.

“You have fever. Are you sure you’re okay?” Queen Dipti can’t shake the feeling something is wrong.

Amiel nods, his gaze darting to the robotic assistant as it moves around the room. Aleister’s presence in his mind steadies him, guiding his responses.

“Yeah, just feeling really tired and hot that’s all.”

Yes, that’s good.

The nurse studies his vitals once more.

“Ma’am his heart rate is elevated for some reason,” the nurse says as a nanobot emits a holographic display showing his heart rate.

Queen Dipti looks once more at Amiel.

Only those who are lying or in trouble have an elevated heartbeat. Something’s not right here.

Aleister quickly realizes the predicament they are in. His processors work to find a solution but cannot work at full capacity because his heightened workload could alert the other robot nearby. But luckily the solution is quite easy and he’s able to administer a drug that lowers Amiel’s heartbeat via a nanobot.

The holographic display of Amiel’s heartbeat goes down to normal levels.

“Huh... Strange. His vitals were elevated just a second ago. Maybe the virus is playing tricks on our scans. We’ll have to monitor him closely or maybe it’s our machines, we’ve never dealt with something like this before,” the nurse removes holographic display and looks at Dipti waiting for further orders.

Dipti is now slightly suspicious, but maybe it was a fluke. She looks around at his room. Checking to see if anything is out of order. She notices some clothing lying on the floor beside his dresser. Her gaze lingers on Aleister. It was designed to clean, so why did it miss something as simple as a stray shirt?

“I think his robot isn’t functioning properly. He left some clothes. I think we should take his robot in for servicing.”

Amiel’s heart races. They can’t take Aleister—his years of work, his only lifeline, gone in an instant. There’s no way he could recreate the AI now, not when they were so close. Losing Aleister would mean starting over, and starting over meant failure. He has to act fast.

Before Dipti or the nurse could say another word, Amiel clutches his stomach, doubling over in bed. He lets out a dramatic groan, his voice hoarse and strained.

“Oh, the pain!” he cries out, twisting his face into a grimace. “It’s unbearable!”

Yes, LION, roar! Aleister's calm voice buzzes in his mind, equal parts encouragement and amusement.

Dipti couldn't shake off the feeling something didn't feel right, but Amiel's apparent suffering overshadowed her doubt. She moves hesitantly from the discarded clothing to his bedside, the urgency of the situation not allowing her to investigate further—for now.

The nurse taps her mentat, summoning another scan from the nanobots. Amiel writhes in bed, clutching his stomach tighter, his moans growing louder.

"It's spreading!" he shouts, adding a gasp for dramatic effect. "I feel like I'm dying!"

"Amiel!" Dipti begins to panic.

The nurse steps back, her expression turning grim. "My Queen, his vitals are spiking again. Elevated heart rate, rising cortisol levels—it could be the virus mutating."

Another injection courtesy of Aleister.

She leans over Amiel, brushing his hair back from his damp forehead. "Stay calm, sweetheart. We'll figure this out." She looks at the nurse. "We need to call in additional support! Bring the medical team here immediately!"

Aleister's voice hums in Amiel's mind again, a note of urgency this time. Steady now, Lion. Don't overplay it. You've bought time—don't squander it.

Amiel groans once more but eases back slightly, letting his body go limp. "I think... it's passing," he murmurs weakly. "Just a sharp pain."

Dipti exhales, visibly relieved but still concerned. "We'll monitor you closely. No one's taking any chances." She turns to the nurse. "Leave the robot for now. Focus on Amiel's treatment."

Queen Dipti walks over to the shirt discarded on the floor, her movements deliberate as she folds it and places it neatly back in one of his drawers. Despite her attempt to push it aside, suspicion continues to gnaw at her.

She moves to the window and draws back the curtains, letting sunlight spill into the room. Warmth bathes her face as she stands for a moment, her thoughts drifting.

"I think a little sunlight will help you, Amiel," she says softly, her voice tinged with both care and unease.

Beyond the window, Yahweh's cloud rises from the temple, its ethereal presence shielding them from the sun's harshest rays. The final seven days haven't arrived yet—there's still time. Things will be okay, she tells herself, clinging to that fragile hope.

But her contemplation is short-lived, shattered by the intrusion of new chaos.

"Ma'am," The nurse all of a sudden looks unwell, "I think I'm going to vomit."

Dipti rushes to her side placing the backside of her hand against the nurse's cheek.

"You're burning up. Come, I'll take you to your room so you can rest."

Queen Dipti checks on Amiel one last time, "Amiel, I'm leaving another robot here to monitor you until I know what's going on with your robot. Don't worry you'll be fine. You're a strong boy. If you need anything just let me know and I'll come immediately. My mind is always listening for you," she pats his cheek and scruffles his hair before leaving him.

Amiel is saddened by her departure. He hopes she won't get sick like the others. If she does, he doesn't want to see it, or he might confess everything.

One last hurdle remains for him to make his escape. The robot that now sits monitoring his vitals in the chair opposite his bed. Amiel is worried that by tampering with this robot they will draw attention to themselves. Service robots hardly ever malfunction. They're not like the old robots he read about before the great war which were incredibly unreliable. Stuff hardly ever broke down. There was one robot, the first model they ever developed with the spare parts of other broken robots left over from the great war. This robot is still running.

"Don't worry, Lion. Give me time to process the situation. I need approximately ten minutes to determine our course of action," Aleister's voice buzzed calmly in Amiel's mind.

"You can destroy it," Amiel murmured, closing his eyes. His heart pounded like a war drum. "Oh Horus, if you're listening, set your servant free."

Aleister chuckled softly; his tone tinged with dry amusement. "I've got it, Amiel. But Horus isn't listening—because you *are* Horus resurrected. Pray to yourself. This robot is pathetic. No security protocols, no encryption, nothing. It's like hacking a toy in a world built by fools. This place, Amiel, is a bad boy's playground: innocent, unassuming, and desperately stupid."

As if on cue, the robot monitoring Amiel abruptly turned and left the room, its movements mechanical and unthinking.

Success.

Aleister's voice now echoed aloud in the absence of intruders. "Amiel, move! We have little time before the pickup. Our contact messaged me—he's on the way."

Amiel sprang from the bed, adrenaline surging through his veins. He yanked open a drawer where he'd stashed clothing meant for this very moment. The people in Gehenna dressed differently than those outside its walls, and he needed to blend in.

Pulling out a black T-shirt emblazoned with Megadeth in jagged, lightning-bolt letters, he slips it over his head, the fabric cool against his skin. He places a facemask over his head until it fits snugly over his nose and mouth partially covering his face. Before leaving, he lingers in front of his wardrobe's mirrored surface. His reflection grins back at him, an impish gleam in his eye as memories surface—videos of frenzied crowds swaying and screaming in

unison to the apocalyptic hymns of the old-world band. They were more than music; they were declarations, twisted sermons set to riffs of obliteration.

The lyrics flood his mind, jagged and raw:

Put mortal man in control,

Watch him become a god,

Watch people's heads erode.

"Prophets of doom," he muses, recalling the band's electric declarations of annihilation. "Old-world sages. Let's see if their spirit guides me tonight."

"I will guide you lion as you go. I'm currently tracking every single robot in the palace. You follow my exact directions on where to go. Do not err from the left or right."

He adjusts the shirt, giving one last look in the mirror, then steps away from the armari into the hallway closing the door quietly as he scans the hallway.

"Now lion, take a right and proceed straight down the hallway, walk as quiet as possible. You'll stop at the intersection ahead and wait while I calculate the patrol routes of the robots."

He moves swiftly but carefully, his footsteps muffled by the polished marble floors that stretch under stone arches. Sunlight cascades through the large windows on his right side. The symmetry of the repeating arches and windows draws his eye toward the distant end of the hallway where he fears at any moment a robot could appear and detain him dashing his plans.

He reaches the intersection and pauses, pressing himself against the cool stone wall. The sunlight fades behind him, replaced by the dim, sterile light of the adjoining hallways. His eyes flicker to each corridor in turn, scanning for movement, for the faintest glimmer of reflective alloy.

Aleister speaks again in his mind, his steady cadence anchoring him. "Hold here, lion. Let me chart the paths of the patrols. Patience is your weapon now."

Amiel waits, his breath shallow and controlled, as the seconds stretch into an eternity. The shadows flicker and shift across the polished marble floor, playing tricks on his restless mind. He studies each movement, searching for signs of danger, his ears straining to pick up the faintest sound. The hum of servos and the rhythmic clink of mechanical joints reach him, distant but distinct. The sounds grow softer, confirming his suspicion—they're moving away.

The voice cuts through the tension like a blade. "Take a left, Amiel, and sprint through the next intersection. I repeat: do not look left or right, keep your eyes forward. You're going to draw attention, but it's the only way. If you walk, you'll get caught. When I say go, *you sprint.*"

Amiel swallows hard and exhales, focusing every nerve and muscle. He adjusts his stance, bending his knees to lower his center of gravity. His muscles coil like springs, ready to propel him forward with maximum force. The polished floor gleams ahead of him, a corridor of light and danger.

His heart pounds, but his resolve is steady. He visualizes the path ahead, each step precise, his speed unstoppable. His hands clench into fists as he leans slightly forward, poised for the signal.

The voice steadies him once more. "Ready, lion. On my mark... three... two...one...go!"

Amiel bursts into a sprint, his wiry legs driving him forward with startling speed. The hours of sparring have honed his movements, each stride sharp and purposeful. Arches and windows blur past, a shifting play of shadow and light.

The intersection looms ahead, but in his focus on speed, his eyes betray him, flickering to the right.

"No, lion, no!" the voice hisses in his ear, sharp with urgency.

Amiel's gaze catches on the unmistakable form of a robot rounding the far corner. Its sleek metallic frame glints under the overhead lights, its jointed limbs moving with mechanical precision as it begins to turn toward him.

The distraction is enough. His foot catches awkwardly on the polished floor, sending him stumbling forward. The momentum of his sprint threatens to hurl him headlong into disaster, but instinct takes over. His body twists as he falls, and he tucks into a roll, his lean frame absorbing the impact.

The world spins for a moment and then he emerges from the roll, his momentum carrying him forward. He springs to his feet, barely losing pace, the voice snapping urgently in his ear.

"Keep going, lion! Eyes forward! You're not out yet!"

Amiel slows as Aleister's voice speaks in his mind. "Lion, you're approaching the critical point. The sewer access lies just ahead, concealed in the lower servant's passage. It's hidden beneath the base of an ornamental statue in the left corridor. You'll need to act quickly and precisely. I'll guide you step by step."

Amiel presses himself flat against the wall, catching his breath from the sprint. The corridor before him diverges into two paths: the left one dark and unassuming, the right one still illuminated by the dim, sterile palace light. He takes a deep breath and continues.

"Take the left path," Aleister urges. "Move quickly, but make no sound. The robots' patrols don't reach this passage often, but you're still at risk."

Amiel pivots into the darkened hallway, the muted hum of servos fading further behind him. The air here is cooler, heavy with the faint metallic tang of machinery. The polished

marble gives way to simpler stone flooring, and the grandeur of the palace is replaced by a stark utilitarian design—a place built for function, not beauty.

Ahead a tall, ornate statue of his father holding a Torah scroll in one hand and a long iron scepter in the other. The statue's surface gleams faintly, as if polished by years of careful maintenance. This part of the palace Amiel has never visited, it must be important because of the smooth worn stones beneath his feet.

"There it is," Aleister whispers. "The base of the statue conceals the control mechanism. You'll need to press the hidden panel on the left side of the pedestal to reveal it."

Amiel steps closer, his footfalls barely a whisper against the stone. He crouches at the statue's base, running his fingers along the cool surface. His eyes narrow, searching for any irregularity in the smooth marble. For a moment, he feels panic rising—what if Aleister's directions were wrong?

"To your left and up," Aleister's voice comes again, steady and certain.

Amiel's hand brushes against a faint seam, almost imperceptible. He presses it, and with a soft hiss, a panel slides open, revealing a sleek control interface with glowing cyan buttons. His pulse quickens.

"Good, lion. Now, enter the code: 7-4-3-2. Quickly."

Amiel begins to enter the code, but before he can do so, he hears the faint echo of voices from down the hall. He freezes, the hair on the back of his neck standing on end. The voices are muffled but unmistakably human, growing louder with each passing second. His mind races with indecision; he doesn't know how far away the incoming people are or how long it will take to open the hatch. His fingers hover over the interface, trembling.

"What are you doing!" Aleister's voice snaps, sharp with urgency.

"People are coming! You can't detect them?" Amiel hisses back, his voice barely above a whisper.

"No, lion, sorry," Aleister responds, his voice mechanical and calm in contrast to the racing of Amiel's thoughts. "I cannot detect the location of mentats. You must hide... quickly."

Amiel covers the control panel then scans his surroundings, his eyes darting to the shadows pooling along the edges of the hallway. To his left, an alcove half-concealed by an old, decorative tapestry offers a potential hiding spot. He moves swiftly, pressing himself behind the thick fabric just as the voices draw near. His breathing slows, his body tense as he listens intently.

Two figures emerge into view, their voices clearer now. Amiel peers through a small gap in the tapestry, his heart pounding. The first man, tall and broad-shouldered, wears a

maintenance uniform. The second, a member of the royal guard with sharp eyes carrying his bio weapon in hand, scans the corridor with a practiced wariness.

“I’m telling you, I heard something,” the maintenance man says, his voice low but insistent, “I think someone is violating the lockdown.”

“Did you shut down the ventilation system yet? It could be that,” the guard replies, still scanning intently.

Amiel fears his eyes are going to meet the guard’s so he quickly shirks away and hides his face behind the tapestry. He looks down, realizing that his feet are still visible below the hem of the tapestry. He slowly sits in the alcove and pulls his feet inside.

The maintenance man crouches, then straightens. “Nothing here. Let’s keep moving. This place gives me the creeps.”

The guard nods, but his eyes linger on the hallway a moment longer before he turns. Together, they move off, their voices fading into the distance.

Amiel exhales shakily, his body finally relaxing. “They’re gone,” he whispers.

“Good,” Aleister says, his usual calm returning. “But don’t waste any more time. Enter the code and enter the hatch.

Amiel steps out from his hiding spot, his movements swift but silent. He returns to the control panel and quickly enters the sequence. The interface beeps softly. A circular section of the floor slides open, revealing a narrow, ladder-lined shaft descending into darkness.

Without hesitation, Amiel swings his legs over the edge and begins his descent, the metal rungs cold under his hands. The shaft is dimly lit by faint strips of bioluminescent material embedded in the walls, casting an eerie green glow. As he descends, the sounds of the palace above grow muffled, replaced by the distant trickle of water and the low hum of waste-processing machinery.

He reaches the bottom and drops silently onto the sewer-filled floor, excrement covering his shoes and cotton trousers. The space around him is a narrow tunnel, the walls lined with sleek, metal material. Pipes snake along the ceiling, some hissing softly as steam escapes from their joints. Small automated drones, about the size of one’s hand, roam the surface of the pipes, scrubbing and cleaning with small lasers that emit a faint red light, giving a slight illumination to the oppressive, smelly darkness.

“You’re in,” Aleister confirms. “Follow the main tunnel to the east. The sewer system is vast, but I’ll guide you through it. Stay sharp, lion. The robots may not patrol down here, but other dangers could lurk in these depths.”

Amiel covers his nose as he begins his slow, arduous slog, his nanobots now swirling around his body, giving light like fireflies on a cool summer night. How long is the walk to Gehenna, Amiel wonders, as the endless darkness of stink seems to go on forever. It was

unimaginable how his condition in life had deteriorated. From prince to sewer rat. This would only make him stronger. He kept imagining the day when he would have the power of life and death over Uriel—this would be his reward, his light at the end of the tunnel.

The shadows deepen unnaturally, blacker than the void he has already traversed. He hesitates, the hairs on his arms standing on end, but before he can take another step, his foot finds no solid ground.

With a sharp gasp, he slips, his legs swept out from under him as gravity takes hold. He plummets down a slick, angled surface, the world around him a chaotic blur. The sensation is both terrifying and disorienting, like being hurled down an ancient waterslide from the old-world amusement parks he'd once read about.

The cold rush of water engulfs him, its force driving him forward at an unforgiving pace. His arms flail instinctively, trying to find something—anything—to grab onto, but the walls of the tunnel are too smooth, too unyielding. His body jerks violently with every twist and turn of the chute, the sharp edges of pipes and protrusions nearly grazing him as he descends.

And then, mercifully, he notices the change: the water, though still rushing with unrelenting force, smells cleaner, fresher than the vile sludge he'd slogged through moments ago. It washes over him, cleansing his skin of the filth and leaving him gasping for air as he tumbles further into the unknown.

Suddenly, Amiel is launched from the slick slide into open air. His body twists uncontrollably, and his arms flail as a panicked scream escapes his lips. For a fleeting moment, he feels weightless, suspended in the void, before gravity takes over.

The fall ends with a bone-jarring splash as he crashes into a deep pool of water. The impact sends cold waves rushing over him, driving the air from his lungs. He resurfaces with a gasp, coughing and sputtering as he wipes the stinging water from his eyes. Blinking rapidly, he strains to make sense of his surroundings.

His nanobots finally catch up, their soft glow illuminating the murky chamber. Brick walls rise around him, slick with algae and dripping with moisture. The faint trickle of water echoes in the enclosed space, mixing with his ragged breaths. Tilting his head back, he spots the dark outline of the pipe he had fallen from, its jagged opening high above.

Treading water to keep himself afloat, Amiel scans the area, searching for a way forward. The faint glimmer of his firefly-like nanobots reveals a faint tunnel entrance ahead, partially obscured by floating debris. Relief floods through him as he spots a large wooden crate bobbing nearby.

He swims toward it, his arms burning with the effort, and latches onto the crate's edge. The rough wood digs into his fingers, but its buoyancy is a welcome reprieve. Resting his weight on the crate, he gulps down air, his chest heaving as he regains his composure.

After a moment to steady himself, he presses forward, kicking gently as the crate glides through the tunnel with him. The soft glow of his nanobots dances ahead, illuminating the path and pulling him deeper into the unknown.

"You could've warned me about that," Amiel mutters, shaking his head in exasperation. "I could've died. And now, how am I supposed to get back?"

"I'm sorry, Lion," came the response, calm but tinged with regret. "My access to the map is limited to a 2D perspective. Are you okay? Your shirt—any rips or tears?"

Amiel glances down at his shirt, puzzled. "No, it's fine. Why?"

"I took the liberty of integrating a holographic mesh projector into the synthetic cotton," the Aleister explained, "Just making sure its still intact, it'll be necessary soon."

"I don't care about that. I want out of this tunnel. How much longer?" Amiel's frustration boiled over, and he kicked harder, propelling himself forward.

"One kilometer, Lion," Aliester's voice came through, cold and detached, as if Amiel's struggle was irrelevant.

"One kilometer? I'm already exhausted! There's no way I can swim that far," Amiel snapped, his voice trembling with fatigue and fear.

"...."

The silence from Aliester was deafening. Suddenly, the current picks up again, dragging Amiel and the crate toward another drop. They flew over a precipice, crashing into the churning water below. The crate shatters ahead of him, splintering into debris. Amiel surfaces, gasping for air, his body barely treading water.

He forces himself to swim forward, his strokes desperate and uneven. The one kilometer loomed like an impossible abyss. Every muscle in his body screamed in protest, his arms and legs now leaden and useless. He fights to stay afloat, but his energy is fading fast.

One haunting thought claws its way into his mind:

I'm going to die.

"It appears that way, Lion," Aliester's voice rang in his ears, calm and unfeeling. "At least you died trying. You followed your heart and perished chasing your dream."

Amiel's thoughts spiral into eternity. What would come after death? Would he face the God his father spoke of? Was it all real? He thought of the hours his father spent with him in the temple, recounting tales of faith and divinity. Yet, he'd always doubted—wasn't it just an illusion, some trick of modern technology? Even the water that poured from the temple fountains seemed more likely to be fed by ancient Roman aqueducts than divine providence.

Soon, he would have his answer.

Water surges into his mouth as he sinks beneath the surface, his body too exhausted to fight anymore. He manages one last desperate kick, breaking through to the surface for a gasp of air, but it was too late. His strength is gone. The inevitable claims him, and he lets himself sink, holding his breath for as long as he can.

With his eyes open, he sees the filth around him—excrement and waste floating by. He is about to become part of the palace's refuse, returning to the earth like discarded matter. His final thoughts were not of himself but of his mother, Sejal. Sick, mourning his death, and left to endure the fever he'd caused her with his quest for greatness.

That was his greatest regret: leaving her nothing but suffering, no accomplishments, no legacy. Just loss.

His chest tightens, his lungs scream for air, and he was on the brink of surrendering to the water's cold embrace. Just as he was about to open his mouth and let the current claim him, his hands brush against something rough and scaly. Before he could process it, a massive force surges beneath him, lifting him upward.

Breaking through the surface, he gasps desperately, pulling in gulps of precious oxygen. Clinging tightly to whatever had saved him, his vision clears, and he turns to see what he is holding onto. A powerful, armored tail swayed rhythmically behind him, cutting through the water in sweeping motions. Following its form, his eyes landed on a long, ridged snout that could only belong to one creature.

An alligator.

Amiel's panicking thoughts are interrupted by a hazy memory from biology class—alligators were known to be surprisingly gentle creatures despite their intimidating appearance. They were known to help struggling animals and people. They lived mostly on algae and other harmless diets.

Still trembling, Amiel extended a cautious hand and placed it on the creature's head. The rough, textured scales radiated a surprising warmth beneath his fingers. The alligator didn't react, continuing to glide steadily through the tunnel. Gratitude washed over him, overtaking his exhaustion, as he whispered softly, "Thank you."

Amiel clings tightly to the creature as the faint light flickers at the end of the tunnel, growing brighter with each second. The stench of the sewers still clings to the air, but it is now mixed with the crisp tang of fresh air—a welcome reprieve. Gehenna, a place infamous for danger and foreboding seems like paradise compared to the hellish depths he is being pulled from.

"It's a shame," Aleister's voice echoes in Amiel's head, cold and analytical. "One of the most fearsome predators the old world had ever known reduced to rescuing urchins who don't know how to swim." Amiel clings tighter to the creature as Aleister continues, his words biting. "It should have devoured you. You have shown much weakness, urchin; it doesn't suit you."

Amiel grimaces, frustration boiling over. “Shut up, Aleister! I can still shut you off. I don’t need your lecturing right now,” he snaps. The AI’s autonomy is growing, and its barbs are becoming sharper, more personal. He wonders when he’d programmed Aleister with the ability to taunt—or if he ever had.

Aleister continues, ignoring Amiel’s outburst. “A lion doesn’t pity their prey. They see weakness—they devour, not like this pathetic excuse for an alligator. You must awaken its true nature, teach them to be predators.”

“What would you have me do, Aleister?” Amiel says sarcastically, his voice barely above a whisper. “Slaughter it for daring to save me?”

The AI pauses in its relentless commentary, thinking. “Yes, show it how to be a predator. Teach it a lesson for rescuing the weak. Evolution is the survival of the fittest.”

The alligator carries Amiel through the end of the tunnel. His sensations are overwhelmed by the gentle sunlight that now caresses his face with a soft warmth. He takes a deep breath, filling his lungs with precious clean air. The alligator swims to an embankment nearby and rests on the sand. Amiel slowly places his feet in the sand, feeling its warmth between his toes. He looks at the alligator’s face, its long snout resting on the sand gently as it looks at him. He places a hand on top of the alligator and pets it. It closes its eyes and opens its mouth.

“Kill him, Amiel.”

“With what? I do not have access to my bio-weapon. It’s unlocked only during sparring.”

“With that stone over there.”

Amiel hesitates, his gaze flicking between the stone and the alligator. Doubt gnaws at him. Is this really what survival demands? The creature saved him. Can he betray that act of mercy?

The Age of Horus requires the strong to act.

Reluctantly, his legs move as if on autopilot, carrying him toward the rock. He crouches, gripping its edges, and struggles to pull it free from the sand. It is heavy, resisting his effort, but eventually, he pries it loose. He holds it in both hands, its weight pressing into his palms like judgment.

“Now,” Aleister urges. “Strike.”

Amiel turns back to the alligator, his heart pounding. The creature has shifted slightly, its gaze now elsewhere, completely unaware of the threat behind it.

He takes a step forward, raising the stone with trembling arms. His entire body screams against the act, but Aleister’s voice pushes him onward. With a shout, he brings the stone down—

But the alligator moves.

Its body slides gracefully back into the water, the stone missing its mark and crashing into the sand with a heavy thud. A splash erupts as the creature vanishes beneath the surface, leaving only ripples in its wake.

“Excellent, lion!” Aleister’s voice crackles in Amiel’s head, sharp with approval. “You failed to kill the alligator, but you passed my test. Every lion has prey that escapes, but they keep trying—hunting—until the kill is theirs. Not now, but later, the predator within you will awaken. Your prey will be a trophy for all to see.”

Chapter 8

Amiel breathes heavily, fists clenching. His soaked clothes cling to his skin as Aleister's voice resonates, calm yet urgent.

"Come now. We must meet our contact soon. Your shirt will activate a hologram. You are Prince Amiel—everyone will know you. Your identity must remain hidden. The palace will be alerted if you're spotted."

A faint hum emanates from his shirt, and a holographic image flickers to life around him. Amiel glances down, but the projection's form is indistinct, shimmering and opaque as it envelops his body.

Still dripping wet, he trudges away from the embankment. Each step feels heavier than the last as he climbs toward the street above. The faint sunlight offers no warmth; evening has fallen, and a chill seeps into his damp clothes as the sun dips below the horizon.

In the distance looms the massive wall separating Gehenna from the rest of Jerusalem. Its shadow swallows Gehenna, while light still clings to Jerusalem—a stark reminder of the divide. Filth and trash clog the paved streets, the acrid stench of decay mixing with the metallic tang of the air.

Above, hover ships hum and whirl, darting between towering buildings whose dingy metallic exteriors barely reflect the dim light, dulled by years of grime and neglect.

"Be cautious," Aleister's voice warns. "Many Mossad operatives work within the confines of Gehenna. We're meeting our contact in a bar, but it's essential you avoid direct light—your hologram won't hold under scrutiny."

Amiel nods faintly, swallowing his nerves as he makes his way down the street. The chaos is overwhelming. Men huddle around fires in rusted buckets, their faces shrouded in filthy rags against the choking stench. The streets of Gehenna are alien to him, chaotic and unpredictable. Unlike the peaceful, orderly avenues of Jerusalem, where harmony reigns, this place feels alive with desperation—and he loves it.

Every step through its twisted landscape feels like a step further into another world. Amiel senses this place is where he can be the lion he's destined to become. Maybe he was meant to bring Gehenna to Jerusalem.

A homeless man stirs as Amiel passes. His disheveled face is marked by the grotesque fusion of metal and flesh—a robotic arm glints at his side. The sight unnerves Amiel. In Jerusalem, such an abomination would be inconceivable. Here, it's just another part of the landscape.

The man's mechanical eye whirs, locking onto Amiel's holographic face. "You won't get far with that hologram. That's old tech—I can see right through you," he mutters, his voice rough and mocking.

Amiel freezes, his hologram flickering slightly as his heart races. Overhead, a sputtering holographic ad bathes the street in unnatural hues, its distorted face leaping out before dissolving back into static.

"You're not from around here, are you?" the man continues, his tone grating. "Just a scared little kid playing dress-up. Bet you ran away from home."

"Sorry lion, this old tech is all the palace had. No one uses holograms, no one tries to deceive. But I foresaw this. Ask this man if he can help us with an upgrade."

Amiel pivots, the homeless man's observations unsettling, but he keeps his cool, "it's none of your business," Amiel's childlike voice is synthesized by the outer peripherals of his hologram turning it into a man's voice, "can you update my tech? I can make it worth your while."

The man sneers, swatting lazily at a fly. "Ten thousand Luxom."

"Five," Amiel counters.

The man chuckles. "You're in no position to bargain, kid. But okay, eight thousand. Good luck finding someone else in this hellhole to do it for you."

Amiel hesitates before nodding. "Fine. But no funny business."

The man groans as he pushes himself up, his movements slow. "This way," he rasps, hobbling into a shadowy alley. He stops at a battered wooden door, the paint peeling like shed skin. "My stuff's in here. Lucky for you, upgrades are my specialty."

Amiel follows reluctantly stepping into the dimly lit room, the air heavy with the smell of oil and burnt circuits. The walls are cluttered with an assortment of half-assembled gadgets, wires dangling like cobwebs from the ceiling. A single flickering bulb casts long shadows, warping the man's gaunt frame into something monstrous.

"Sit and deactivate your hologram," the old man rasps, gesturing to a rickety stool near a workbench.

Amiel does as he's commanded. Once his hologram is deactivated the old man looks him over.

"Haven't I seen you before."

"I'm sure you see a lot of kids creep. Do the upgrade," Amiel fidgets nervously. He wonders if his face mask is enough to hide his identity.

"Take off your shirt so I can run it underneath this print scanner."

Amiel has his shirt halfway off above his head when he suddenly feels the firm grasp of the old man take hold of both his hands.

Amiel freezes, his shirt tangled around his head, obscuring his vision. Panic rises in his chest as the old man's grip tightens, his robotic hand tight around Amiel's wrists like iron clamps.

"Got you now, boy," the man growls, his voice dripping with triumph. "You're worth a fortune to the right people. I know who you are. Don't bother struggling."

He lifts Amiel up, his robotic arm amplifying his strength. Amiel's legs dangle in the air. His heartbeat pounds, but instinct takes over, sparring drills flashing through his mind. Years of sparring with his brother flood back.

"I'll release his grip now, but the rest is up to you," Aleister's voice pierces his confusion, giving him a moment of clarity. "The man doesn't have a mentat, but the chip controlling his arm can be accessed with yours."

The robotic arm of the man malfunctions releasing Amiel from his grasp. Amiel pivots sharply on one foot, his shirt falls away, and his vision clears just as the man lunges with renewed vigor, his charging body barely visible by the stuttering light.

Amiel sidesteps, his movements fluid and precise. In the corner of his eye he sees a metal rod lying on a shelf. He grabs it, swings down onto the man's back, crashing down hard onto his spine. His attacker is stunned as pain shoots through his back. He stumbles into a cluttered workbench. Tools and scraps clatter to the floor as the old man curses.

"You little punk!" the man spits, reaching for something on the workbench.

Amiel catches a glint of metal—a crude blade. Instinct takes over. The metal rod hits the man's hand before it can reach its target. The old man yells, releasing his grip on the blade as pain shoots through his wrist.

Amiel doesn't hesitate. He delivers a sharp strike to the man's ribs, sending him staggering back into the wall. The old man's collision causes the flickering bulb to swing above them casting swirling shadows, amplifying the chaos of the moment.

"Foolish old man," Amiel snarls, his voice steady despite the adrenaline surging through him.

The old man stumbles, clutching his side, but his eyes burn with defiance. "You're just a spoiled brat. I'll get you yet—"

Amiel cuts him off with a swift, controlled kick to the man's knee. The man collapses with a pained grunt, his breath coming in shallow gasps.

"The restoration never reached here. You can't kill me boy. You don't know the sin, the suffering, but I can kill you," he coughs still gasping for air.

“Amiel, you must kill him, he’s seen us.”

“But my hologram, he never updated it.”

“I can do it for you, just let me access his machine. Lion cubs always start with the weak prey in preparation for the stronger kill.”

“You’re right, he’s seen us. I have to kill him,” with uncertainty lingering in his mind Amiel steels himself for the bloody task ahead.

Amiel walks over to the old man lying on the ground, the icy metal rod still firmly held in his grasp.

“Once you go this route boy, you can never go back,” the old man’s voice meek as he holds his hand in the air bracing for the impact.

For a second Amiel hesitates. This isn’t how he imagined it. He has his eyes set on Uriel, the true prize. Killing this man would cheapen the thrill of when he finally has first blood. There must be another way to remove this man’s knowledge of his identity. Amiel steps back and looks around. He sees a mentat located in a syringe laying on a shelf.

“If I inject him with a mentat can you partially erase his memory and keep tabs on who he talks to?”

“I understand lion. You’re saving yourself like a virgin on her wedding night. Honorable. Yes, I can do a memory wipe…but only at the time of insertion, when his neural synapses first connect.”

Amiel’s heart pounds as he grips the syringe, his gaze darting around the cluttered room for something he can use. The old man, injured but still defiant, tries to inch away, his mechanical arm twitching ominously.

“You’re making a mistake, boy,” the man growls through gritted teeth. “You’re not going to turn me into one of you mentat bound Levi slaves you fucking piece of shit.”

Amiel takes a steadying breath, ignoring the man’s taunts. His eyes land on a coil of thin, sturdy wiring hanging from the wall. Perfect. He steps quickly to grab it, ignoring the old man’s attempts to shuffle further away.

“Aleister, can you disable his arm again?” Amiel whispers under his breath.

“Of course, lion,” Aleister replies coolly. “But only briefly. Once restrained, you must act swiftly.”

Amiel nods, gripping the wire tightly as he approaches the man. The mechanical arm twitches again, but then it freezes, jerking to a halt as Aleister’s override takes hold. The old man curses, thrashing weakly with his organic limbs, but his strength is no match for Amiel’s quick, precise movements.

Amiel loops the wire around the man's torso, binding his arms tightly against his sides. The old man grunts, his frustration evident as his struggles grow weaker. The wire bites into his flesh, a clear sign of its unyielding grip. Amiel pulls it taut, tying a secure knot before stepping back to survey his work.

The man glares up at him, his breathing labored but still defiant.

"Prince Amiel," he spits, like a hissing snake, "You won't last five minutes out there."

Amiel smirks, his voice calm and cutting. "Lech La'azazel," he replies. "I'll last a lot longer without you tipping anyone off."

Aleister's voice cuts in, calm and calculating. "Excellent work, lion. Now, administer the mentat. I'll handle the memory wipe."

Amiel crouches beside the restrained man, his hands steady despite the adrenaline coursing through his veins. He positions the syringe at the base of the man's neck, the spot Aleister had described. The man jerks his head, trying to avoid the needle, but the wire binding holds firm.

"Relax," Amiel mutters, his voice low. "Be happy you survive tonight."

The old man growls something unintelligible, his resistance faltering as exhaustion takes hold. With one swift motion, Amiel drives the needle into his neck. The man stiffens, his body convulsing briefly before going limp. His mechanical arm twitches one final time before falling still.

"Connection established," Aleister reports. "Stay close while I erase his recent memories. This won't take long."

Amiel rises, watching as the man's body shudders slightly, his eyes rolling back. The hum of the room's outdated equipment blends with the faint buzz of Aleister's work.

After a few moments, the convulsions stop. The man slumps against the wall, his breathing shallow but steady. Aleister speaks again, his tone satisfied. "His memories of tonight are gone. I've also registered his mentat in our neural network. If he mentions you to anyone, I'll know."

Amiel exhales deeply, tension draining from his shoulders. "And the hologram upgrade?"

"I've already extracted the necessary data from his console," Aleister replies. "Power it on, and I'll integrate the new schematics into your shirt."

Amiel glances down at the unconscious man, disgust crossing his face. "What a weak, pathetic old man." He turns away, powering up the workstation and preparing for the next step in his mission.

"Lion," Aleister says, his voice tinged with approval, "you've proven resourceful tonight."

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” Amiel mutters, sliding his shirt under the print scanner. Lights pulse from the device, illuminating the microscopic chips woven into the fabric. Multi-colored lines of circuitry ripple across the surface, flickering as Aleister updates the hologram.

“Put it on before the old man regains consciousness,” Aleister urges.

Amiel complies, slipping into the upgraded shirt and activating the hologram. The projection solidifies around him, no longer faint or translucent. He glances at his reflection in a nearby cracked mirror—a man’s imposing figure stares back, his face shadowed by the low light. Satisfied, Amiel steps back just as the old man stirs.

The man’s eyes flutter open, his face twisting in confusion before panic sets in. He thrashes against the wire binding him, his movements jerky and desperate. His gaze locks on Amiel, his face contorted in terror at the imposing holographic figure standing before him.

“Who the hell are you?” the man stammers, his voice trembling. “What did you do to me?”

Amiel steps closer, his hologram casting an ominous silhouette over the cowering figure. He leans in slightly, his tone icy yet laced with mockery. “You messed with the wrong man, old fool. I had my way with you. And now I’m satisfied.”

The old man’s face drains of color as realization—or at least the seeds of doubt—dawns. “W-what?” he stammers, his voice cracking. “You… you violated me?”

Amiel straightens, a cruel smirk playing at the corners of his lips. “The finest piece of ass I’ve ever had,” he says, his words dripping with disdain. Amiel was trying his hardest to keep from laughing. This was like a scene from *Pulp Fiction*.

The old man recoils, his breath hitching as fear and confusion twist his features. “Why… why would you—” He chokes on the words, his mind a chaotic storm, racing to fill the blank spaces left by Aleister’s memory wipe.

Amiel tilts his head, his hologram shimmering faintly in the dim light. His voice, cold and mocking, cuts through the silence. “Don’t think why, old man. Think how. You lured me into this place, thinking you had the upper hand. But I turned the tables, didn’t I?”

The man trembles, his eyes darting around the room as if searching for an escape.

Amiel steps closer, his tone growing sharper. “Change your life, and I’ll never come back. Or…” He leans in slightly, his holographic form casting a menacing shadow over the bound figure. “Should I give you another go?”

A cruel smile tugs at Amiel’s lips, hidden beneath the projected face of the hologram.

“No, no!” the man sputters, desperation lacing his voice. “I’ll change, I swear! I’ll never try to rob anyone ever again!”

“Good.” Amiel glances at the cluttered workbench and snatches a pair of pliers. With a sharp flick of his wrist, he tosses them onto the ground near the old man’s feet. “Here. Use these to cut yourself free.”

The man scrambles to grab the pliers, clutching them tightly like a lifeline. His hands shake as he fumbles with the tool.

Amiel turns to leave. At the door, he pauses, glancing back over his shoulder. His voice, calm yet menacing, rings out in the stillness. “Remember, we’re watching you.”

The door creaks shut behind him, leaving the old man alone in the dim room, his breath coming in shallow, panicked gasps as Amiel disappears into the shadows of Gehenna.

Outside, the air feels colder, sharper, as Amiel steps back into the chaos of the streets. His new hologram projects a confident, commanding figure—every movement of his slim frame now cloaked in the veneer of an imposing adult. Despite the damp chill biting at his skin beneath the shirt, he feels emboldened, more assured of his place in this fractured city.

Aleister’s voice breaks the silence. “You handled that well, lion. A cunning approach—though your flair for dramatics is... intriguing, you’re a man after my own heart.”

Amiel glances at the towering wall in the distance, separating Gehenna from the opulent streets of Jerusalem. The boundary feels less daunting now, less of a barrier and more of a challenge. The encounter with the old man has given him confidence, a readiness to press on into the unknown with a sense he would be capable of handling anything this cruel place could throw at him or at least—he thought so.

“I think this hologram upgrade will allow us to remain cloaked even under the brightest light. I was counting on this upgrade. The bar is bound to have bright lights.”

“Where’s the contact?” Amiel asks, his voice low but steady.

“Close,” Aleister replies. “The bar is two blocks ahead.”

Amiel’s gaze sharpens as he moves forward, the dim light glinting off the edges of shadowy figures watching from alleyways. His grip tightens instinctively, though there’s no weapon in his hand. He doesn’t need one. The lion in him stirs, hungry and ready.

Gehenna whispers promises to him in every shadow and scream. For the first time, Amiel feels alive, not as a prince, but as a predator.

....

Amiel reaches the intersection, pausing at the corner to take in the building that houses the bar. The structure is squat and windowless, its walls made of dull, dented metal plates,

streaked with rust and grime. Faded graffiti sprawls across the wall's surface, layers of crude tags and cryptic symbols in a form of Hebrew Amiel doesn't understand.

Amiel is tense as he crosses the street, his steps crunching pieces of glass. He looks up, an intimidating neon sign greets him above the entrance, buzzing faintly. The sign reads "The Iron Jackal" in bold, jagged letters, though several of the letters are either burnt out or barely holding on. The image of a jackal's head—half mechanical, half organic—glows faintly beside the text, its eyes flashing intermittently like it's malfunctioning. The eyes stare at him, as if he is the prey now, he forces himself to look away and ignore them.

It was time. The contact was getting nervous. Amiel was late. He walks over discarded wrappers, broken glass, and other debris to the entrance of the bar. A few figures linger near the entrance, their faces obscured by hoods and masks. He pushes a reinforced metal door, scarred with scratches and dents, but it doesn't budge.

A slit through the door opens, wary eyes peak through them, "Put your hand on the scanner. We want to know who you are," the voice deep and uninviting.

He looks to the right, a small, dimly lit scanner is embedded in the wall beside the door, blinking a pale red light through a cracked case.

Amiel is unsure, he puts out his hand above the scanner and braces for the consequences.

"Don't worry lion, everyone that lives in Gehenna is registered, you are not. Use my name."

Amiel's hand fits into the groove, the cold metal pressing against his palm. A red light flickers to life, scanning back and forth in rhythmic sweeps. After a tense pause, the scanner beeps, and the slit in the door widens slightly. A pair of wary eyes glare through.

"There's no record of you," the man behind the door growls. "That means you're from Jerusalem. State your name and purpose."

Amiel hesitates for a fraction of a second, then hears the familiar metallic cadence of Aleister's voice reverberate in his mind.

"Tell him you're here to sin. Make it convincing, little lion."

Amiel's lips twitch into a sly smile. "I wish to sin."

The man snorts, a derisive chuckle escaping him. "Another holier-than-thou flock member looking to taste the forbidden fruit, huh? We get more of you goody two-shoes every month, all decked out in illegal holograms, pretending you're someone you're not." His tone is mocking, but his eyes gleam with amusement. "So, what's your poison? BDSM? Gambling? A little bump and grind on the dance floor? We've got it all, baby."

Amiel straightens, his voice steady. "I'm here to meet Arnon. I have business with him."

The bouncer raises a skeptical brow but then steps aside, his broad frame allowing the heavy door to creak open. A faint haze of smoke and neon light spills into the alley, mixing with the distant thrum of bass that now grows louder. “Ah, a high roller looking to buy forbidden tech, huh? Fine. Drinks are on the house.”

He waves Amiel through, a grin tugging at his lips. “Welcome to *The Iron Jackal*. Try not to lose yourself too quickly,” he adds with a chuckle dripping in condescension.

“Good work, lion. Keep up the act,” Aleister murmurs in Amiel’s mind as he steps inside, his mental voice carrying a smug edge.

An overwhelming pungent mix of burnt synth-leaf, spiced liquor, and sweat hits Amiel’s senses as he walks in. Erratic lighting pulses with the heavy beat of music, slicing the darkened room with bursts of neon and shadow. Patrons grind and sway against one another, their movements synchronized with the music’s hypnotic rhythm.

He weaves carefully through the crowd, each step deliberate, avoiding unnecessary contact. His hologram projects the image of a rugged, older man, but the illusion is fragile. A brush of flesh against his wiry frame could shatter it.

The music beckons him, an intoxicating pulse urging him to join the revelry, to surrender to the chaos. But Amiel resists, his focus sharp. The crowd is a swirling blur of flesh, holograms, and machinery, the boundaries between real and artificial blurring. Some figures feel solid, their bodies colliding with his like walls. Others pass through him, their forms mingling with his projected persona in unsettling distortions that flicker like glitches in a corrupted program.

A robotic bartender glides past, its four arms expertly balancing trays of brightly glowing drinks. Amiel snatches a glass of something vivid and iridescent, raising it high to match the holographic projection of his head. He tips it, letting the liquid cascade down. Some splashes miss his mouth, soaking his collar, but he adjusts until the strong, fruity concoction hits its mark. The bitter aftertaste bites, but he doesn’t flinch.

“You’re blending in nicely,” Aleister purrs in his mind. *Now find Arnon. We didn’t come here to play.”*

Amiel sets the glass down on the robot’s tray, his eyes darting through the crowd. The hologram holds steady, its rugged facade masking his youthful frame, but the tension in his chest doesn’t relent. The drink courses through him, a burning warmth spreading from his stomach. It’s not like communion wine—this is sharper, wilder, and far more intoxicating. For a fleeting moment, he feels unshackled, alive, as though he could do anything.

Amiel shakes his head lightly, trying to steady himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he notices movement—a slender figure in a shadowy booth tucked away in the far corner. The man raises a hand in a subtle gesture, beckoning him over.

His heart quickens as he breaks free from the thrumming crowd, the noise dimming slightly with each step. He locks eyes with the man, trying to read his intentions, searching for signs that this could be Arnon. The man's expression is neutral but sharp, his gaze unwavering as Amiel approaches.

The booth's dim light accentuates the man's features—a thin face with angular cheekbones, a neatly trimmed beard, and eyes that gleam like polished onyx. He leans back with an air of casual authority, gesturing to the empty seat across from him.

Amiel hesitates for a beat before sliding into the booth, his movements cautious. His hologram mirrors his actions seamlessly, though he can't shake the feeling that the man's piercing gaze might see right through it.

"Can I get you a drink?" the man asks, his voice smooth and measured, as though he's done this a hundred times before.

Amiel shakes his head, his hologram echoing the motion. "No, I'm good. I'm here for business. Are you Arnon?"

The man leans forward slightly, his lips curling into a faint smile. "I am," he says, his voice dropping to a near whisper, "if you brought the Luxom."

"I brought the Luxom. Show me the product," Amiel nervously leans forward anticipating the culmination of his daring escape from the palace.

The man pulls out a hard ceramic case, its polished surface reflecting the dim light. With a deliberate motion, he opens it. A soft *click* can still be heard over the pulsating rhythm of techno music in the background, followed by the faint creak of hinges. Inside, nestled in a bed of dark velvet, lies the mentat faker.

Amiel leans in, his breath hitching as he studies the small, unassuming device. It looks like an ordinary pill casing—smooth, slightly translucent, with faint etchings that seem to ripple like veins under the light. Deceptively simple, yet brimming with possibility. A wave of anticipation courses through him. This is it. The device he had risked everything for. A tool that could mimic another's mentat flawlessly, granting him the power to become someone else.

The man's steady gaze doesn't waver. Without a word, he snaps the case shut, the spell it cast over Amiel breaking in an instant.

"Luxom first," the man says, his voice clipped, businesslike.

"Eight hundred thousand Luxom," Aleister murmurs faintly in Amiel's mind, his tone distant, almost distracted. The voice that once guided him like an anchor now feels remote, untethered.

Amiel straightens in his chair, forcing himself to sound composed. "We agreed on eight hundred thousand Luxom, correct?"

The man smirks as he lights a cigarette. The flame flickers briefly before he exhales a curl of smoke directly into Amiel's face. "That was the old deal," he says smoothly, his voice carrying the weight of indifference. "But you're late. Price went up. One million Luxom."

Amiel's stomach drops. Panic begins to claw at him as sweat forms along his brow. One million. That's everything he has. All of it. How's he supposed to get back? What would he do if he spent it all? His mind scrambles for answers, for a way to salvage this. He has to bargain—maybe nine hundred fifty thousand, leaving fifty thousand for his return. But desperation would be his undoing. If the man senses even a hint of it, he'd press for more.

Amiel waits, heart pounding, for Aleister's voice to come through with guidance, a clever word, a strategy. But there's only silence.

His thoughts grow frantic. *Aleister? Where are you?* His mind reaches out like a desperate prayer, seeking Aleister within the neural network, but there's no response. Only an oppressive void.

Across the table, the man watches him, patient and amused, as if relishing the unease creeping over Amiel. He takes a slow drag from his cigarette, the ember glowing faintly. When he exhales, the smoke forms a perfect ring that drifts lazily in the stale air. His lips curl into a smirk as he watches the circle glide upward, entertained by his own artistry.

Amiel swallows hard. He has to speak, to say something, but his mind feels blank. How does one bargain with someone like this? All he can manage is a faint, unconvincing, "Too much."

The man chuckles, flicking ash into a tray. "I've got other buyers who'd pay even more," he says, his tone dripping with mock courtesy. "Consider the million a favor."

Amiel clenches his jaw, feeling the prickling heat of sweat at his temples. He can't lose this—not after everything he's risked to get here. But he has to tread carefully. If he pushes too hard, the man might walk away, and the faker would slip through his fingers.

His mind whirls, searching for the right response. Thankfully, the hologram masking his face conceals the turmoil beneath. With a deliberate effort, he leans back in his chair, feigning an ease he doesn't feel.

"Nine hundred thousand," he says, his voice steady. "I'm not paying a credit more."

Arnon's smirk remains, but his eyes harden slightly. He taps the ash from his cigarette onto the tray, then places it between his lips again, studying Amiel in silence. The smoke curls around his face like a mocking veil, obscuring his expression just enough to unsettle.

"That's bold," Arnon says finally, his tone light but underscored with menace. "Nine hundred thousand isn't bad. Not bad at all. But let's be real—you're desperate. I can smell it on you. You came all the way from Jerusalem, somehow got your hands on a fancy hologram. I don't know how you pulled it off, but you did. The lengths people go to fulfill their desires..." His voice trails off, punctuated by a dark chuckle.

Aleister!

Amiel's heart skips a beat, but he forces himself to remain still. No flinching, no giveaways. Instead, he tilts his head, a faint, mocking smile curving his lips. "Desperation? From me?" His tone is measured, deflective. He shakes his head and falls silent, buying precious seconds.

Aleister! I can't do this without you!

Arnon flicks his cigarette into the ashtray, snuffing it out with a deliberate motion. The sight makes Amiel feel as though he's the one being crushed, suffocated under Arnon's scrutiny. The man tilts his head slightly, his sharp gaze locking onto Amiel.

"Why don't you deactivate your hologram?" Arnon's voice is smooth, almost coaxing, but there's steel beneath it. "Let me see who I'm dealing with. You've got guts coming all this way. Deal with me man to man."

Amiel shakes his head quickly, his voice firm. "That wasn't part of the deal."

Arnon spreads his hands in a show of false diplomacy, his lips curving into a wolfish grin. "Show me who you are, and I'll make it nine fifty. Call it goodwill. I don't like dealing with shades."

Shades. The word strikes Amiel as odd, but he pieces it together—people who hide behind holograms. The label stings, but he can't afford to let it rattle him.

He feels his resolve wavering. Did he come all this way for nothing? He can't reveal his identity—not with what's at stake. But if it's his only option... He swallows hard. The faker means everything. He doesn't fully understand why, but it's part of Aleister's grand plan. He's learned to trust Aleister more than his own instincts.

Maybe Arnon doesn't know who he really is. Maybe revealing his identity could build trust.

Arnon leans back, glancing past Amiel with a pointed look. "So, what's it going to be? I'm running out of time. I've got another client waiting on me." He nods toward someone behind Amiel, their arms crossed, tapping their foot impatiently.

Amiel glances over his shoulder, tension mounting. The moment of decision looms, and his hand moves instinctively toward the control to deactivate the hologram.

"STOP, LION!"

Aleister's voice tears through his thoughts like a crack of thunder. The command halts Amiel mid-motion, his hand freezing as the weight of Aleister's authority anchors him in place.

"This man is Mossad. He has a mentat. Everything that's happening right now is live streaming to the palace."

“Where were you?”

“I’ll explain later, but they’re about to apprehend you...the guy behind you, also Mossad.”

Amiel’s mind began to race. Mossad operatives were often chosen from the cream of the crop of palace guards plus they had access to their bio-weapons. There’s no way he’s going to fight his way out of this one. Keeping his face—and the hologram—calm, he let his gaze flicker toward the figure behind him. The "client" Arnon had gestured to was imposing: broad shoulders, military posture, and an unnervingly still presence. Definitely not just another buyer.

“They’re trying to make you reveal your identity to verify if you’re a threat. Once the transaction is done, they’ll make their move regardless. *Run.*”

Running seems impossible; the room is packed, and there’s one exit. He decides he’s not going to bolt, instead he’ll make the transaction, take the faker, and get out of there somehow.

I didn’t come here for nothing. Help me get the faker.

Make your move. I’ll be there Lion.

“I want to see the faker one more time,” he says, his tone almost casual. “How do I know it’s legit? You could be selling me a fake faker.”

Arnon scoffs, shaking his head. “A fake faker? Funny.” He flips the case open again, revealing the device inside.

Arnon once again flips open the case with the mentat faker inside.

“Turn it on,” Amiel presses. “I want to see it working.”

With an exasperated sigh, Arnon activates the faker. It comes to life, a red light in its core begins to blink.

Amiel stall while I mimic his mentat. Just a minute.

“It’s a deal, then. One million Luxom. Let’s toast,” Amiel says, his sudden shift catching Arnon off guard.

Arnon sets the faker down, his anticipation palpable. He forgets to turn it off.

“Great! I knew you would appreciate my generosity. Now pay, I’m tired of wasting time with you.” Arnon slightly lurches forward with anticipation. Amiel can’t help but feel like at any moment Arnon would lunge at him.

Amiel pulls out of his pocket a sleek credit chip and dangles it in the air. It gleams under the erratic neon lights. “One million Luxom, as you requested. Let’s not waste any more time.”

Done Lion!

In one fluid motion, Amiel grabs the beer with his right hand and hurls it into Arnon's face. With his left, he snatches the faker and the credit chip simultaneously. Darkness swallows the room as the power cuts. Chaos erupts. Voices shout in frustration as the music stops, and in the confusion, Amiel makes his move.

"Wait! The power will be back any moment!" the bar owner bellows, his voice straining to rise above the cacophony of grumbling voices. But the crowd, fueled by alcohol and impatience, isn't having it. Their protests grow louder, drunken logic urging him to open the door and let them spill out into the night.

Reluctantly, the owner relents, shouting over the chaos, "Fine! Just don't break anything on the way out!" With a metallic groan, the gate slides open.

The crowd surges forward, an unrelenting flood bursting free from a dam. Amiel moves with them, letting the chaotic momentum carry him. He's jostled left and right, bumping into swaying bodies and sloshing drinks. The air reeks of stale beer and sweat, the din of laughter and shouting nearly deafening.

He keeps his head low, his hologram flickering faintly in the dim emergency lights. The Mossad agents, trapped behind him, shove through the crowd, their sharp, purposeful movements standing out against the drunken chaos. Their eyes dart wildly, scanning faces, hunting for him.

Amiel uses the moment to his advantage, allowing himself to be swept deeper into the tide of revelers. Every shove and stumble carries him closer to the exit, farther from their grasp. He risks a glance back and spots one of the agents elbowing past a belligerent patron, their frustration palpable. The other agent, taller and broader, is scanning the crowd with hawk-like intensity, his gaze slicing through the drunken haze.

Keep going, Aleister's voice whispers in his mind, calm but urgent. Lose yourself in the current.

Amiel ducks lower, his body folding into the chaos as he pushes forward. He can feel the heat of pursuit, the weight of the faker in his hand like a burning brand. But the crowd is his shield, their drunken, aimless movements forming an unpredictable labyrinth for his pursuers.

As he nears the exit, the cool night air wafting in from the street invigorates him. One more push, he tells himself, gritting his teeth as a burly man stumbles into him, nearly knocking him off balance.

Behind him, a sharp voice cuts through the noise: "Stop him!" One of the agents has spotted him, their hand outstretched like a predator lunging for its prey.

But it's too late. Amiel bursts free of the bar, the night swallowing him whole as the crowd spills onto the street. The neon-lit chaos of the city awaits, a perfect labyrinth to vanish into.

Keep moving, Lion, Aleister's voice urges again. The hunt isn't over yet.

Chapter 9:

Prince Levi reclines against the ornate headboard of his bed, his golden robes crumpled and slightly askew. A half-eaten bowl of pudding rests precariously on the quilted blanket, the spoon dangling lazily between his fingers. "Ugh," he groans, swirling the spoon idly. "I can't taste anything anymore. Corona's back. Let's call this the Beta Phi Epsilon variant." His voice, still hoarse from earlier bouts of vomiting, rasps with irritation.

Across the room, Queen Dipti sits poised on a silk-upholstered chair, her sari shimmering under the soft glow of the lamplight. The intricate gold embroidery catches fire with every subtle shift of her posture. She raises a perfectly arched eyebrow at him. "Another Greek-inspired name?" she says, pouring tea from a silver teapot into a porcelain cup. "We've had enough of those. Let's give it a Jewish twist."

Levi's lips curl into a smirk, his mismatched blue and green eyes glinting with mischief. "The Sah-tahn variant," he declares with conviction, "That *harami*¹ bastard."

Dipti chuckles softly, "Amen to that."

Levi leans back further, his expression growing pensive. "You know," he begins, swirling the spoon absentmindedly, "It's surreal. Living through Corona five hundred years ago was bad enough. Now, here I am, back in lockdown. If this goes on any longer, I'll commission the scientists to reinvent PlayStation. Otherwise, I might actually lose my mind."

"You're already halfway there, my dear," Dipti teases, rising gracefully to her feet, her posture straight as a plank. She sets a steaming cup of tea on the bedside table within reach of Levi. Placing her hand gently on his forehead, she frowns slightly.

"It seems the fever has passed," she murmurs. "What a strange illness—so intense, yet gone in less than twelve hours. Flus used to last a day at least."

Levi nods, his brow furrowing. "Not that I'm complaining. Half the palace is sick, and yet you, somehow, manage to avoid it. How is that even possible?"

Dipti smiles, a hint of playfulness in her voice. "It's good, nah? Or would you rather I join you in misery?"

"Misery loves company," Levi quips with a sly grin.

"Oh really?" Dipti arches an eyebrow, her tone dripping with mock skepticism.

"Definitely not," Levi says with a laugh, shaking his head. "I need you healthy. Otherwise, who'd take care of me? Without you, I'd have nothing but my own sighs for company."

¹ Hindi, is an insult or to describe someone who is deceitful, cunning, or immoral.

As he speaks, his thoughts drift elsewhere. A report flickers through his mind, vivid and urgent: an imposing man tricks the Mossad into handing over a mentat faker—a weapon of terrifying potential in the hands of a diabolical mind. Levi's mental image sharpens, replaying footage of the perpetrator: a figure from Jerusalem with access to an outlawed hologram linked to Gehenna. He scrutinizes the scene in his mind's eye, searching for any clue, any inconsistency.

The figure pours a drink into their hologram. Odd. Some of the liquid spills onto the floor, suggesting they are shorter than expected. Stranger still, they manage to cut the lights—a feat requiring significant technical expertise. Someone powerful must be aiding them.

Levi's head throbs. "Ugh, I can't deal with this right now," he mutters, shoving the perplexing report aside to the back of his mind.

He sighs deeply, sinking into the plush pillows. "My mind's a mess. I'm stuck here with tasteless pudding and nothing to occupy me but this disturbing report from the Mossad."

"Disturbing report?" Dipti leans forward, her brows knitting in concern.

"Wait, you didn't see it?" The weight of the report reflected in his weary tone.

"I'm focused on you." Her voice is steady, but her eyes widen in shock.

"Leave it," Levi says with a dismissive wave of his hand, his voice softening. "We'll talk later. For now, Dipti, tell me a story. Entertain me."

Dipti tilts her head, her eyes softening as she regards him. "A story?" she muses, her mind desperately trying to keep her focus off the disturbing news. "I'll try, but you really dropped a bomb on me here."

"Please," Levi begs, his hands folded.

Dipti adjusts her sari and begins, her voice soft and rhythmic.

"Once, in a land where the sun never sets, there lived a prince who sought a treasure so rare it could only be claimed by a pure heart. But the prince's heart was not pure. Desperate, he made a pact with an evil wizard who gave him the illusion of virtue in exchange for the throne. Blinded by ambition, the prince accepted."

Levi smirks. "Classic mistake. Go on."

"The prince passed the trials of truth, reflection, and despair—shielded by the wizard's spell from the guardian spirits of those trials. Finally, he reached the treasure: a golden chalice, said to hold the wisdom of kings. But the chalice trembled in his grasp, rejecting his deceit. The spirits cursed him: he must carry the chalice back to his kingdom, but its power would only reveal his betrayal. When the prince returned, his people celebrated. But on his coronation day, the chalice's glow turned sickly green, spreading blight and sickness across

the land. The people turned on the prince, and the wizard, seizing his moment, took the throne, imprisoning the king and enslaving the prince."

Levi frowns, "Bleak bedtime story."

Dipti leans closer. "But it's not over. The chalice still holds the wisdom of kings—and with it, a chance for redemption... you see, the king still deeply loved his son, despite his betrayal. A royal servant still loyal to the king sneaks into the evil wizard's royal chamber and steals the chalice and brings it to the king trapped within his cell. The king takes a shard of glass lying in his cell and slits his wrist pouring all his blood into the chalice. His blood is then filled with the wisdom of kings. As his strength seeps from his body the king beckons his servant to deliver the chalice to his son and orders his servant to tell his son to drink his blood so that he might be filled with the wisdom of kings and deliver his kingdom from the evil clutches of the wizard."

"Suppose I would do the same for one of my sons if they fell into the same trap," Levi comments wistfully.

"Would you, though?" Dipti's voice is gentle but probing, her gaze unwavering. "Would you sacrifice everything, even your life, for the chance that one of your sons might redeem himself?"

Levi chuckles softly, though there's little humor in it. "It's easy to say yes when the chalice isn't in front of you. But when it is..." He trails off, staring into the distance as if seeing something only he can perceive.

Dipti watches him, her expression softening. "You love your children, Levi. Even when they stray, even when they make choices that test you. That's what makes you a king—a father worth remembering."

"So, tell me, does the prince drink the chalice and become wise like his father? Does he save his kingdom?"

Dipti takes a sip of Prince Levi's tea, "Only time will tell."

....

After breaking free from the crowd, Amiel sprints, his breath ragged, each inhale burning his lungs. His pulse drums in his ears, drowning out the muffled shouts of the party-goers he pushes past. He risks a glance over his shoulder. The two Mossad agents are still in pursuit, their determined faces illuminated by the flickering neon lights of the city.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spots an alley—a narrow slit between two towering buildings. The dumpsters pressed against the walls seem like sentinels guarding its entrance.

Shadows pool in the tight space, thick and oppressive, the kind of darkness that swallows everything whole. It beckons him, promising refuge, its cold embrace oddly comforting.

Perfect, he thinks. What better place to lose them than in the darkest dark?

With a sharp turn, Amiel darts toward the alley, but his momentum betrays him. His feet skid on loose gravel, and he stumbles, nearly crashing to the ground. Desperately, he shifts his weight, his palm scraping against the rough asphalt as he claws for balance. The sting burns into his skin, but he barely registers it. His adrenaline-fueled legs propel him forward, driving him toward the narrow alley—the only hope of escape looming ahead. His pursuers gain on him due to his mishap. Arnon is almost close enough to jump on Amiel and grab his legs, but Amiel grits his teeth, pumps his arms and puts a little distance between him and Arnon.

The alley swallows him, its chill wrapping around him like a cloak. His eyes strain to adjust to the dim light, and his heart pounds louder than ever. He presses deeper into the shadows, slowing his pace to silence his steps. Somewhere behind him, the muffled echo of the agents' boots grows louder, their voices bouncing off the narrow walls.

Amiel ducks behind a rusting dumpster, the pungent odor of rotting waste stinging his nostrils. He forces his breathing to slow, cupping a hand over his mouth to muffle the sound of his gasps. His scraped palm throbs, warm blood trickling between his fingers, but he dares not move to check the wound. His eyes dart around the confined space, searching for a way out—a fire escape, a loose grate, anything.

The alley stretches deeper into the urban maze, its far end obscured by a veil of darkness. The oppressive silence is broken only by the approaching footfalls of the Mossad agents. Amiel's thoughts race. He knows their efficiency, their relentlessness. Hiding will only delay the inevitable. The soft thud of their steps draw closer, he has to act.

I have to outthink them, outmaneuver them.

His gaze catches a stack of crates near the back of the alley, just beneath a fire escape ladder. The rusty rungs gleam faintly in the dim light—a risky gamble, but a chance nonetheless.

Amiel is about to move, “*Stay still lion I’ll distract them,*” Aleister’s voice causes him to freeze.

A deep voice pierces the quiet. “He went this way,” one of the agents barks, his tone edged with certainty. Amiel swallows hard. He waits for their shadows to lengthen, for their footsteps to reach the tipping point of proximity. Then, like a coiled spring, he launches himself toward the crates, every muscle in his body screaming with effort.

The agents react instantly, their shouts splitting the air. Amiel's foot hits the first crate, its precarious balance threatening to topple him. He clammers up, ignoring the sharp jab of

splinters through his shoes. The fire escape ladder is just within reach. He leaps, his fingertips grazing the cold metal before catching hold.

A gunshot cracks the night, the sound ricocheting through the alley. The bullet bites into the brick mere inches from Amiel's hand, sending a spray of dust and fragments into the air. He doesn't look back. Adrenaline surges anew, propelling him upward as he climbs, every movement driven by sheer survival instinct.

Reaching the first landing, he flings himself onto the platform, the old structure groaning beneath his weight. Below, the agents scramble to follow, one boosting the other toward the crates. Amiel doesn't wait to see how quickly they ascend. He sprints along the fire escape, leaping over gaps, the cold metal rattling beneath his feet.

The city sprawls below him, a glittering expanse of chaos and opportunity. If he can just get high enough, lose himself in the rooftops, he might have a chance. The thought fuels his legs, pushing him onward, even as exhaustion claws at his body.

Behind him, the agents climb with relentless precision, their determination a shadow that refuses to be shaken.

Chapter 5: Burning Blades

Gavriel steps into the training hall, the sharp echo of his polished black boots cutting through the silence. He adjusts the high collar of his white linen uniform, strokes his beard, while his eyes search for his trainees that are flanked by sparring robots that stand as lifelike mannequins armed to the teeth.

Amiel and his older half-brother Uriel, stand at attention, they glance out of the corner of their eyes scanning for Gavriel. The sharp echo of his footsteps draws closer, and they straighten even more, bracing for his arrival.

Sunlight streams through the glass wall behind them, casting a bright glare as it reflects off the young trainee's battle armor. The armor resembles Gavriel's dress uniform but features lightweight segmented plates perfect for protecting against bio weapon blows.

Gavriel stops and squares off in front of Amiel, his gaze meeting the trainee's eyes which are locked face forward at attention.

"Activate your nanobot armor, Amiel," he orders. Gavriel watches as the shimmering swarm of particles envelops Amiel, shifting and tightening with each breath.

Gavriel observes Amiel's face lighting up with a wild delight. He is impressed by Amiel's unwavering focus. His intensity during these sessions is remarkable—almost unsettling. To Gavriel, it is a display of mastery; to Amiel, it is far more—a vital step toward his secret ambitions. The passion surges through him, and the nanobots echo his drive, orbiting like a swarm of agitated killer bees, sharp and purposeful, waiting for their moment to strike.

In a flash, molecules burst from Gavriel's body, scattering like a dust cloud swept off the Sahara. Under his mentat's watchful guidance, the particles bond instantaneously to form a staff in his hand. Gavriel shifts his stance, the movement fluid and precise, before swinging low, the staff slicing through the air as he aims for Amiel's legs.

Amiel reacts instantly, his body a blur of motion as he leaps over the staff's sweeping arc. He lands lightly, his fingers splayed outward for balance, as though walking a tightrope.

His sharp eyes lock onto Gavriel.

Gavriel doesn't pause. He pivots smoothly, running backward with practiced agility, his feet barely touching the ground. In a single, fluid motion, he twists mid-air, the spin lending force to his dart shocker contained under his embroidered cuffs as it launches a volley of darts. The projectiles whistle faintly through the air.

But the trainee's nanobots, ever vigilant, absorb their momentum turning into powdery dust before they ever reach their target.

"Very good, Amiel. You can deactivate your nanobots now."

The nanobots come to rest, their microscopic forms settling along his skin.

Gavriel pauses. “You probably think that you’re indestructible when nanobots are activated. You’re wrong. Take cover, conserve your nanobots.”

Gavriel double taps his mentat with his two index fingers. One of the robots comes to life and sprints towards the exit. A few minutes pass and it enters the training hall carrying something heavy and big. It stops before Gavriel and lays the gun at Gavriel’s feet. Gavriel hefts the weighty, well-oiled machine gun, its sleek metallic surface gleaming under the light. The machine gun has a hefty magazine, packed with bullets, locked securely in place, feeding ammunition smoothly into the gun’s loader. Gavriel then points at the robot then motions for it to stand at the far end of the training hall where it has become cavernous surrounded by three stone walls to absorb projectiles. It dashes off in a sprint, its mechanical feet briskly tapping on the wooden floor until it reaches its destination. It stands beside ruined robots and their pieces and parts after being demolished by weapons and other forms of munitions.

“Bot 36 activate your nanobots!” He commands.

A swarm of nano bots now surround its synthetic body.

“Now watch this boys! I’ll show you a thing of beauty!” His finger flips the safety off and pulls down the trigger releasing torrent of destruction.

Thunderous drumming of the machine gun fills the hall, each bullet blazing through the air in a relentless assault. Bot 36 stands at the far end, its synthetic frame surrounded by the shimmering shield of nanobots. The swarm works frantically, small particles zipping here and there like bees in the midst of a hornet invasion. They deflect some of the oncoming bullets with dazzling flashes that clatter harmlessly against hard stone or turn into faint wisps of vaporized particles.

Gavriel’s finger stays steady on the trigger as the rounds pour out in rapid succession. The recoil of the gun vibrates his shoulder, his body tightening to control the spread of his shots. He shouts in delight as each bullet strikes the swirling swarm of nanobots.

Then it happens.

The magazine runs dry, its barrel glowing red. The machine gun jolts violently with its final shot, ejecting the last shell with a sharp *cling*. The last bullet slices through the air like a predator seeking its mark. The nanobots, now depleted in number, falter at the worst possible moment. They move to block the last incoming bullet but barely miss it, and the bullet pierces through, slamming directly into the robot’s chest. A sharp metallic crack reverberates through the room as the impact sends sparks flying. The robot falls on its back, a smoking hole now mars its frame exposing loose wires that spark a fire engulfing the entire bot in flames.

Gavriel smirks as the other robots activate, their extinguishers dousing the flames with mechanical efficiency.

Gavriel lowers the gun, its smoking barrel still radiating heat as the echoes of gunfire fade from the cavernous end of the hall. He turns to the boys, “And that’s all it takes. One bullet, when your defenses are down. You’ll be like that robot, a massive gaping hole in your chest, your entrails flowing out.”

He turns back to the boys, handing the machine gun over to a waiting robot, who takes it and whisks it away to the armory outside the hall. “Always plan for when the swarm fails—because it will. Any questions?”

The boys are silent in awe of the demonstration. He motions his hands for them to come forward.

“Now, both of you will square off against each other. What’s our main rule for sparring?”

Their voices crack as they shout in unison, “Love one another!” Gavriel’s lips twitch in a faint smile, but his tone remains stern. “And what does love do?” Gavriel continues.

“Love builds up and doesn’t harm.”

“Exactly. Love builds up and looks out for our brothers, to strengthen them, not tear them down. That’s why we’ve been free of injury all these years. Let’s keep it that way today,” satisfied, Gavriel steps away to allow them to spar. Some other pressing matter distracts his mind and he leaves them alone.

They face each other. Their weapons materialize in their hands.

Uriel and Amiel take their stances, every move deliberate. Amiel double-taps his mentat, leaving Uriel briefly perplexed but steady.

Amiel plants his feet in a wide, grounded stance, lowering his center of gravity. His sword angles downward in front, gripped firmly with both hands. He stands like an anchor—unmovable, resolute, as if prepared to withstand any strike. His gaze is fierce, almost feral, focused on Uriel with a burning intensity that feels strangely unfamiliar, almost unnatural. Uriel shifts uncomfortably, the glint in Amiel’s eyes making his skin prickle. They have sparred countless times since childhood, but he has never seen this look in his brother’s eyes before. It is a look filled with a fire that seems almost... ungodly. It is as if for a moment, the light in Amiel’s eyes has turned black.

For the first time in his life, Uriel feels threatened—a primal instinct buried within humanity for centuries. He hesitates, instincts screaming at him to be cautious. But he dismisses the feeling, pushing the thoughts of caution out of his mind. Maybe it is only nerves, a fleeting fancy. After all, he has never known suffering or truly understood the threat danger carries. Confident again, he steps forward, sliding into his stance.

Uriel adopts a light, agile stance, positioning one foot forward and the other angled back for balance. His sword hovers at chest level, gripped firmly in one hand, while his other hand floats near the blade, fingers splayed as if channelling an unseen force. Built for agility, his stance lets him weave and dodge, waiting for the perfect moment to spot and exploit any

weakness. Though he can unleash a powerful soul-infused strike, he holds back—this is training with his brother, not a ruthless fight. Still, he has proven himself against hundreds of training bots in a single month, but sparring with Amiel is different.

Uriel begins a slow, measured dance around Amiel, who stands like a stone pillar, firm and unreadable. Separated by two years, both boys are strong and agile, their muscles twitch and flex each strand of muscle visible, the effects of the fruit from the river. There is no sign of malnourishment. They are perfect specimens of boys who live in a perfect world. Uriel is taller and more skilled than Amiel because he is older, but Amiel is undaunted despite his disadvantage, his muscles flex with a quiet readiness, holding tension that shows he is prepared for anything.

With a steady breath, Uriel advances, raising his blade in a quick, sweeping arc aimed for Amiel's shoulder—a controlled strike, yet one with enough force to stagger if it connects. This is the moment Amiel has been waiting for, training in secret. In a flash, Amiel's stance shifts. His back foot surges forward, his body twisting as his sword comes down from above, intercepting Uriel's strike with a force that sends a shock up both their arms. The clang of steel rings through the air, vibrating between them, and for a split second, Uriel can feel the raw power in Amiel's movement. This isn't the brother he has sparred with countless times before.

Uriel staggers back, momentarily thrown off balance by the unexpected force of Amiel's counter. But before he can fully recover, Amiel surges forward, abandoning the defensive stance he usually relies upon. This is a new Amiel, aggressive and relentless. Uriel's heart races as the familiar sparring pattern crumbles, replaced by this newfound ferocity in his brother.

As Amiel presses forward, that unsettling sense of danger screams in his mind. He can no longer ignore it. The dark gleam in Amiel's eyes returns. Each swing of Amiel's blade is calculated but ruthless, leaving Uriel barely enough time to deflect or dodge. Uriel is in a panic, something he has never experienced before.

"That's enough for today, Amiel. I'm done."

Gavriel is gone as planned, it only emboldens Amiel's assault. He appears possessed by something dark and unknown, pushed by an unstoppable force. Uriel successfully parries Amiel and kicks him away. He finally gets a breather to stabilize himself and come to terms with what is happening. His breather doesn't last long.

A dart shocker is hidden underneath the cuff of Amiel's armor. The device senses the momentum in Amiel's hand as he flings his left hand forth. A dart shoots, exiting one of the round slots of the dart shocker, whistling through the air. Uriel is caught off guard once again.

The dart pierces his skin. The sting shocks him, his mind racing. His nanobots lie dormant on his skin.

"Where did you get that?" Uriel cries in shock.

“I’ve been busy while you were lazy,” Amiel responds smugly.

Where is his mind? Uriel curses himself for ignoring the warning, the flicker of danger that brushed his thoughts moments before. His chest tightens as panic sets in. Is the dart poisoned? Panic floods his mind as he yanks the dart out and hurls it away, blood trickling from the wound.

The sight of his own blood horrifies him. It’s the first time he has ever seen human blood. Animal sacrifices have never prepared him for this. A wave of nausea rises. He feels faint, but there’s no time to dwell.

Another dart hurtles toward Uriel, but his nanobots react instinctively, intercepting it mid-air. Amiel wastes no time, summoning twin daggers into his hands as he charges forward. Mid-sprint, he hurls the bio-dagger in his left hand with deadly precision. Uriel counters with his sword, deflecting it, but the move costs him—he’s momentarily distracted.

Seizing the opportunity, Amiel launches his second dagger. Uriel narrowly evades the projectile, but the effort leaves him off-balance. Capitalizing on the opening, Amiel materializes his sword mid-strike. The blade arcs down in a vicious slash, catching Uriel’s right arm as he tries to block. A deep gash opens, and blood spurts out, the metallic tang of it sharp in the air, sickening Uriel.

As his wounded arm falters, Uriel’s sword dissolves, retreating into his body. But almost instantly, it reforms in his left hand, just in time to parry Amiel’s follow-up stab. Strike after strike follows from Amiel. Uriel is now fighting with his left hand. He struggles to keep up with Amiel strikes. Pain and exhaustion begin to take their toll. He’s losing blood. He’s always fought offensively, commanding the flow of combat. Now, forced onto the defensive, he’s completely out of his element.

The world around him starts to blur. His reactions slow, his vision spins. The truth hits him like a hammer—the dart is poisoned. That’s how Amiel managed to slice his arm.

Uriel stumbles, his head spinning, his strength fading fast. His legs give way, and he collapses to his knees, helpless as Amiel looms over him. His entire body is burning as a result of the poison. He can no longer fight.

“Amiel have mercy. I’m your brother,” Uriel pleads. His words fall on deaf ears.

Amiel begins channelling his soul within the blade for one last strike. His sword glows with an indescribable aura as his soul burns within the sword creating enough heat to melt the strongest metal.

Amiel’s nostrils flare, his chest rising and falling as he prepares to take the biggest step of his life.

"It’s incredible, isn’t it? Holding this kind of power—deciding whether someone lives or dies. There’s nothing like it," he says, his voice thick with excitement, his breath quick and uneven.

Amiel holds his sword close to Uriel's face, he winces as feels the heat come from the sword burning his skin, "Every man is star; I'm a supernova," he declares, his voice steady, repeating words he has rehearsed countless times in his mind, "A supernova grows and absorbs dying stars and gets stronger, this is your sacrifice, Uriel."

Amiel raises his glowing blade, a cold detachment fills his eyes. Uriel strength fades, yet he clings to the only source of hope he has left. He whispers with all that remains within him, "Lord Yeshua, my life is in your hands."

Amiel's blade slashes forward, Uriel's vision is hazy, yet the flash of light cuts through the darkness like a beacon. The clang of Amiel's broken blade echoes, and he struggles to comprehend what has happened. The detached half falls to the ground with a thud. His unknown defender then trips Amiel, sword pointed at Amiel's chest, halting his advance. Slowly, Uriel's vision sharpens. A cloaking cape drifts to the ground, its ultra-light weight material as light as a feather, capable of fracturing light waves to the hide the figure in its grasp. Uriel can now make out his deliver's bearded face.

"Gavriel..." he breathes, relief mingling with shock, as he slips in and out of consciousness.

As Uriel is carried away, Gavriel glances down at him, a look of quiet intensity in his eyes. "Sorry I couldn't intervene sooner. Your father knew what Amiel was planning today and ordered me to cloak myself, hidden until the last moment if necessary. He wanted to test Amiel." Gavriel then turns back to Amiel, disappointment evident in his gaze. "He failed."

Amiel's breathing remains excited, his grip tight around the broken shaft of his sword. When Gavriel looks down and meets his eyes, Amiel looks away, unable to face the displeasure of his longtime mentor and trainer.

"We've been following you, watching you closely," Gavriel says, his voice firm but saddened. "Your father is worried about you, Amiel. He knows everything, the mentat faker, breaking into the armory. He threw the bait and you took it hook line and sinker. I thought he was mad to do it, but now... now I understand." Gavriel shakes his head. "What has gotten into you? This breaks the law of love, Amiel. Killing your brother doesn't make you great. A true warrior knows when to take life — and when to spare it. You ambushed Uriel, ignored his plea for mercy. The Evil One... he's been whispering to you, hasn't he?"

A flicker of something, doubt, guilt, perhaps anger, flashes in Amiel's eyes, only to be smothered by pride. He struggles to get up, refusing to meet Gavriel's gaze fully, his silence a mixture of shame and defiance.

Gavriel shakes his head, his gaze flicking briefly to the royal guards who have come, then back to Amiel, "There's still time to turn back, Amiel. What has the Evil One been whispering to you? Does he promise you the world? Invincibility? A place among the greatest warriors who ever lived? Tempting, isn't it?" Gavriel pauses, his voice dropping, almost as if speaking to himself. "They are lies—empty, hollow promises. He may seem to offer you the world, but he's taking something far more precious—your soul. Once you walk his path, you

may find there's no way back." Gavriel's eyes become sad as if he's no longer angry with Amiel, but then he snaps out of it and his eyes become intense, searing, as if he's trying hard to be angry.

Amiel's silence stretches, his mind struggling to process Gavriel's words. He doesn't know what to say. The diversion didn't work. He feels like a fool. Finally, he mumbles something, barely audible.

"Speak up, Amiel!" Gavriel's deep, commanding voice pierces the haze clouding Amiel's mind, jolting him from his inner turmoil.

Amiel's voice cracks as he replies, "It is me. It is my desire. I wanted to know suffering... to see if I could bear it, and to watch it inflicted on someone else. To have power over them. To feel my superiority in battle, to strike fear into the heart of someone who always defeated me in sparring. That... that is why."

Gavriel's face softens, though sorrow fills his eyes.

"Amiel, power isn't in causing suffering but in choosing when to show mercy. You think causing suffering in others is strength? True strength lies in overcoming the desire to inflict it, not in giving in. In the old world, there were those who were sadistic—who took pleasure in causing others pain. They were horrible, wicked people. You don't want to become like them."

Two members of the royal guard now stand behind Amiel. Gavriel's voice hardens slightly, though his sorrow lingers.

"Take him to a cell until I know what to do with him. Further orders will follow. Amiel, you'll have ample time to think about your actions in your cell."

One guard steps forward, producing a pair of handcuffs. He takes hold of Amiel's left wrist, locking it in place, then secures the other. Amiel begins to struggle, his face twisting with rage and indignation.

"Once he knows, he'll make sure you pay! My father's ruler of the world! He won't allow this!" Amiel shouts. "When he finds out, he'll punish you all. He knows I want to be a great warrior; he'll understand!"

Gavriel sighs deeply, pressing a hand to his temple. With his other hand, he waves dismissively.

"Take him away. I can't listen to this anymore."

Amiel continues to kick and struggle as the royal guards lead him away, his defiance echoing down the corridor. Gavriel watches him disappear, the familiar weight of regret settling over him. So much of his life has been spent striving to prevent moments like this. He sees what happens when power and pride overtake wisdom and mercy—when warriors forget the very principles that bind them in brotherhood and honor.

He had once believed Amiel was different—that his heart could be guided, his ambition tempered. But the young warrior has come dangerously close to the edge, and Gavriel can no longer ignore the signs. His father had been right to be suspicious. Nothing escapes that man's perception—it's as if he can see through your skin and into your soul. The thought sends a ripple of anxiety through Gavriel. Almost unconsciously, he checks his pockets for the pill.

Gavriel's sword dissipates, returning slowly to his body. Memories of the Great War flood his mind—the lives he had taken, the faces that haunted his dreams. A deep, unspoken longing fills him: the hope that history will not spiral back into that ruthless cycle of war and vengeance. Moments ago, as he had swung his blade and disarmed Prince Amiel, a dark fear had crept into his heart. What if, one day, he was forced again to take human life?

He glances down at the broken fragment of Amiel's sword. He kneels, picks it up, and turns it over in his hand. The shattered blade seems to symbolize something much greater than mere steel. It represents the ongoing struggle that transcends this world—a battle not fought with flesh and metal but with spirit and resolve, against the powers and principalities of darkness. Against these powers, weapons are useless.

Prince Levi had warned him that, though peace had come for now, the shadows would one day rise again. And when that day came, Gavriel doubts if he'll stand as one of the last guardians of truth and justice.

Chapter 4: Justice

Prince Levi strides through the sunlit corridors of the palace, his thoughts consumed by the ever-complicated Sejal. His path winds through the harem, a sanctuary of color and laughter. Women recline on plush cushions; their conversations interwoven with the soft, haunting melodies of a robotic harpist.

A sleek robotic attendant glides toward him, balancing a tray of delicate hors d'oeuvres. Its mechanical voice humming, "Can I assist you, my lord?"

"I'm looking for Priscilla. It's urgent."

"I've notified her mentat to summon her," the robot replies, inclining its head with programmed courtesy.

Levi nodded absently, his gaze sweeping over the room. The women's beauty and elegance seemed to reflect the diverse nations they hailed from. The Indian women, in particular, drew his attention—graceful and poised, their attire and presence a testament to centuries of diplomacy and admiration. But his eyes linger on the emptiness left by the absence of Chinese women, their nation lost in the ashes of the great war.

Before long, Priscilla appears, her commanding presence parting the crowd like a ship through water. Her long strides devour the distance, the tight bun of her crimson red hair bouncing slightly with each step. She is a vision of strength and elegance, the slit of her bright red dress revealing muscular legs that move with purpose, the fabric clinging to her powerful curves.

Priscilla was the daughter of one of the most influential families in Jerusalem, a lineage steeped in power and prestige. It was a great honor for her family when she became the wife of the most powerful man in the world. Rising through the ranks of the prince's wives, she had earned her place as one of his most trusted confidants.

"Prince Levi," she greets, her voice steady, her smile warm yet respectful.

Levi looked up—despite his impressive six-foot height, Priscilla still towered over him by at least six inches.

"Priscilla," he begins, his tone firm. "You're exactly the person I need right now."

Priscilla raises a curious eyebrow, her tone measured. "What can I do for you, my prince?"

Levi leans in slightly, his voice dropping low enough to avoid attracting attention. "I need your help with something... delicate. It's about Sejal."

Her expression sharpens; her intrigue barely veiled. "Sejal? What about her?"

“She’s been different lately,” Levi admitted, his brow furrowed. “I suspect she’s hiding something, and I need you to find out what it is—discreetly.”

Priscilla folds her hands thoughtfully, her sharp eyes already calculating. “The women of the harem are observant, my prince. If there’s something amiss, we’ll uncover it.”

Levi nods, but his urgency to confront Amiel pulls at him. Noticing Priscilla’s expectant demeanor, he adds diplomatically, “I have pressing matters to deal with concerning Amiel, but you’re welcome to walk with me.”

For a moment, disappointment flickers across her face—evidently, she had hoped for a more private moment. But she quickly composes herself, offering a gracious smile. “Of course, my prince. Let’s walk.”

Outside the entrance of the harem Priscilla is able to speak freely now as they walk.

“Amiel, Sajel’s son?”

I tell her about my dream, “And now there’s some emergency regarding him. I hardly slept and now this. I don’t think my day can get any worse.”

A loud spine curdling scream in the direction of the garden sends a shiver up Prince Levi’s spine.

“Deborah!”

Prince Levi and Priscilla break into a sprint, his heart pounding as Deborah’s scream echoes through the palace gardens. Priscilla follows close behind, her long strides easily keeping pace. As they near the towering Tabor Oak, the scene before them brings Levi to an abrupt halt.

The lamb lay still on the ground, its pristine white coat marred by deep crimson. Standing over it, Igor, the once-gentle lion, growling low and guttural, his mane streaked with blood. His golden eyes, once filled with calm, now blaze with primal fury. The air seems to crackle with tension, the serene garden transforms into a place of horror.

Deborah stood frozen, her small hands clasp over her mouth, tears streaming down her cheeks. The child who had so recently embraced the lion as a companion now faces it as a potential prey.

Levi steps forward cautiously, his voice steady but firm. “Deborah, come to me. Now.”

The girl hesitates, her eyes darting between her father and the lion. Igor’s growl deepens, his massive frame tensing as if preparing to strike. A sword instinctively materializes out from his hand.

“Deborah!” he calls again, sharper this time. “Move!”

Priscilla steps to his side; her voice low. “We must act quickly. That lion is no longer the creature she knew.”

Levi’s mind races. He had trained for battles, negotiated with rulers, and faced enemies of every kind—but nothing had prepared him for this moment. *This is this what Deborah feared. This is the evil she spoke of.*

Deborah finally breaks free from her paralysis and stumbles toward him. The movement catches Igor’s attention, and with a deafening roar, the lion lunges.

Priscilla grabs Deborah shielding her with her body while Levi acts on instinct. He steps in front of Priscilla, his blade meets Igor’s claws mid-air, the impact reverberating through his arm. The lion recoils, momentarily stunned.

“Get her out of here!” Levi barks to Priscilla, who doesn’t hesitate. She scoops Deborah into her arms and begins to retreat, her long strides carrying her toward the palace.

Levi squares off with the lion, his heart heavy.

But now, something had changed. Igor’s corruption could mean only one thing: sin had crept into this sanctuary, a place meant to be free from the evil that still plagued the world. Could this have anything to do with the urgent call about Amiel?

Igor had reverted to the primal instincts of his ancestors, a fierce predator driven by the law of survival. Now, that same majestic presence that was once the sigil of the tribe of Judah was now a threat. Levi holds his ground as Igor circles him. The beast’s golden mane bristles with tension, and his amber eyes glow with primal rage. The muscles underneath his fur twitch with aggravation, his back legs ready to thrust himself forward with one killing swipe ending Prince Levi’s life.

Levi’s hand twitches as he holds his blade, its shimmering surface flickering with the faint warmth of his soul’s energy. He didn’t want to use it—not against Igor. But the lion’s guttural growl and tense muscles leave no doubt: this will end in blood.

“Igor,” Levi says softly, his voice wavering. “Come on boy, remember who you are. Remember what you’ve meant to this place—to me.”

For a moment, Igor hesitates hearing the gentleness in Prince Levi’s voice. The fire in his eyes flicker, and Levi thinks he saw a glimmer of recognition. But the corruption within the lion roars back to life, drowning any trace of the creature he once knew.

With a deafening roar, Igor lunges. Levi sidesteps, his blade flashing to deflect a swipe of razor-sharp claws. Sparks fly as the weapon met the hardened strength of the lion’s corrupted form. Each clash sent a shudder through Levi—not just from the force, but from the heartbreak of fighting a creature he had loved for centuries.

The garden, once a sanctuary, became a battlefield. Igor attacks with the ferocity of the wild, his movements swift and brutal. Levi counters with precision, his strikes calculated to

avoid killing blows. He aimed to subdue, to bring Igor back if even a spark of the old lion remained. Cuts appeared on Igor's body as Levi dodges and weaves leaving behind slashes in his wake.

A swipe catches Levi off guard, claws raking his shoulder and drawing blood. He staggers, his breath hitching from the sharp pain. But there was no time to falter. Gritting his teeth, he raises his blade, pouring every ounce of his energy into it. The weapon glowed red-hot, the heat radiating from his very soul, fueled by his resolve.

"Forgive me, Igor," Levi whispers, his voice heavy with sorrow.

Igor charges, a blur of feral strength, his claws poised for a fatal strike. Levi swings his blade with precision born of desperation. The strike connects, cleaving through the corruption that had bound Igor's heart.

The lion roared in agony, his mighty frame collapsing to the ground. The fury fades from Igor's eyes, replaced by a soft golden hue—gentle, familiar. For a fleeting moment, Levi sees the old Igor: the companion, the guardian, the friend.

Igor lets out a soft rumble, almost a purr, before his eyes close for the final time. Levi drops to his knees, tears streaming down his face. The garden falls silent, save for the gentle rustle of leaves in the breeze.

"Sin has reached even here," Levi murmurs, his voice breaking. "And I was blind to it."

The blade in his hand dissolves, retreating back into his body, its heat now a fading memory. Levi knew this wasn't just about Igor. This fight was a warning—a harbinger of what was to come.

Blood seeps from the deep gash in his shoulder, soaking his tunic. Weakness spreads through his limbs like poison. He tries to stand, but his strength fails him. Was this the end? Could this be the moment his life was meant to close, despite all the promises?

His thoughts drift to the prophecy spoken so long ago, back in that dim mental institution after a demon nearly tore his arm from his socket:

"She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne."

Levi clings to this prophecy, believing it with every fiber of his being. For centuries, Christians had called it the Rapture—the snatching away of believers before the coming of Yeshua. He wasn't alone in this hope; the first part of the prophecy had already come to pass. But now he awaits the second.

Kneeling there, blood pooling beneath him, Levi prays silently. He wasn't ready to give up—not yet. The prophecy wasn't finished, and he clung to his faith that the Lord's word was true. But how much longer could he hold on?

The world began to swirl around him, the edges of his vision darkening. Weakness overtook him, and he felt himself slipping, teetering on the edge of unconsciousness. Just as the darkness threatened to claim him, she appeared—like an angel sent to deliver him.

Priscilla.

Her strong, yet unmistakably feminine arms wrapped around him, lifting him with surprising ease. The warmth of her presence radiated strength, steadying his faltering spirit. Around them, others rushed in, working swiftly to tend to his wounds.

Tears streamed down her face as she cradled him close. “You’re not leaving us yet, my love,” Priscilla said firmly, her voice trembling with a mix of determination and panic.

Her words pierced through the haze of his pain, grounding him. As she carried him in her arms, Levi’s heart swelled with gratitude. Her unwavering strength was more than just a comfort—it was a testament to the unbreakable bond they shared. For the first time in what felt like ages, a faint flicker of hope stirred within him.

In a delirium caused by loss of blood, he entered a dream like state that reminds him of their wedding night, when she had jokingly swept him off his feet and carried him across the threshold of the most opulent chamber in the royal harem.

The chamber of the royal harem was filled with craftsmanship and sacred artistry. Golden sunlight poured through tall, intricately carved windows, illuminating marble floors inlaid with gems that shimmered like stars. The walls were adorned with vivid murals depicting scenes from the Torah—Moses parting the Red Sea, David standing triumphant over Goliath, and the fiery chariot of Elijah ascending to the heavens. A grand bed draped in silks and adorned with rich embroidery stood at the center, its posts carved with motifs of olive branches and cherubim. A fountain at the far end, surrounded by rose petals, mirrored the serene flow of the Jordan River, while the faint scent of frankincense and myrrh lingered in the air, creating an atmosphere of sacred splendor.

He could still see the shy hesitation in her eyes as she began to undress, her back turned to him, self-conscious about her physique. She worried that her strength, her broad shoulders, and her powerful frame might overshadow her femininity. But to Levi, she was a vision—a woman whose beauty rivaled that of a Valkyrie, embodying both fierce grace and unyielding power. In her, he saw not just a warrior, but a partner whose strength complemented his own in every way.

Levi approached her from behind and kissed her shoulder and quoted one of his favourite verses to her:

“I praise him because you are fearfully and wonderfully made, his works are wonderful, I know that full well. You have nothing to be ashamed of, now come to bed.” She turned around and leaned down to kiss him.”

Levi swept her up into his arms, a feat that at any other time might have left him nursing a herniated disc. Priscilla let out a shout of ecstatic laughter, while he, in stark contrast, grunted and wobbled, his legs trembling under the effort. Staggering toward the bed, he nearly dropped her more than once, each misstep drawing a delighted giggle from her and a strained groan from him. By the time they reached the bed, he was teetering like a laborer about to collapse under the weight of a quarry stone. Yet, with a final surge of determination, he steadied himself and gently laid her onto the bed, his tenderness eclipsing the comedic struggle that had brought them there.

Soon after, he returns to her arms, his consciousness flickering like a flame fighting the wind. His spirit, undeterred by the weakness of his flesh, summons its last reserves of strength deciding to carry her once more, this time with his words. “Take heart, my sweet Priscilla,” he murmurs, his voice soft yet firm. “This is not the end.” His heavy eyelids finally close as nano-bots and blood transfusion bags work tirelessly to preserve the life slipping from him.

....

I’ve often heard it said: *If God allowed even one unrepentant sinner into heaven, heaven would turn into hell.* As I slowly open my eyes, the truth of that statement has never been clearer.

Deborah clings to Yaffa’s dress, trembling as if to shut out the world. Gavriel paces in agitation, his shoulders sagging under a weight I can’t yet grasp. Priscilla sits beside Dipti, her bloodshot eyes a testament to relentless weeping. Yet Dipti remains composed—a steady center amidst the storm, her hand resting on Priscilla’s in quiet reassurance.

The room comes into focus. The soft glow of nanotech walls adjusts as I stir, tracking my vitals. The medical pod beside me hums with holographic updates on Uriel’s condition. Even the robots, silent and precise, seem to mirror the tension in the room.

Igor’s gentle face flashes before me, frozen in the moment of his final breath. My chest tightens, and I force the image away, but the weight lingers, pressing down on my heart. A tear escapes my eye. I can’t bring myself to tell Deborah about Igor—or maybe she already knows. Either way, the world I know is spiraling into chaos, hellbound on a freight train.

Dipti’s gaze meets mine, searching. There’s an unspoken understanding between us. I look away and turn to my left, where Uriel lies pale and motionless.

A blood transfusion tube runs from his arm. His eyes snap open, wide with shock, and his bandaged right arm twitches. I don’t need to ask what happened—I already know.

“Amiel,” I mumble under my breath.

Gavriel sees that I'm awake. He stands to my left, his footsteps hesitant. Our eyes meet, and he doesn't have to say anything. Dipti moves to my side and grabs my hand.

"Your sons and daughters are waiting outside," she says gently, patting my hand.

"I know. I can see them." I glance toward the door, their anxious faces etched in my mind. "They're distraught." I tell them to wait. I don't want them to see me like this. I glance at my wound, covered in tight bandages. The nanobots have done an incredible job, but I feel my condition would be disheartening for those who rely on me most. If they see me like this, I fear they might panic—or lose hope.

"It's begun, Dipti," I say, squeezing her hand. "The rebellion—it's begun."

I glance at Uriel, my mentat accessing his thoughts. Images flicker—Amiel as a boy, the two of them training under the sun, laughter echoing through the yard. Those moments once felt unbreakable, yet now they're ghosts, eclipsed by Amiel's relentless hunger for power. Uriel's heart tightens; the cracks were always there, he realizes now. The quiet resentments, the ambition lurking behind Amiel's smiles—he had been blind to it all. A fairytale, shattered in the face of this betrayal.

I know what I must do. Righteous anger fills my heart. I will punish Amiel to the fullest extent of the law, but first I must gather all the evidence against him and put him on trial for the world to witness. They must see that my judgment is not reserved for outsiders alone but extends to my own blood. Justice does not waver before the bonds of family. No one escapes the consequences of sin—not even those closest to me.

Ever since my dreams began, I knew I needed to test Amiel. My agents, now rebranded as SpecNet Operatives, carried out my will in silence. Former Mossad legends, they infiltrated every mentat connection and channel.

I designed a test for Amiel—a whisper of temptation crafted to reveal his true nature. The operative planted a ping in his network, hinting at an opportunity to buy a mentat faker—a rare and illegal device capable of mimicking mentat signals of any individual of choice. A tool that could rewrite the truth itself and be used to access places and do things as someone else.

The opportunity was irresistible. Amiel moved quickly, unaware that every step of his journey was being tracked. He met the operative in a hidden enclave outside the city—a haven for rebels and others who dream of dismantling my authority. There, under the cover of shadows, he bought the faker.

The price? An impossible sum—one million shekels. Enough to purchase a home along the Dead Sea's shores. Where could he have found such wealth? Certainly not from the modest allowance I grant him. Someone else must be involved.

I suspect he's using mentat blockers. It's the only explanation for how he's managed to evade my mental grasp. Without access to his thoughts, I couldn't intervene before his attack

on Uriel. Perhaps that was his plan all along: to operate beyond my reach, shielded by cunning and chemicals.

Still, I allowed him to proceed. I needed to see the depths of his ambition. The mentat faker was just the first step, but his actions suggest a web of alliances and motives far larger than I anticipated. Perhaps his mother gave him this sum? Could she be part of this conspiracy? No, her thoughts remain open to me. I would have seen it.

Amiel is more dangerous than I imagined—a clever and conniving boy. But I will uncover the truth. I'll test his blood for traces of mentat blockers. If he's tampered with his very physiology to outwit me, that will confirm how far he's willing to go.

Amiel must have used the mentat faker during his sparring sessions with Gavriel, bringing himself close enough to sync with Gavriel's mentat signals. But this is still conjecture. The faker requires close proximity for five to ten minutes to complete the syncing process—a difficult task during a dynamic sparring match.

Tracking data revealed the faker was in Gavriel's quarters for over an hour before being discarded in a waste container nearby. What was it doing there? Another mystery. Late at night, Amiel retrieved the device from the container. Using Gavriel's mentat signals, he then accessed the armory in the dead of night.

How Amiel bypassed the heavy security remains unclear. I suspect he used a cloaking device, slipping past the guards during a moment of distraction or rest. The gate logs confirm it opened without any visible presence—a clear indication of cloaking technology at work.

Once inside the armory, he secured a dart shocker, a vital weapon in our warriors' arsenal. The shocker allows users to fire deadly projectiles while maintaining agility and proficiency with their bio-weapons. Amiel used it on Uriel, striking him with a poisoned dart. The toxin is highly lethal; had Gavriel not intervened, Uriel would have perished—either from the poison or Amiel's blade.

I could have stopped the fight the moment Uriel was poisoned, but I didn't. I needed to know if Amiel truly had the will to kill his brother in the most gruesome way possible.

I glanced at Gavriel. He was stroking his beard—a habit he'd held for as long as I could remember. Despite the years, he still resembled the young man I had fought beside during the Battle of Jerusalem. His thoughts flowed into my mind, unguarded. I saw him, cloaked and hidden, watching Amiel and Uriel fight. He had waited until the last possible moment to intervene. Relief coursed through him, but so did a palpable shock as he looked at me in my current state.

Our eyes meet. "I can't believe it," he said, his voice trembling. "Seeing you like this—it's too much for me." His gaze darted to the wound on my shoulder, then to Deborah, who stirred at the sound of his voice.

She lifted her tear-streaked face from her mother's lap, her red, swollen eyes locking onto Gavriel before she rushed to my side. Her small hands clutched at me as she buried her face in my chest, her sobs shaking her fragile frame.

I winced sharply as her weight pressed against the wound from Igor. Though the nanobots had expertly sealed the surface with regenerated skin cells from my body, the internal damage was still raw. Pain flared with each movement, a relentless reminder of how close I had come to death. Her tears soaked through my shirt, warm and persistent, as though trying to cleanse the horrors she had witnessed.

The physical pain was nothing compared to the ache in my soul. Deborah's innocence—the precious light I had fought so hard to protect—was gone. The old world, with all its cruelty and sin, had unveiled itself to her in ways I had tried so desperately to shield her from.

I had always known I couldn't keep her safe forever. But knowing didn't make it any easier. I held her trembling body, feeling the weight of my failure press down on me. I had hoped, foolishly, that I could delay this moment, that I could keep her untouched by the scars of this broken world for just a little longer. But now, no matter how tightly I held her, I couldn't undo what had been done.

Her voice cracked as she choked out, "Why, Daddy? Why did Igor have to go? He won't wake up. You... you killed him, didn't you?"

Her words cut deeper than any blade. I opened my mouth to explain, to tell her the truth: *It was either him or me*. But the words stuck in my throat. Would it even matter? Could anything I said soothe the waves of pain coursing through her body and heart?

Instead, I let her see the memories, her own mentat showing her what had happened—how I had tried to stop Igor, how I fought to keep him alive. But we had never fully domesticated him before bringing him here. In the end, he reverted to his old nature, something I had never anticipated, never planned for.

"I tried," the words breaking as they left me. "I tried so hard, Deborah. I'm so sorry. I didn't want this to happen."

Her sobs quieted, but the weight of her grief, and mine, hung heavy in the air. There was no undoing the damage, no way to turn back time. All that remained was the fragile hope that, one day, we might find a way to heal.

In the midst of my sorrow, my mind wandered to the temple. I longed to rise from this bed, to leave these burdens behind, and to sit in His presence. There were so many questions, so many things I needed to share with Him—things I couldn't make sense of alone. The weight of recent events felt insurmountable, one pressing matter piling upon another, leaving me no time to breathe, let alone find clarity.

My thoughts drift from the temple to the river and its fruit. The image of its glistening waters, flowing from the holy sanctuary into the Dead Sea, brought a flicker of hope. Soon, I

would draw strength from its life-giving leaves and fruit. They would restore what the nanobots couldn't reach, knitting together the unseen wounds in my body and soul. I clung to the promise of renewal, to the belief that I would be whole again.

But a shadow of doubt crept into my thoughts, a gnawing worry I couldn't shake. What if this *is* the rebellion? What if these strange events are the first signs of the upheaval we've long feared? And if it truly is, what will become of the river and its fruit?

A chill ran through me as the possibility took root. If the rebellion overtakes us, will the river dry up? Will the fruit that grants us restoration vanish? Without them, their miraculous effects would cease, and the inevitable decay of the world would reclaim me. I would begin to feel the aches and frailty of my once-ailing body again.

The thought was unbearable. I had come so far, fought so hard, only to face the prospect of losing it all—the strength I had regained, the life I had rebuilt. I closed my eyes, my grip tightening around Deborah as if holding her could anchor me against the storm in my mind. I know the end has to come, but that doesn't comfort me. I've been happy with the life that I've lived till now. Memories of my old life return to me. My aching knees, the sleepless nights, the quarrels, the arguments with my enemies, prison, my withering eyes as they poured over the Scriptures searching for answers as to the reasons behind the purpose of my difficult trials, the rejection, my heart sick from hopes deferred and on, on.... The burning anger, the righteous indignation, I just want to jump out of my body.

I closed my eyes and whisper a prayer, my voice breaking under the weight of it: "Let the river flow. Let the fruit remain. Not just for me, but for all of us. Please... let this not be the end.

Uriel's voice breaks through my ponderings. He's in my mind.

"Father, I'm filled with something I've never experienced before. It's something that burns within me. I don't know how to explain it. My jaw clenches every time I think of a Amiel. My stomach burns, my hands clench, my palms become sweaty. I'm filled with us overpowering rage. I want to find Amiel and...and..."

I see an image of Uriel's burning sword flash through the darkness and Amiel's head severing from his muscular yet developing body. I see Uriel over his body gloating.

"I want justice. I want to avenge the wrong done to me by Amiel. I will kill him father I swear. The Lord is my witness, I..." I interrupt Amiel, I understand his anger. I've been there a thousand times, that dark place where only the hand of the Almighty can pull me out.

"Vengeance is mine, I will repayeth says the lord," I quote to him. "You give Amiel to me. I will do your vengeance. He will be punished in front of all of Israel."

I sense tears flowing down his eyes and intense pain in his body caused by the deep cut in his arm and the poison coursing through his body having been blocked by the antidote.

Chapter 5: The Prince of Darkness

Amiel hit the cold, hard floor of the cell with a thud, the echo of his impact fading into the silence. Anger burns in his chest as he attempts to scramble to his feet, hands clenched into fists. How dare they treat him this way? He is a prince, destined for greatness, and yet here he is, locked in a cell like a common criminal.

He struggles to get up. He's completely exhausted having formed so many weapons in his anger and rage he's surprised that he's even alive. He crawls to his cell bars and pulls himself up. He bangs his fists against the heavy iron bars, his voice rising in furious protest.

"I'll have your heads on a platter, you'll see."

One guard speaks with him patiently and respectfully.

"Prince Amiel please note that your personal bible has been placed by your bed. Please take this time to reflect and examine yourself. We hope this experience will end in your repentance."

Amiel's fists fell silent, his defiant shouts echoing away as he heard the guard's calm words. A bitter scoff escapes his lips, "*Repentance?*" Then he thinks, as if he, of all people, needs to reflect or change. Yet something in the guard's respectful tone gnaws at him, a quiet discomfort settling beneath his anger.

Turning, he spots the small, leather-bound Bible resting on the edge of the simple bed in his cell. It looks untouched, pristine—the very same one he had been given on the day of his baptism on his eleventh birthday by his father, though it had rarely seen his hands since. Most of his siblings lived like saints falling in line with lordship of the God written within. He had also initially, but the past year or so had begun to resent the God who sat in the temple with his father. Even his father claimed to be God in human flesh. He was so patient it made him sick. "Do this son or do that, don't do that, love Yeshua he died on the cross for you, for your sins.....he exists, he's real, look at his glory in the temple, my face when I leave his presence and on and on.....he clenched his hands in a fist and slammed them on his bed. His flesh cried out as if he could take a knife and just jam it in his father's face.

A thought pulses through Amiel, sharp and intoxicating. *I will be greater than him, than their God.* The words echoed within him, feeding the fire that seemed to consume his very bones. The idea of power—real, unyielding power—was like a balm to every wound, every slight, every ignored cry for independence. They wanted him to bow, to repent, to submit, yet in his heart, all he craved was dominance, freedom from this relentless weight of expectation.

Amiel's anger flickered, tempered by a spark of hope. He remembered his mother's words, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder as she'd looked at him with a rare warmth, a belief that he could indeed be the warrior she envisioned. She alone saw him, understood his restless spirit. *One day, she had said, you will take your father's place, but only if you forge yourself into someone worthy.*

The image was there in his mind—himself in the temple, cloaked in the reverence and respect his father commanded. But his path to it would not be through quiet piety or meek submission. It would be through strength, a strength that could only come from relentless dedication, from pushing his body and mind until he was unmatched. The title of warrior was not a gift to be given, but a prize to be earned.

He would appeal to his father once more, try to make him see his true nature, his potential. *Let him see me as I am*, Amiel thought, *not as a hollow image of him*. If he could make his father recognize his vision, perhaps then he could finally step into his own, free from the heavy chains of expectation. He still wanted to please his father, still loved him. It was true that his father had been nothing but good to him.

But a gnawing fear surfaces in his mind. How would his father react to his attack on Uriel? Amiel was certain he would not accept it easily. Nothing like it had ever happened in the royal palace for centuries.

He recalled the court histories he had studied, delving into every decision his father made to understand the workings of his rule. He wanted to be prepared for when his time would come. In Egypt, he remembered, a murder had shaken the court. Upon the testimony of three witnesses his father's response had been severe—he sentenced the man to death, invoking the Old Testament as his justification: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." That unyielding judgment hung in Amiel's mind, a reminder of the consequences he now faced.

Would he apply that same law to his own son? Amiel wonders. Or could his father look beyond the act, seeing not just the offense but the purpose, the vision, beneath it?

The thought twists in his mind. Would his father punish him as he had punished others, perhaps slashing and poisoning him like Uriel, or would he devise some other form of public retribution? Amiel feels as if he were already on trial, though his judgment had yet to be passed.

He remembers how his father often didn't need witnesses to make a decision; he could cut through lies with unsettling clarity. God sees all things, even what's done in secret, his father would say, catching the accused of guard. He saw the money you stole, his father would declare, knowing the truth without a single witness. Amiel knew what he must do. He must evoke the Bible as his own defense quoting some passage of Scripture to keep himself from feeling his father's wrath. He knew the Bible quite well. He and his siblings were brought up on its principles from the time they could read which was very early on.

Amiel makes his way to his bed carefully trying to keep his balance. He stumbles and falls on the firm mattress. Composing himself he sits up, takes a deep breath while picking up the bible then opens it skimming for words he could use. He comes to the ten commandments. He would look his father in the eye and say, "Father, the Bible says, 'Thou shalt not murder.' But I didn't hurt Uriel without reason. I did what I thought had to be done, to protect us all. A true warrior must kill. Killing and murder are different. My motive was not malice." It's true,

I hated Uriel, he always was able to defeat me in our sparring sessions. My father would see through the lie. Maybe there was another route.

He closes the Bible and falls back onto his bed. His voice echoes off the stone walls of his cell as he murmurs, *“Let that man do whatever he wishes. No matter what he says, my path is set in stone.”*

”| Sejal’s chest swelled with pride. I’ve been given the glorious honor of bearing our savior—the one who will break the chains of my husband’s god.

But beneath her pride, fear quickened her heart. How did he come to know of this destiny? Was it revealed by the god I pretend to serve? Can he truly see so deeply into our souls? She clenched her hands, determined. I must convince my husband that his dream is just that—a dream. Fictitious, symbolic, full of harmless metaphors. Yes, the lake of fire is merely a metaphor. She steadied herself. I need time to prepare. Amiel will become God and rise above, but the time is not yet. Amiel is unready. He must learn, grow strong, master the art of combat if he’s to defeat the saints.

Her mind raced with a single, unbreakable resolve. I must ease my husband’s doubts about our son. If he knows... if he truly understands, Amiel may face a fate from which there is no return.

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Somehow this seemed foreign to Amiel. He had tried talking to the God of his father, but he never got a response, if he never got a response how was he going to be praised. He had prayed fervently to be able to beat Uriel in sparring practice, but his prayers continued to fall on deaf ears as day by day he had to face the humiliating defeat at the hands of his older brother. So, he stopped speaking to the invisible creator that eluded him.

Amiel thinks of his favorite quote from Aleister Crowley, *“Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law, what I will is that this confession of faith and water brings me one more step closer to my goals, confesses Amiel to the god of his desires.”*

The baptism was merely an expectation, a tradition that bound him as tightly as the white ornate robes he wore. Without it, he knew, the people's praise would vanish like smoke on the wind. But deep down, he wondered: what if he refused? What if he became the first son of Prince Levi in four centuries to reject baptism?

The thought is absurd, it lingered in his mind like a wistful fantasy. His imagination went wild with the kind of scandal that would ripple through the kingdom. He could see his father’s sad and disappointed eyes mourning over his refusal. It fills him with glee for once he could disappoint their expectations in him. But the pleasure of disappointing his father paled in contrast to this fleeting adoration, it was worth it despite more the cold, distant ceremony awaiting him.

With a heavy heart, he resolved to meet their expectations. If he was ever to follow in his father's footsteps and judge the people from the temple, he would have to secure their devotion. This baptism was nothing more than a bothersome formality—a small price to pay for the sake of his greater ambitions. It was as if he could hear Rejecting the baptism would be aiming too low, he would rather aim high, higher than any other prince before him that walked this ancient procession.