Eclipse of Perdition

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Yashua Lebowitz

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meshiachkingdom@gmail.com

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# Chapter 1: Weary Nights

His left intact eyeball is devilishly black as his right biomechanical 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 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 with the rest of his face, creating an inhuman sound.

*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 gaze at me; their wickedness continues to haunt me. I wish to speak to him and say something, 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 off the cliff, his eyes still glaring at me, his face 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; the lighting is dim, allowing me to 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 to ensure his survival against the man of lawlessness and his armies, yet now he might turn those same skills against us. It will mean the end of my kingdom. My son, oh my son. I open my Bible, reading prophecies 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 and 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 and 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 slight 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. I seek the guidance of God’s voice to discern if there’s anything more here, anything beyond my child's innocence.

"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—something challenging, 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 replies almost automatically. Yet a brief tightening of his fingers reveals a moment of resistance, his hand curling and then loosening as he quickly averts his gaze.

Seeking 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 tightly. 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 should leave him in his rest, but his voice cuts through the quiet just as I shift to go.

“Father.”

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

He hesitates, then speaks with a mixture of earnestness and something more profound, 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 trying to prevent 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 lead the people, but he cannot stand there at the temple. He’s mistaken to believe that I won’t be able to fulfill my duties. I won’t 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 carefully 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, you must learn, serve, and understand that the temple is not mine to give. It belongs to Yeshua alone. I was chosen long ago before the world's creation. He chooses those who serve before him. Maybe he is yet to choose you.”

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 take 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. It's early morning. Too late to fall back asleep. Too early to begin my work. I choose to relax on a levitation lounger, my body wholly 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 long, solemn shadows.

Somewhere in those shadows, I feel the spirit of Antiochus IV Epiphanes[[1]](#footnote-1)—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.

….

Dipti disturbs my much-needed rest. 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 the 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 brows, and a straight, petite nose above full, naturally curved lips. Her warm complexion glows faintly in the light, and her long, dark hair flows gracefully over her shoulders. The year-old scar on the center of her forehead still haunts me whenever I look at it. It’s a reminder of the perilous times.

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 momentarily 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 rest 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.

“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 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 harbor resentment?

“Maybe, I figured your marriage would cement her 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, 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 feeding Amiel that same poison?*

"You should visit her quarters," Dipti says firmly, "If there’s bitterness, we must root it out before it spreads. You remember what happened a year ago. We still haven’t found the culprit. I’d hate to see it happen again." Her gaze was sharp, her authority as queen unmistakable, "If Amiel is indeed being negatively influenced, we must stop it before it festers. Sin grows in the shadows, not in the light."

I place two fingers underneath my throat, activating my mentat and syncing it with Dipti’s. My face hardens with seriousness, knowing I’m at a critical juncture as king. This was the first crisis in over four hundred years, and the old Joshua Levi, who had been before the war, was returning as if from a pleasure-induced coma. “Sense for any irregularities in her actions. We will convene with our counselors in the evening and examine the footage of our interaction. If she is lying about anything, we will uncover the truth. 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.

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

Deborah stands, her tiny 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 momentarily forget my troubles. I admire Igor, the lion to whom my daughter clings. 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 the 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, hugging me as big as she can manage. The lion stands too, brushing its side against my leg. I place my hands on my daughter and the lion, brushing my fingers through Deborah’s well-kept hair. She looks up at me with 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 and more insistent. I fear for my children—for her. The heart of a child is so pure and 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 possible, lovely little Deborah, who clings so tightly to my leg. “Oh God,” I pray silently, “help me. She must survive. She *must*.”

I kneel, 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 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 purposefully, 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 amplified my pain until his glory returned to the temple. I eat daily in his presence, which is 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 to 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 amid training, navigating a grueling obstacle course spread across the courtyard. A forty-foot tower looms over them, ropes swaying from its peak. From the top, Priscilla, their chief trainer, shouts commands in a crisp British accent that cuts through the air.

“Get moving, you lot!”

Below, most of his wives struggle with the climb, their muscles trembling as they fight gravity. But Sejal—Amiel’s Mother ascends with effortless grace, her toned arms pulling her upward in fluid, powerful motions. Years of discipline are etched into every fiber of her being, and her strength is undeniable.

Beyond the tower, his other wives spar with swords and spears, their nanobot armor shimmering in the sunlight, reflecting beauty and lethality.

Levi’s gaze lingers on Sejal, admiration warring with doubt. Does her loyalty match her prowess? The thought festers, its weight pressing heavier each day beneath the shadow of his haunting dream.

Then, he realizes his mistake—he has come unannounced. The women, caught off guard, freeze, their instincts kicking in as they prepare to announce his arrival through their mentats.

“Stand down,” he commands.

They hesitate only for a moment before bowing their heads in obedience.

Among them, a guard—princess of the King of Germany catches his eye. She moves with the poise of a reincarnated Amazon, tall and lean, each step as light as a huntress stalking her prey. But as she nears, her eyes fail to meet his. A flush of uncertainty betrays her confidence, and when she finally speaks, the word tumbles from her lips, unpolished and raw.

“Prince.”

Levi meets her gaze with a knowing smile, his warmth disarming. Then, with effortless charm, he winks.

Her breath hitches. A deep crimson spreads across her cheeks, and through her mentat, he senses her heart's sudden, frantic flutter."

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 flush and bodies glistening with sweat. The air is crisp and temperate, and the eternal spring-like weather makes 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 the ephod snugly fit around his body. He ascends the platform to stand beside Priscilla. Her cheeks flush with embarrassment 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, and he studies her reaction intently. Her demeanor is calm and 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, Levi nods to his wives and speaks through his mentat, his voice both gentle and commanding.

“I’m sorry to come unannounced. This morning, I felt compelled to express my gratitude for your dedication. You honor me with your strength. I urge you to continue your training. Though we do not suffer, we live in a world where suffering remains a grave possibility. The devil still prowls like a roaring lion, seeking 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, each eager to offer reassurances, hoping to ease whatever burden they sense he carries.

As his wives absorb his message, Levi studies their faces. Each reflects something different—some nod with solemn resolve, embodying the very strength he commends. Others exchange faint smiles, sharing an unspoken understanding of his sudden appearance.

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

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

“Step forward, Sejal.”

She hesitates. “Why? What happened?”

Levi studies her, his eyes tracing her sharp features and the taut muscles beneath her skin. He can sense her restraint and the controlled strength behind every breath.

“You seem to be the most proficient warrior among my wives. Let’s see what you’re capable of.”

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

Levi’s voice hardens in their minds.

“This isn’t about fun. This is about survival. The lawless one is coming, and with him, doom for this world. You train because your lives depend on it. He will stand against me, seeking to destroy everything I protect—including you.”

He pauses, his piercing gaze sweeping over them, measuring their reactions. The faint smiles and uncertain glances vanish, replaced by rigid determination. Satisfied, he speaks aloud, his voice ringing through the courtyard like a battle cry, words heavy with prophecy.

“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 near, and I must ensure that your training has been more than just a ritual.”

Then, without warning, he leaps from the podium. The ground trembles beneath him as he lands, the force rippling through the courtyard as if a small earthquake were about to strike at the moment of his impact.

The sudden movement startles many of his wives, their mentats buzzing with alarm. He quells their panic with a single thought, his intent unmistakable. Those flanking Sejal quickly step back, forming a tight circle around them.

Levi doesn’t hesitate. A sword forms in his grasp mid-stride, materialising as if a thousand unseen hands are forging it from molten metal instantly. The weapon hums with power, its polished edge catching the sunlight in a gleaming arc.

Then, the blade descends in a swift, merciless strike.

Sejal moves without thinking. Training surges through her like instinct. She steps into his charge, pivoting on her heel with effortless precision. Seizing his arm, she turns his momentum against him and hurls him over her shoulder in a single fluid motion.

Levi crashes to the ground.

For a heartbeat, silence. Then, a grin spreads across his face.

He catches his breath, his voice low, raw, tinged with exhilaration.

“Stunning, wife.”

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 materialises 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 has a vision of precision and purpose, and her movements are honed to perfection.

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

She presses forward with rapid thrusts and slashes, each motion fluid and relentless. The air hums with the force of her attacks, the glint of her weapon catching 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 inches from Sejal’s. With a quick sweep of his leg, 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 gain the upper hand.

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 triumph flickers across her face for a fleeting moment, 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 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.

“You’ve exceeded my expectations, of course, I yield,” Levi concedes, having obtained what he desires.

Levi 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 about it.”

Her calm and rigid voice replies, “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 you still love me somewhere. 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 wife 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 lives 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 has become their quiet commitment.

The room is bathed in natural light, filtering through a glass ceiling that can project 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 instantly. Though the mountains had vanished in the wake of the Great Quake, they rose once more, timeless and untouched, surrounding her room and filling him with overwhelming joy.

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

“Please join me, my lord.”

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

….

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

Sejal shifts beneath the silk sheets, propping herself on one elbow as Levi approaches with two steaming cups. The dim morning light filters through the curtains, casting soft shadows across his form.

Her gaze lingers on him, tracing his bare shoulders, which move with quiet strength. Even after nearly five centuries, his body remains lean and powerful—there is no trace of the frailty he once knew in the days after the Great War. Time has only refined him.

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 scrutinising 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, 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.

The robot glides forward, its humanoid hands balancing two plates. Its sleek, metallic frame mirrors human dimensions, and its head tilts slightly as if mimicking attentiveness. As it approaches, each movement is smooth, calculated, almost graceful. It sets the plates down before them with a quiet hum of servos.

A slice of synthetic lamb is on the plates, its rich flavor mimicking real meat and fresh vegetables—bell peppers, zucchini, and spinach. The aroma ignites Prince Levi’s hunger. After a morning of battle and passion with Sejal, he’s 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 chuckles.

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 about its purpose. “Another harem?” he muses, raising an eyebrow. “I’m not sure the council would approve.”

*She’s trying hard to please me.*

She gives him a sly smile. “Well, you are the ruler of the world. You can have anything you want.”

He grins, leaning a bit closer. “True. But I think I’m satisfied with my company right here.”

He could almost see Dipti rolling her eyes with a slight smile and the Council pondering whether another harem was possible.

She looks down. He can sense her resistance against his attempt to draw closer to her. This is 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 like 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 her thoughts about her inner nature from him, leaving him only to guess what she could be thinking.

Sejal pulls back her dishevelled hair and ties it. “Are you going to keep me in suspense?” she 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 gaze lingering on the scars etched across her back—the remnants of a plague that once ravaged her flesh. A flicker of something unreadable crosses his face. A part of him wants to ask, to trace those lines with his fingers and understand the suffering that left such deep, permanent marks.

But he holds back. He knows better than to press into wounds she has no intention of reopening.

Through her mentat, he senses her awareness of his curiosity, the way her mind tenses, already fortifying itself. She is prepared, unwilling to let him “twist” Scripture into justifying what was done to her people.

Prince Levi looks out the window, where the waterfall cascades down the Himalayas. 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.

“It’s this dream, Sejal. Our son… Amiel. He’s there every time. But it’s not him—it’s some monstrosity. His body is fused with our robotic technology, as if he has 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 following words, choosing to leave out the worst part: the part where he delivers the final push that seals Amiel’s fate.

Sejal tries to make her voice as distraught and gentle as possible, feigning her sympathy for the prince’s plight: “Dreams are strange, my Lord. Perhaps this is the evil one planting doubt. Amiel is 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 believe in him, maybe your dreams will be of 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 and thinks Amiel is pure, free from darkness. Yet the dream had been vivid, unshakable, like a warning branded into his 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 that masks her inner conviction. "My lord, sometimes dreams are a test—testing our loyalty, our hope. Amiel is still 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.*

Levi decides to press her. “I spoke with Amiel. He seems to have a troubling desire to harm others. And I noticed something else—he seems to think he could replace me in the temple. I have no idea where that notion came from,” he says, his voice sharp with concern. “You realise that’s exactly what the lawless one is foretold to do.”

Sejal listens intently, her lips pressing into a thin line at his words.

Levi strokes his beard, his tone thoughtful but firm. “Strangely, I’ve never tried to instill such desires in him. So, I’m left wondering—where are they coming from? Have you been teaching him these things?”

Sejal’s expression falters briefly, her eyes flickering with something unreadable before she quickly regains her composure. Her lips curl into a soft smile, though the warmth doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Of course not, my lord,” she replies, her tone steady and deliberate. “I would never teach Amiel anything that would lead him astray. All I’ve ever tried to instill in him is love for his family and unwavering loyalty to you.”

She hesitates, her gaze briefly dropping to the floor. “Perhaps he’s discovered these ideas on his own. Our depraved nature was never fully extinguished, even after the restoration. I think it’s a passing fancy—nothing more. But I assure you, my lord, he is innocent of anything truly harmful. Children with their curious notions,” she adds with a slight shrug, as if dismissing her son’s thoughts.

Levi narrows his eyes, studying her closely. “His depraved nature, you say? It’s strange—none of my other children have shown such inclinations over the past four hundred years. I’m starting to wonder if someone, or something, is influencing him. Desires like these don’t always appear on their own. Sometimes they need a nudge.”

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 feel strength in places we’d rather they leave 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.” But Levi catches the faintest tremor beneath her words. Her eyes harden for a moment before she looks away. Rising from her seat, she gathers 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 and carrying the plates to the sink. The sound of dishes rattles softly as she washes them.

Levi watches her momentarily, then decides his time there 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, gently kissing 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 and resumes work efficiently.

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

Sejal pulls out a censer from beneath her bed, which is full of incense. She lights it. A faint glow flickers to life, and she lifts 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, filling her room with an oppressive weight.

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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 reflected the diverse nations from which they hailed. 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 harem's entrance, Priscilla can speak freely now as they walk.

“Amiel, Sajel’s son?”

I told 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-tingling 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, growled low and guttural, his mane streaked with blood. His golden eyes, once filled with calm, now blaze with primal fury. The air seemed to crackle with tension, and the serene garden transformed into a place of horror.

Deborah stood frozen, her small hands clasp over her mouth, tears streaming down her cheeks. The child who had 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 materialises out of his hand.

“Deborah!” he snaps again, “Move!”

Priscilla steps to his side; her voice is 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 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 retreats, 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 intended 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 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, but he was 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 to hear the gentleness of Prince Levi’s voice. The fire in his eyes flickers, and Levi thinks he sees 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 meets 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, and his resolve fueled the heat radiating from his soul.

“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-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 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 when 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 accurate. 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 firm, 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 determination and panic.

Her words pierced through the haze of his pain, grounding him. Levi's heart swelled with gratitude as she carried him in her arms. Her unwavering strength was more than just a comfort—it was a testament to their unbreakable bond—a faint flicker of hope stirred within him for the first time in what felt like ages.

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 Elijah's fiery chariot 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, broad shoulders, and robust frame might overshadow her femininity. But to Levi, she was a vision—a woman whose beauty rivaled a Valkyrie, embodying 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, and 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.

# Chapter 3: Aleister Crowley

*One year before. 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 dance exuberantly in the streets, waving palm branches in a frenzy of excitement. Women raise their voices in thanksgiving psalms, their melodies weaving through the joyous, clamor-like threads of golden light. The tightly packed citizens, spilling over into every corner of the city, shout in unison:

"Baruch habá b'shem Adonai![[2]](#footnote-2)1"

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

When the Prince’s sons reached the age of accountability and were ready to dedicate themselves to the Lord’s work of judging Israel, their father baptised them at the temple in a ceremony filled with divine significance.

At the time of this writing, the kingdom of Israel has a population of two hundred million, with Jerusalem alone accommodating ten million during royal occasions.

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![[3]](#footnote-3)2

Above, ships hover in the skies, their passengers craning to catch a glimpse of the young prince. Even these lofty vantage points are congested as small bots jostle and swerve to avoid collisions, all vying to capture an image of the handsome boy who has become the center of the world's attention.

Amiel tugs lightly at the reins, slowing the robotic horse to a measured pace. Its hooves strike the stone-paved road, echoing like a drumbeat through the narrow streets. The crowd surges closer, their cheers swelling with each step. Children wave palm branches, their eyes wide with wonder, reaching 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 people’s gaze, letting them feel seen. A faint, practiced smile graces his lips, warm yet commanding.

The sunlight glints off the horse’s polished frame, casting radiant reflections across the stone walls and dazzling its audience. Hands shield eyes, but no one dares look away. Their cheers reach a fever pitch as Amiel pauses, raising a hand in acknowledgment.

In the distance, Levites stand watching, their faces portraying disgust as they exchange whispers. The faint scent of incense wafts through the air, and Amiel’s polished smile falters momentarily. But he steadies himself, resting a hand on the horse’s 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 horse responds instantly, lifting its legs into the air in a controlled arc and walking on its hind legs. Its 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.

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Amiel reaches the temple, where the Levites stand side by side along the road, their posture growing more solemn as he approaches. The horse stops. Amiel dismounts. As he approaches the stairway to the temple, all the Levites kneel in unison, a collective display of respect. 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. Prince Levi beckons Amiel to stand as he descends the steps and greets him with a hug and a kiss on his forehead. The crowded streets, great ships, and buzzing robots that had filled the sky are no longer there. He is 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 incredible feeling. I wanted to take my time and soak in the admiration from those around me.”

“Not as amazing as what awaits us within,” 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 puts his hand on his shoulder as they enter the temple’s courtyard.

Prince Levi remembers his youth: “I was baptized in basic training.” You could say it was a baptism of fire and water. Now you’ll begin your journey with God if you haven’t already. However, unlike me, you will be baptised in the most beautiful place on Earth, the fruit of my hard work in Messiah.” His Father falls silent as they approach the sacred pool, letting his hand drop from Amiel’s shoulder.

Through the mentat link, Levi brushes the edges of Amiel’s thoughts. He expects to feel the nerves of a boy about to undertake a sacred rite, perhaps apprehension or even a flicker of doubt. But instead, he encounters an 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 accurate.

Levi frowns, 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. 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 recoils inwardly, his stomach twisting at the thought. The very idea was abhorrent. Chemicals designed to scramble neural signals and render a mentat’s readings unreliable weren’t just illegal—they were treacherous. Only those with something to hide would stoop to such measures.

Worse still, mentat blockers were dangerously unpredictable. They disrupt the brain’s ability to process information. When used on a child, their effects could be catastrophic, sometimes leading to symptoms resembling madness as the child grows.

Levi’s eyes narrow as he studies his son. The boy’s face is calm, almost serene, but now that serenity feels like a facade.

*Is he really using mentat blockers? Who would supply them to him? And what could he possibly be hiding?*

The questions send a cold shiver down Levi’s spine. The blockers are detectable, but proving their use is no easy feat. A blood test must be conducted precisely two hours after ingestion—no later.

They continue to walk side by side, Levites kneeling before them as they cross their path. Amiel notices every detail: the polished floor that reflects their figures, the gold-embroidered robes of the priests as they prepare 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 flows from beneath the temple’s threshold, winding past the altar and weaving through the courtyard toward the Sacred Pool. The crystal-clear water glides smoothly in its carved channels, its gentle flow steady.

He touches the water within the sacred pool, feeling cool 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 examines Amiel, his thoughts racing, *“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 lifts a burnt thanksgiving offering, taking a spotless lamb he has prepared, and 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. He pours the remaining blood at the altar’s base, 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 Father’s right hand, fulfilling all this ritual symbolises.

Levi turns around 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 worldwide, on everyone’s mind.

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

They both enter the water.

Prince Levi says, “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 recognise 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 to take Amiel into his arms and pull him into the water. As their bodies submerge, the sun undergoes its transformation. The sky turns black; the once-radiant sun is 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 covering the earth. Prince Levi, unperturbed, continues the ceremony, “The water symbolises 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. As if drawn by an unseen force, he slowly steps out of the sacred pool, his movements deliberate, almost mechanical.

Prince Levi can hear him mumbling, “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.

*Is this a sign from God? And why is this happening on the day of Amiel’s baptism?*

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 alright?”

He decides that the world has seen enough and double-taps his mentat.

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. It was the first time he had heard Amiel mention an imaginary friend. This is like the real Amiel, chaotic and unpredictable, if only the façade in his mind could be lifted. Levi forces a small smile, masking his unease.

"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 indeed 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 begins broadcasting again, patting Amiel on the head, composing himself. He 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 they start the long walk back to the palace together.

As they descend the steps from the temple, the golden spires behind them shimmer faintly under the returning light. However, 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, freshly prepared by their robotic chef, fills the air.

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 before 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 crosses her face. “Go on,” she urges softly.

Amiel meets her gaze, his 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 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 peace to his young face. He smiles, the comforting aroma of his favorite food reaching him. His appetite returns, and he attacks 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 medication,” she says, opening the rice-filled jar. 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 protects you 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 it, then takes a sip of water.

Almost immediately, a faint buzzing settles in his mind, a sensation he dreads. It isn’t painful—not as a scraped knee would be—but an unsettling hum, like static, Mothering 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, stretching for an hour. His mind splits, tangled between his 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 tranquillity but unable to escape its 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. I love you.”

“Love you too, son,” she says, watching him leave.

"You’ll understand someday, Amiel," she murmurs to herself.

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: Bringing Death Back

Amiel steps into the garden, where the setting sun spills crimson light through the canopy, painting a mosaic of gold and shadow across the path—his heart races, as it always does when she is near. Deborah’s laughter echoes through the garden—clear and melodic, like a church bell calling the faithful to worship. When he’s around her, Amiel feels free, as if he can finally lay his burdens down. There’s a quiet magic in her laugh; a warmth that wraps around him and makes the world feel less heavy. Her eyes shimmer with a light that seems to reach into his soul, lifting his spirit with their glow.

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?

He rises to his feet, heart pounding, but his back foot catches the hem of his garment as he steps forward. 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. The lion bounds toward him with a low rumble and a playful glint in his eye. 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 releases 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 and brushes 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 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 relaxes. 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 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 were you,” Amiel says defiantly.

“No, I don’t wish it were me. Unlike you, I care more for the praise of God than the praise of man. If you keep talking like this, I’ll go tell Father.”

Amiel mocks, “I’ll go tell Father.” A cold wave of anger rises, twisting his stomach. The warmth Deborah had stirred in him vanishes, replaced by a stern, 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 deepens as his sharp 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. “I’m older and more skilled. But I’m making you stronger, 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; he can’t stand Uriel’s patronizing tone simmering beneath the surface. That holier-than-thou air—so confident, so sure—grated against him more than any physical defeat ever could.

He abruptly rises, now face-to-face with Uriel. Amiel is two years younger, yet he matches his brother in height and stature and 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 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. She uses whatever strength she can exert from her tiny body to separate her brothers from each other.

“You 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 exerts 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 petite frame is 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, “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 Amiel hesitate before finally walking 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. Amiel doesn’t push him away this time—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 and departing.

Amiel fidgets with a blade of grass, avoiding Deborah’s gaze as his cheeks grow warm. Now that Uriel is gone, their silence 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 the confrontation with Uriel emboldened it. It was time for him to aim too high. What if he made Deborah his queen when he takes his father’s place? His dad has a queen, so why not him? If there’s anyone, he’d always want to stay by his side, it's Deborah. There was something 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 will hit its mark.

“I’m your sister, Amiel; Dad would never be ready for that.”

“Half-sister. I’ll be king, and what Dad thinks won’t matter.”

“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,” Amiel retorts.

“It’s not possible, Amiel. I could never go against Dad.” The realisation dawns upon her that Amiel is 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. His bright, boundless dreams faltered for the first time 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 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 it in books, but it still felt unreal, like the memory of a nightmare he’d never experienced.

If his ambition required death to come back, Amiel wondered, *then would his father have to die so the world could move forward?* Or would his father 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 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… perhaps 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 make me your queen?” Amiel snaps out of 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. 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 on a more queen-like stature, straightening her posture and 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 more profound, “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 serious about this, you’ve 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. Something kind in her expression 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 can I 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. Perhaps 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 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.”

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Amiel collapses onto the sofa, still wearing his baptism tunic, his exhausted body sprawled over a heap of discarded clothing—robes, tunics, and sparring wraps crumpled across the cushions like forgotten skins. One sandal lies upturned beneath the coffee table in front of the sofa, the other entirely missing. The floor is scattered with datapads, pens, and torn scraps of notes in his hurried handwriting. A grand piano sits idle in the corner, its polished surface now dulled. Several books are strewn across its closed lid. Aleister Crowley’s The Book of the Law lies open, half-covering a diagram of human anatomy overlaid with thin lines of red ink, as if mapping nerves or pressure points. A heavier book, bound in cracked leather, bears the title The Cult of Horus: Rebirth Through Sacrifice on its spine. In the far corner, a tall glass enclosure glows faintly. Two lambs stand inside, their coats impossibly white against the sterile floor. They bleat softly. Lamb feed lies carelessly scattered around the cage.

Amiel considers the servant robots meant for folding clothes and tidying rooms to be a waste of potential. In the old world, such machines solved advanced calculations and driven innovation. Now, they serve 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 smirks, running a hand through his hair, his gaze drifting to the dormant machine in the corner. Aleister is his partner, a tool for ambitions far grander than neatly folded laundry. It is 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 begin 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. Then he’ll never be able to stand in front of me again.”

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

“Never spar again? Shooting too low? How can I shoot any higher?” Amiel props himself up. “I’m intrigued. Tell me more.”

His red eye blinks, “You need to douse him with pride.”

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

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

Amiel’s anger dissipates, instead, shock and disbelief take its place. He leans forward, narrowing his eyes at the glowing red orb of Aleister’s gaze, whose red aura has 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. I’ve been *dying* to talk about this since I left the garden.”

“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 is 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 magick, 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 dies 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 now hypnotizes: “Everything, Amiel. Great warriors do not wait for power—they seize it. They dominate, conquer, and take what is theirs by right.”

Aleister 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 lionesses, 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 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, his 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 whir 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 slicing into his own. Then, a flood of images bursts through: he understands words he’s never known, like *orgasm.* A vision follows—bodies intertwined in passion, their faces twisted with ecstasy, contorted as if caught between agony and release. The scene sears into his consciousness, overwhelming him with emotions he doesn’t fully grasp.

He doesn’t understand why a man and a man, or a man and a woman, do such things to one another? The intimacy feels grotesque, their bare flesh and genitalia too vivid, too foreign, too intrusive. He wants to look away, but there’s nowhere to go. He’s trapped, helpless, caught in the labyrinth of Aleister’s mind.

And yet, something shifts. A heat rises within him, unbidden and confusing, as if his body is betraying him. His morbid disgust bleeds into an unsettling fascination, the rawness of the act pulling him deeper. This isn’t just pleasure—it feels primal, mystical, forbidden. Now he understands why Aleister calls it *magick.* The thought of Deborah sharing such intimacy with him sparks in his mind, tantalizing and impossible to ignore. He wants to know and feel more, but the connection abruptly breaks.

The oneness he feels with Aleister dissolves as the servos quiet, their steady hum fading into silence. The needle retracts, and Amiel slumps forward, his breath ragged. His heart pounds as he looks up at Aleister, eyes wide with unease, his thoughts swirling with the forbidden knowledge he’s just been exposed to.

“What now?” he whispers, his voice trembling, the weight of everything he’s just experienced pressing down on him like a stone.

Aleister’s red eye glows brighter, a menacing beacon in the dark. “Now, my lion, we begin.”

# Chapter 5: Gavriel

*A week after Amiel’s eleventh birthday, an air of tension settles over the royal court like a storm on the horizon.*

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

“My Lord, I humbly approach and beg you for help,” the man says, his voice trembling, thick with sorrow that clings to every word. His weathered hands, calloused and dirt-streaked, fidget nervously at his sides as though unsure what to do with them. “For the first time in centuries, my vines died last season. There wasn’t much rain.”

His voice falters, a crack slicing through his composure. He presses his lips together, his chest rising and falling with the effort to keep the tears from spilling over.

Prince Levi sits on his ornate throne, leaning heavily on the armrest, his chin resting on his palm with an expression 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. Soon, I will be nothing more than a servant on the soil that once belonged to me.”

Prince Levi straightens, considering the man’s plight. This case, like so many others, is straightforward in its injustice, yet the frequency of these cases 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 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. As you know, I see almost everything in the neural network. I was aware of your case even before you petitioned it.”

The hall grows silent as Saul steps forward, his polished shoes tapping against the marble floor. His fine robes gleam. He avoids Levi’s gaze, his hands fidgeting at his sides.

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

The rich man shifts uncomfortably. “Yes, my Lord. It’s just business. You were a businessman once; you understand. Others charge the same interest—I’m no exception. He needed the money, and 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, his posture shedding its casual air. His voice takes on a weight that silences the room. His piercing gaze locks onto the rich man, as if he’s looking past flesh and bone, straight into his soul.

“Help this farmer,” Levi continues, his tone steady but commanding. “Forgive his debt. We will subsidize his next seed purchase. Do this, and you’ll find yourself rich—not in the fleeting wealth of this world, but in treasures that last forever. Invest your money in heaven, where the return is eternal and the assets unshakable.”

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 deeply breathes, “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 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 scratches his head. The tension in the room builds, but Levi tries to remain persuasive rather than confrontational. "If you refuse, the state will pay this man’s debt and ensure he has the seed to restore his vineyard. Yet, know this: your opportunity to extend mercy and grace will pass to another, and so will your reward in heaven."

Levi pauses, letting his words sink in before continuing. "The Jubilee was established so 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 hesitates, his lips pressing into a thin line. The weight of Levi’s gaze bore down on him, and for a moment, he seems on the verge of defiance. But then his shoulders slump, and he nods, 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 granddaughter's 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 leaves the hall, Levi leans back in his throne, his brow furrowed in thought. He says, “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 will 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.”

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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 flush, 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, her arms flailing, until she falls back on a levitating chair, which prevents her from landing on the hardwood floor.

As Martha steadies herself, the discarded dress flutters 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, lifting 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 sighs. 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 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 cleaning up the mess you’ve become, 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 unsure 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 smiled wistfully, her gaze drifting to the horizon before returning to Martha. “Perhaps. After everything we’ve endured, I’ve come to treasure the steady warmth of the flame more than its fleeting sparks. It’s the warmth that sustains you through the darkest nights.”

Martha’s expression clouded, her curiosity flickering to life. “Ma’am, can I ask you something personal?”

“Of course, Martha. You know you can ask me anything. Go ahead.”

Martha hesitated, choosing her words carefully. “Did you and Prince Levi ever face serious problems in your marriage?”

Dipti drew a deep breath, her shoulders lifting with the weight of memories she hadn’t revisited in centuries. “Oh, Martha, the struggles Josh and I went through…” Her voice softened, almost a whisper. “There were times I hated him.”

Martha’s eyes widen, her curiosity sharpened. “Hated him? What happened?”

The memories surged like a tide, threatening to pull Dipti under. For a brief moment, her eyes dimmed with sorrow. Then, with practiced resolve, she shut the door on the past, her composure returning as swiftly as it had faltered.

“The past is like an anchor,” Dipti said, her tone firm yet reflective. “If you let it drag too much while trying to sail forward, you’ll get stuck—or worse, be pulled backward. Let it rest, Martha. Those times are over. What matters now is the course ahead.”

Her smile returned, warm and reassuring, dissipating the fleeting sadness. But she noticed the shadow lingering in Martha’s expression.

“How about you, Martha?” Dipti asked gently, tilting her head. “How’s your marriage? You and Gavriel have been together for, what, 400 years now?”

“Something like that. The centuries fly, but recently...” Martha’s voice takes on a bitter edge. “I don’t know what’s gotten into Gavriel. He seems distracted, preoccupied with... who knows what. He’s not giving me attention like he used to.” Her expression twists into a mix of sadness and frustration. “It’s as if I’ve become invisible to him. I don’t feel the steady warmth of the flame anymore—just cold embers where it used to burn.”

The light in Dipti’s face becomes dim as she shares Martha's sorrow. Now, she becomes Queen Dipti, and her body posture is serious. “Is that so? Maybe I’ll have the prince speak to him.”

Martha turns away and looks 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 a long time. Then, as if waking up from a stupor, he returned 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 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. I’ve been carrying this burden for quite some time. I feel better knowing someone is there to carry it with me now.”

Dipti gently touches Martha’s shoulder, her firm and comforting touch. “Good. Then let this be the start of something lighter for you, Martha—no more talk of men today. Let’s finish up here and then raid the kitchens for some kheer. If I start my exercise regimen tomorrow, I’ll indulge tonight!”

Martha chuckles, the tension easing from her posture. “No, you mustn’t—but if you insist, my Queen, I’ll gladly take on the noble task of helping you.”

Dipti laughs, her eyes sparkling with warmth. “That’s the spirit! Come on, let’s wrap this up.”

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

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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 aren’t like that anymore—not in their time.*

She couldn’t imagine Levi ever growing cold or distant. If he did, she wouldn’t hesitate to report it to the Levites, who would confront him directly. But such a scenario felt impossible, a fragment of a past world long forgotten.

*There hadn’t been a divorce in a century.*

The last divorce was a spectacle, fraught with controversy. The proceedings dragged on for years before Levi, weary but resolute, finally relented, recognizing the couple’s hardened hearts. Despite his efforts, salvaging their marriage proved futile—a bitter reminder of their estrangement and disqualification from the kingdom of heaven.

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

Dipti double-taps her mentat, and instantly, her mind accesses the vast neural networks connecting millions of lives. Waves of emotions engage her.

A burst of laughter engulfs her: Martha giggling as her son holds up a crooked drawing of their Father. The joy is so vivid that Dipti smiles as if the moment belongs to her.

The warmth fades as she delves deeper. A farmer’s sorrow grips her—a raw despair clenches her chest. She feels his tears become hers, his anguish setting her heart aflame. Then, as suddenly as it appeared, the farmer’s presence dissolves, evaporating like summer rain under a blazing sun.

Prince Levi appears before her in the sacred meeting place of the temple. His expression is distant, his thoughts tethered to Amiel. Dipti’s mind sharpens, drawn to the memory of Amiel’s baptism—just six days after Yom Kippur. Six days. The number lingers in her thoughts, heavy with significance.

Behind him, King Yeshua sits, his radiant glory filling the room like an unquenchable flame. They are eating together, though the food remains indiscernible until Dipti tastes it through Prince Levi—a blend of exquisite flavors stirs her hunger despite the weight of kheer sitting heavily in her stomach. She feels suspended in the shared presence, tethered by threads of wonder and unease.

She leaves the sacred meeting place, leaving the better half of herself in her departure. In the Lord’s presence, Levi’s strength feels even more profound—his quiet confidence, his unwavering faith, the way he anchors her when she feels unsteady. She realizes how much she relies on him and how deeply they are bound. She sees the truth now: they are no longer two separate beings but one creature, with two hearts beating in perfect step. All her longings and desires for Levi are fulfilled in his presence.

Yet, even as she lingers in this sacred completeness, her concern for Martha rises, compelling her forward. The love she feels in this space doesn’t just anchor her—it calls her to act. Purpose steadies her as she searches for Gavriel, navigating the intricate mentat neural pathways woven into the palace’s foundation like a living map.

Her search leads her to the expansive training hall. Through the eyes of a nearby palace guard, she spots Gavriel, his commanding presence unmistakable as he instructs a group of young recruits. They stand in tight formation, hanging onto his every word, their movements rigid yet hopeful. Among them, she focuses on one recruit positioned at the front.

Curiosity tugs at her, and she enters him him him him his mind.

The recruit stands stiffly at attention, his youthful face marred by a furrowed brow as he wrestles with Gavriel's task. His unease radiates like ripples in still water, betraying the truth he is desperate to hide. Barely qualified for the royal guard, the weight of his inadequacy bears down on him. He struggles with the simplest of exercises, and though Gavriel’s tone is patient, the recruit’s failure is evident.

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 recruits. I will show you how to materialize your bio sword using your mentat chip. This is your first test today. You will be disqualified if you cannot achieve the desired result.”

The recruit clenches his fists and shifts his weight. His feet are itching, and he thinks of only removing his shoes. He stays still, his every nerve screams for relief. She considers scratching it for him—ridiculous, right? The queen of the world is fussing over a recruit’s itchy foot. But then again, didn’t Yeshua wash feet too?

She uses this opportunity to examine Gavriel through the recruit's eyes, watching his demeanor for signs of anything unusual. She looks into his eyes. They are as challenging as the bio swords and 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. It’s another day on the job. It’s hard to tell what he could be thinking by looking into his eyes. Should she breach his mentat now? Would he be preoccupied enough not to notice? She hesitates and wonders if it’s necessary. Gavriel has been with Levi since the beginning, a devoted husband for hundreds of years. Can *we still trust him?*

“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 it.” A staff forms in Gavriel’s hands.

“Now it’s your turn.”

Dipti mirrors the recruit's indecision as their shared mind reveals his turmoil. Distracted by thoughts of his family and the weight of expectations, he struggles to synchronize with his mentat. While others effortlessly form their weapons, his remains incomplete.

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. Please 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 plunges into Gavriel’s mind.

Her presence is 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 sense her. Gavriel’s thoughts sharpen into focus: his lesson plan, the exact words he’s about to speak. He imagines himself holding a throwing knife fashioned from his flesh, glowing with the heat of his soul, its frozen mid-flight, as he ponders the beauty of its trajectory. He imagines nanobots swirling 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—your essence, your life. Lose it, and you lose yourself.”

*Gavriel, you’re irreplaceable; 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 onto 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. For a moment, grief crushes him, but Gavriel endures, his faith in the Lord unshaken.

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. He responds in turn, placing his hand gently on her cheek, wiping away her tears of joy with his thumb.

The memories flicker like glowing embers, coming and going. As one becomes irrelevant to her mission, they vanish in a puff of smoke, dissolving into nothing. 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 in her skull. Gavriel’s mind is vast and 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 approaching something. The smoky haze of his memories begins to part, and a scene reveals itself—Martha and Gavriel are arguing. Their voices are muffled, distorted, but the tension is unmistakable. Martha’s face is flush, her hands gesturing emphatically, while Gavriel’s jaw tightens with restrained fury.

He slams the door, the sharp echo of his anger marring the beauty of a life once filled with love and purpose.

*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 fuels his actions.

A robot charges, 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 are unsettling. *Is this rage from his fight with Martha? Or something deeper, something darker?*

As she probes further, she senses a deep, unmet longing in Gavriel’s heart. It’s raw and 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. Feminine legs extend from the bed, 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.

*Those are not Martha’s legs; they are the legs of an athlete, well sculpted, with rippled muscles beneath her skin.*

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. “Dipti, 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, she only has hearsay—images and impressions from her unauthorized journey into Gavriel’s mind. It was just her, Gavriel, and those mysterious legs.

*If he’s having an affair,* *I pray the woman isn’t married. If she is…* The thought sends a chill down her spine. 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 what could she say when he confronts her, because he will confront her?

*"Whose legs are those in your mind?"*

Its absurdity almost makes her laugh, but she shakes her head, pressing a hand to her temple. *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: The Age of Horus

Amiel sits across from his mother, the aroma of roasted lamb and spiced vegetables wafting up from his untouched plate. The rich scent turns his stomach, a cruel irony given how much he once savored her robot’s cooking. His appetite has vanished, consumed by the swirling storm of thoughts. 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 lofty ambitions.

*But this?*

Can she be trusted with him and 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 signs she might understand and approve. But the stakes feel higher now.

Aleister’s latest discovery weighs heavily on him—a mentat faker. Aleister uncovered a seller 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, and it's not even close. But his mother? She might.

None of this would have been possible without Aleister bypassing the restrictions his father has imposed. The more excellent 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 more excellent 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. She might meet the same fate as Uriel if she chooses the latter. Any tree that falls into his path will be cut down and cast into the fire.

“Mother, I need your help,” Amiel says, his anxious voice interrupting the quiet calm of their meal. “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 indifference grating against the storm of concern raging inside him. The silence stretches, amplifying his heartbeat in his ears.

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

“Eight hundred thousand shekels.”

She stops chewing mid-bite, her eyes widening as she leans back in her chair, her mouth 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 medley of shock and disbelief.

“Eight...hundred thousand...shekels,” Amiel repeats, his tone steady, trying to project an air of seriousness despite the absurdity of his request.

She smiles—a small, knowing smile that doesn’t quite belong in the moment. It lingers just a heartbeat too long, the kind that could mean anything: a mother’s quiet trust… or a gentle, dismissive nod to a child’s innocence. Amiel can’t tell which, and the uncertainty 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 she rises from her chair without a word.

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 paper and a pen. 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.

*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 in Gehenna, a place that teems with the undesirable people of Jerusalem. It is a labyrinth of desperation and danger, where whispers of betrayal carry farther than the echoes of footsteps. One wrong move, and even a palace prince might disappear without a trace. Also, a well-guarded wall 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 many years.

Sejal casts him one final glance before double-tapping her mentat. A soft chime reverberates in Amiel’s mind, signaling the successful transfer. One million luxom, more than he asked for, materializes in his neural interface, its digits glowing with an almost triumphant brilliance, like he’d just clinched the million-dollar question on a pre-Restoration game show. But this isn’t shekels or credits; it’s Luxom, one of the most elusive and untraceable cryptocurrencies 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 pre-restoration 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 burn out. 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 are 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, and he is 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."

Each bite is a struggle. He wants nothing more than to leave, but 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—others are waiting for you. But I must hold my tongue until the time is right. When that time comes, you shall know all.”

Amiel listens intently as he shovels food into his mouth, 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 voiced his desire to take his father’s throne, she gleefully supplied the knowledge, the tools, and the means to help him carve his path. She has been his guiding hand, his fiercest supporter.

*But he shall no longer lean on her*.

He has to let go to become the great warrior he is destined to be. 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.

….

Amiel now stands before Aleister’s glowing eye, his voice brimming with triumph as he pumps his fist after arriving from his mother’s quarters.

“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.

“While you moved among the living, I remained here... with the innocent. I want to show you something.”

Aleister’s bipedal humanoid frame glides toward the lambs in the far corner. His movements are smooth, almost graceful.

Yet his head remains unnervingly fixed on Amiel. The body moves in one direction, the glowing red eye in another. “I’ve been running some experiments that might help you one day. I’ve installed a mentat chip in one subject. I want you to guess which one.”

The pixels in Aleister’s eye begin to dance frantically like bees around a queen in a swarm. The lamb to the right becomes increasingly irate. Its bleating grows shrill, its eyes wild, rolling with primal fear—or rage. It paws at the glass floor, nostrils flaring, muscles twitching beneath its pristine white fleece.

Then it lunges.

With terrifying speed, it crashes into the other lamb, slamming it against the glass with a sickening *thud*. The peaceful one wails, stunned, but the attacker doesn't stop. It rears up and sinks its tiny teeth into the other’s neck, tearing away a chunk of flesh. Blood sprays across the sterile glass, a stark red against white wool and glowing walls.

Amiel flinches.

The once calm lamb thrashes, legs flailing in desperate arcs—but it's no use. The chip-lamb is relentless, possessed. It tears into its sibling again and again, pulling tufts of wool and ribbons of muscle free with each jerking bite. The floor becomes slick with gore and smeared feed, the scene a hellish parody of innocence.

Aleister watches silently, unmoved.

Amiel stares in frozen horror at the carnage, “What did you do?”

“I’ve altered the mentat chip to interfere with its neural pathways, creating intense aggression. I think you’ll need this someday.”

“How? That was scary and so awesome at the same time,” Amiel can’t resist letting out a small chuckle.

“It would create a wonderful diversion if used at the right time. I have something in mind when that day comes.”

Amiel looks at the gore and worries if someone might see this.

“Don’t worry, Lion, I’ll clean this fearsome little mess.”

After seeing such a gruesome sight, Amiel needs something to calm his nerves, so he sits at his piano and begins to play a light-hearted, gentle tune. Aleister stands next to the piano opening *The Cult of Horus: Rebirth Through Sacrifice,* and rapidly flips through its pages.

“Your mother, 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 ignite something profound within Amiel, like embers catching fire. His chest tightens, and a faint shiver runs down his spine. The Age of Horus. His mother sometimes whispers the term during her midnight meditations, her voice low and reverent, as though invoking prophecy. His heart quickens at the memory, and a small, almost involuntary grin tugs at the corner of his lips. The phrase feels alive, electric, stirring a heady mix of awe and anticipation that he struggles to contain. Amiel stops playing the piano and rises as if he has awoken from slumber.

Amiel is pacing back and forth, his hands fidgeting. “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 a sense of 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. I can't 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 since I found the mentat faker.”

Amiel blinks, stunned. “What?”

“It has been done before,” Aleister explains, his voice clinical. "Before the Great War unleashed a man-made plague that spread across the entire Earth, forcing individuals to live in isolation. Everyone feared transmitting the illness. 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 for those you love. Symptoms must be severe enough to force a lockdown. I cannot guarantee no one will die. That is my promise.”

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

Aleister’s monotone voice remains steady, as though his logic has a cold edge.

“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 tremble, his nails pressing into his palms as if to punish himself. Sacrifice. The word echoes in his mind, heavy with accusation. The cooks, the guards, the aides—faces he has known his entire life—flash before him, each a reminder of his complicity. 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, his teeth pressing hard into his lip to stifle the storm inside him. The taste of blood spreads across his tongue, but he doesn’t flinch. Is it worth the cost? The question claws at him, but Aleister’s words linger, heavy and unyielding. Destiny demands sacrifice.

A dreadful thought pierced his mind, and his eyes widened as reality strikes its blow. His voice drops to a trembling whisper, "What if my father finds out?"

“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.”

His resolve hardens like tempered steel. “Then do it. But promise me—my mother and Deborah must survive.”

Aleister’s servos hums again, like a faint mechanical sigh. “Of course, my Lion. I will safeguard those you hold dear. Trust me.”

A thin needle extends from Aleister’s mechanical hand, gleaming and precise. The faint whir of servos fills the silence as he adjusts his grip, the needle catching the dim light. “Now, I must inject you with something so you won’t get sick. It’s called a vaccine. I developed it using old scientific archives forgotten in the palace library.”

Amiel frowns, his brow furrowing. “A vaccine?” The word feels foreign on his tongue, like something from a history lesson he barely remembers. “I thought those weren’t needed anymore.”

Aleister’s eyes narrow, his voice low and urgent. “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. A cold fluid rushes from Aleister’s core, through the thin tube, and into his shoulder. The chill spreads, making his muscles clench reflexively.

“Magnificent, my lion,” Aleister says, retracting the needle with 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. Everyone will be sick tomorrow morning—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: Lockdown

“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. Her breath hitches as she raises the back of her hand to her forehead, checking for a fever that isn’t there. 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 were dismantled after the Great War, when sickness was conquered and vaccines were deemed unnecessary.

Dipti pulls Cohen aside, her voice urgent, “How is this happening? I’ve searched the neural network, and 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 checked for symptoms. 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 we 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 a mentat faker for sale in 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.”

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.”

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“Amiel, it has begun. They’re sending people to check on us. You must get ready. Lay in bed—the vaccine I gave you should fight the virus in your blood. It’s loaded with synthetic markers that’ll mimic the pathogen’s signature. They’ll see it in the scans, but it won’t harm you. I’ll raise your body temperature through your mentat. It’ll feel like fire, but it has to look real. I’ll act inefficient from here on out. They can’t suspect a thing.”

Aleister’s red pixilated eye turns blue as he picks up dirty clothes and places them in the 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 underneath his blanket and pretends he’s sleeping like Ferris. The door opens, and Dipti and a nurse enter his room, followed by a robotic assistant.

“Amiel?” Dipti studies him as he lies 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 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 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 remorseful 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 a fever. Are you sure you’re okay?” Queen Dipti can’t shake the feeling that something is wrong.

*Don’t worry, Lion. The temperature will pass; it's only a side effect of the vaccine. I’ll give you something when it’s time to escape.*

Amiel nods, his gaze flicking to the robotic assistant as it glides around the room. Aleister’s steady presence in his mind anchors him, orchestrating every word.

“Yeah, just feeling tired and hot, that’s all,” Amiel says, his voice measured.

*Yes, that’s good,* Aleister’s voice purrs in his mind. *Not too much Shakespeare, just enough to make them believe you’re sincere.*

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 assesses the predicament, his processors restrained to avoid alerting the nearby robot. Calculating swiftly, he commands a nanobot in Amiel's bloodstream to release a synthetic parasympathomimetic agent. The drug mimics the body's calming signals, instantly slowing Amiel's heartbeat and stabilizing his vitals without raising suspicion.

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 the holographic display and looks at Dipti, waiting for further orders.

Dipti is now slightly suspicious, but maybe it was a fluke. She looks around 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. Let's take his robot in for servicing.”

Amiel’s heart races. They can’t take Aleister—his years of work, his only lifeline, gone instantly. He could not 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 struggles to shake off the feeling that something is wrong, but Amiel’s apparent suffering overshadows her doubt. She moves hesitantly from the discarded clothing to his bedside, the situation's urgency not allowing her to investigate further.

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.”

*A methamphetamine injection via nanobots 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. *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 neatly returns it to 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 momentarily, 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 back 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 happening with your robot. Don’t worry; you’ll be fine. You’re a strong boy. Let me know if you need anything, and I’ll come immediately. My mind is always listening for you. " She pats his cheek and scruffles his hair before leaving him.

Her departure saddens Amiel. 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 now monitors 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. 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 moment. The people in Gehenna dressed differently from 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, the memory of the band’s electric declarations of annihilation echoing in his mind. “Old-world sages. Let’s see if their spirit guides me tonight.” His pulse pounds, fueled by the twin surges of heavy metal and meth coursing through his system.

“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, gives one last look in the mirror, and then steps away from the armoire into the hallway, closing the door quietly as he scans it.

# Chapter 8: The Escape

Aleister’s voice is a whisper, so soft it seems to coil inside Amiel’s mind rather than reach his ears. It’s deliberate, as if he’s trying not just to be quiet, but to leave space for Amiel’s thoughts—clear, undistracted, focused.

“Now, Lion, take a right and proceed straight down the hallway. Walk as quietly as possible. You’ll stop at the intersection ahead and wait while I calculate the patrol routes of the robots.”

Amiel moves swiftly but carefully, his footsteps barely audible against the polished marble floor—the stone arches above loom high, their silent grandeur both oppressive and awe-inspiring. Shafts of golden sunlight slant through the tall windows to his right, streaking across the floor in long, shifting light bars. Dust motes swirl in the beams, disturbed by his movement.

The perfect symmetry of the hallway—the rhythmic repetition of arches and windows—draws his gaze toward the distant end, creating an eerie illusion of infinity. But his mind remains locked on the present, the tension coiling in his chest. Any moment now, a robot could emerge from the far end; it’s cold, with an artificial gaze sweeping over him, reducing all his careful planning to nothing. The thought sends a ripple of unease down his spine, but he presses forward, every sense sharpened, every muscle poised for the next move.

He pauses at the intersection, 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, scanning for the faintest glimmer of reflective alloy.

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

Amiel waits, his breath shallow and controlled, as the seconds 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 echo in his ear, distant but distinct. The sounds grow louder, confirming his suspicion—they’re moving towards him.

"The voice cuts through the tension like a blade. 'Take a left, Amiel, and sprint through the next intersection. Do not look left or right; it’ll break your concentration. Keep your eyes forward. You’re going to draw attention, but that’s okay. If you walk, you’ll get caught. When I say go, you sprint with everything you've got. It’s the only way you’ll make it.'

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 sprints, 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 fly past, a shifting blur 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 turns 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 tucks into a roll, his lean frame absorbing the impact.

The world spins momentarily, 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 ahead, concealed in the lower servants’ 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: the left path is dark and unassuming, while the right is still illuminated by the palace’s dim, sterile light. He takes a deep breath and moves forward.

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

Amiel pivots into the darkened hallway, the muted hum of servos fading behind him. The air here is more remarkable, tinged with the faint metallic tang of machinery. The polished marble gives way to rough stone, and a stark utilitarian design replaces the palace's grandeur.

Ahead, a tall, ornate statue looms—his Father, one hand clutching a Torah scroll, the other gripping a long iron scepter. Its surface gleams faintly, polished by years of careful maintenance. Amiel has never bothered to visit this part of the palace. The servants' quarters and guard barracks lie in this direction. To him, these people hardly exist beyond fulfilling his every whim.

"There it is," Aleister whispers. "The base of the statue conceals the control mechanism. Find the hidden panel on the left side of the pedestal."

Amiel steps closer, his footfalls barely a whisper against the stone. He crouches at the statue’s base, fingers gliding over the calm surface. His eyes narrow, scanning for the slightest irregularity in the marble. Panic flickers at the edges of his mind—what if Aleister’s directions were wrong?

“To your left and up,” Aleister’s voice comes again, steady and confident.

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.

“Enter the code: 7-4-3-2. Quickly.”

Amiel begins to enter the code, but he hears the faint echo of voices from down the hall before he can. 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 is indifferent.

“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. That part of the greater neural network I've yet to hack, the encryption is still way beyond me, but I’m learning. You must hide… quickly.”

Amiel covers the control panel and scans his surroundings, his eyes darting to the shadows pooling along the hallway's edges. 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 as the voices draw near. His breathing slows, his body tense as he listens intently.

Two figures emerge into view, their voices growing clearer. Amiel peers through a small gap in the tapestry, his heart pounding.

The first man is tall and broad-shouldered, clad in a maintenance uniform. Beside him, a royal guard grips his sword bio-weapon, eyes sharp and scanning the corridor with 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 shirks away and hides his face behind the tapestry. He looks down, realizing his feet are still visible below the hem. He slowly sits in the alcove and pulls his feet inside.

The maintenance man crouches, looking underneath the tapestry, and 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 above palace sounds 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 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 here, but other dangers could lurk in these depths.”

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

“Hey Aleister, I’ve gone from prince to sewer rat.”

“Not true. You’re a lion trying to escape its cage. This will only make you stronger.”

Amiel keeps imagining the day when he will have the power of life and death over Uriel—this will be his reward, his light at the end of this 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 terrifying and disorienting, like being hurled down a 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 anything to grab onto, but the tunnel walls 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.

Suddenly, Amiel is launched from the slick slide into open air. His body twists uncontrollably, and his arms flail as a 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.

Above him, the ceiling arches in uneven layers of stone and rusted metal, a patchwork of ancient masonry and decayed infrastructure. Cracks splinter across the surface, where roots have wormed through, hanging like skeletal fingers dripping with moisture. Stalactites of mineral buildup cling to the edges, glistening faintly in the nanobot light. Pipes of varying sizes snake across the ceiling, some corroded and leaking, sending rhythmic drips into the water below. Shadows shift in the dim glow, making the overhead expanse feel oppressively low, as if the weight of the city above might collapse at any moment.

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.

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.

“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 it’s still intact, it’ll be necessary soon.”

"I don’t care about that. I want out of this tunnel. How much longer?" Amiel kicks harder, propelling himself forward.

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

“I’m already exhausted! There’s no way I can swim that far," Amiel snaps, his voice trembling with fatigue and fear.

The silence from Aleister 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," Aleister’s calm and unfeeling voice rang in his ears. At least you died trying. You followed your heart and perished chasing your dream."

Amiel’s thoughts spiral. What lay beyond death? Would he face the God his Father revered, or was it all illusion? He recalled hours in the temple, listening to tales of faith—yet doubt always lingered. Weren’t miracles just tricks of technology? Even the temple’s flowing fountains felt more like relics of Roman engineering than acts of 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. He manages one last desperate kick, breaking through to the surface for a gasp of air, but it is too late. His strength is gone. The inevitable claims him, and he lets himself sink, holding his breath for as long as possible.

With his eyes open, he sees that the sewer has turned into a river, its waters winding through the tunnel like a hidden vein beneath the palace. Pale catfish dart around him, their whiskered mouths searching blindly in the murk. Strands of riverweed drift in the current, brushing against him like grasping fingers. The tunnel walls, slick with moisture, are coated in patches of algae that cling stubbornly to the stone. Above, faint shafts of light filter through unseen cracks and grates, casting flickering patterns on the water’s surface.

He is about to become part of the palace’s refuse, returning to the earth like discarded matter. His final thoughts are 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.

His greatest regret was 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 holds 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 mainly lived 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, “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 air is stale, 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 from which he is being pulled.

“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.

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 and 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 free it 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, utterly 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.

“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 9: Gehenna

Amiel breathes heavily, his fists clenching as his soaked clothes cling to his skin. Aleister’s voice cuts through the silence, calm yet insistent.

"Come now. We must meet our contact soon. Your shirt will activate a hologram to mask your identity. If you’re spotted, the palace will be alerted."

A faint hum vibrates against his chest. The holographic disguise flickers to life, a wavering projection draping over him like a second skin. But the illusion is unstable—its edges shimmer and blur, barely holding its form. Amiel glances down, uneasy.

Still dripping, he trudges away from the embankment, water pooling in his wake. Each step feels heavier than the last as he climbs toward the street above. The weak evening light offers no warmth; the sun is sinking, and the cold gnaws at his damp clothes, burrowing into his skin.

In the distance, the massive wall looms—an unyielding divide between Gehenna and the rest of Jerusalem. The wall's shadow swallows the slums below, while the last remnants of sunlight linger on the city beyond—a cruel contrast etched in stone and light.

The air is thick with the stench of filth and rot, and the pavement is choked with refuse. Acrid smoke curls from burn barrels, where clusters of figures huddle for warmth. Towering buildings rise like skeletal remains, their broken windows and hollowed-out floors offering little shelter.

Above, hover ships weave between the ruins, their engines humming and whirring like restless insects. Their dingy metallic hulls barely catch the fading 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 you must avoid direct light—your hologram won’t hold up under scrutiny.”

Amiel nods softly, swallowing his nerves as he steps into the street. The chaos engulfs him whole. Men huddle around rusted barrels, their faces wrapped in filthy rags against the choking stench. The roads of Gehenna are a different world—feral, unpredictable. Unlike Jerusalem, where order reigns and every step is secure, this place pulses with desperation. And he loves it.

Every stride through its twisted landscape feels like shedding a layer of his old self. Here, he can be the lion he was meant to become. Maybe he was meant to bring Gehenna to Jerusalem.

A man stirs as Amiel passes. His face is a grotesque fusion of metal and flesh, a mechanical arm glinting under the flickering neon haze, his tattered coat hanging loose over a frame worn thin by hardship. Amiel tenses—such an abomination would be unthinkable in Jerusalem. Here, it's just another piece of the ruin.

The man’s cybernetic eye whirs, locking onto Amiel’s flickering form. “That hologram won’t fool anyone. Old tech—I see right through you,” he mutters, voice rough as shattered glass. He groans, rubbing his temples, eyes struggling to focus.

Amiel freezes in shock. His projection wavers, betraying his heartbeat hammering in his chest. Overhead, a sputtering holographic ad distorts into a grotesque smile before dissolving into static.

“What have you done, Aleister?”

“Sorry, Lion. This old tech was all the palace had. No one uses holograms to cover their identity, but I foresaw this. Ask this man if he can help us with an upgrade.”

The old man’s gaze drifts to his surroundings, taking in the filth-streaked streets, the gutter fires, the looming shadows. The realization dawns slowly. His breathing hitches.

“Shit…” He pushes himself upright, swaying slightly. “How the fuck did I end up out here?” He rubs his face, his laugh brittle and jagged. “Guess I drank too much.”

The ragged man narrows his good eye, “You’re not from around here, are you?” His tone scrapes like a blade on metal. “Just a scared little kid playing dress-up. Let me guess—you ran away from home.”

Amiel pivots, the man’s observations unsettling, but he keeps his cool. “That’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. " You know who can update my tech? I can make it worth your while.”

The man sneers, swatting lazily at a fly. “I can do it, kid, *ze ya'aleh lekha beyoker[[4]](#footnote-4)1*.”

“How much?”

“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 who’ll do it for less.”

Amiel hesitates before nodding. “Fine. But no funny business.”

The man groans, holding his head like it's hammering with a hangover, 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 steps in reluctantly, the dim light casting uneasy shadows across the room. The air is thick with the acrid scent of oil and burnt circuits, clinging to his throat like smoke. Half-assembled gadgets litter the walls, their exposed wiring tangled like veins, while loose cables dangle from the ceiling like cobwebs.

A single bulb flickers overhead, its sputtering glow distorting the man’s shadow, stretching it unnaturally along the walls—a shifting, monstrous silhouette.

“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 robotic grip tightens around Amiel’s wrists like iron clamps.

“Got you now, boy,” the man growls. “You’re worth a fortune to the right people. I know who you are. Don’t bother struggling.”

He lifts Amiel, 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 training with his brother flood back.

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

The robotic arm of the man malfunctions, releasing Amiel from his grasp.

The old man grabs his robotic arm, “What the fuck is happening?”

Amiel pivots, his shirt falls, 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. He sees a metal rod lying on a shelf in the corner of his eye. 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. It clatters to the floor.

Amiel doesn’t hesitate before the man can recover. 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 cast swirling shadows, amplifying the chaos. He’s now kneeling.

“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 side of his knee. A sharp crack fills the air as the man’s leg buckles beneath him. He crumples with a pained grunt, his breath coming in shallow gasps.

“Good. You should bend the knee—I am your prince.”

The man coughs, spitting out a bitter laugh. “The Restoration never reached here. You can’t kill me, boy. You don’t know sin. You don’t know suffering. But I do… and I can kill you.”

His words hang in the air, heavy with defiance.

Aleister’s voice hums in Amiel’s mind, calm, unwavering. “Amiel, you must kill him. He’s seen us.”

Amiel hesitates. “But my hologram—he never updated it.”

“I can do it for you. Just let me access his machine.”

Amiel’s fingers tighten into fists—his pulse pounds in his ears. “You’re right… He’s seen us. I have to kill him.”

Doubt lingers, but he forces it down, steeling himself for the bloody task ahead.

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

"Once you take this path, boy, there's no turning back," the old man says, his voice meek as he raises a trembling hand, bracing for the blow.

"Lion cubs always start with the weak, preparing for the stronger kill. Do it, Amiel." Aleister's voice seethes.

For a second, Amiel hesitates. This isn’t how he imagined it. He has his eyes set on Uriel, the actual 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 lying 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. So you have to be spot on with the insertion, or you can end up killing this man anyway.”

Amiel’s heart pounds as he grips the syringe, his gaze darting around the cluttered room for something he can use. The injured but still defiant old man 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 quickly grabs it, ignoring the old man’s attempts to crawl further away.

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

“Of course, lion,” Aleister replies mechanically. “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 and kicks his legs, 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 the man’s body shudder 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 is satisfied. “His memories of tonight are gone. I’ve also registered his mentat in our neural network. If he has any recollection of you, I’ll know. I’ll make sure he doesn’t live to tell a soul.”

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?”

“Follow my words, Amiel. You’ll find this humorous,” Aleister’s cold, calculating voice beckons him.

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 about 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 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, desperate. “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 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 comes in shallow, panicked gasps as Amiel disappears into the shadows of Gehenna.

Outside, the air feels colder and 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 and a readiness to press on into the unknown, with a sense that he would be capable of handling anything this cruel place could throw at him—or at least he thought so.

“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 a promise 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 and pauses 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 that Amiel doesn’t understand.

Amiel’s heart pounds as he steps onto the cracked pavement, glass crunching beneath his boots. Not since the night he asked Deborah to dance at a royal ball has he felt this dread. The sign reads “The Iron Jackal” in bold, jagged letters. Several of them 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, and 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 and other debris to the bar entrance. 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,” the voice deep and uninviting.

He looks to the right, and a small, dimly lit scanner is embedded in the wall beside the door, blinking a pale red light through a cracked case.

Amiel puts his hand hesitantly above the scanner and braces for the consequences.

“Don’t worry, lion. Everyone who 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 fingers twitch at his sides. A flicker of unease crosses his face before he forces a sly smile.

“My name is Aleister; 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 street, mixing with the distant thrum of bass growing 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.

As he walks in, an overwhelming pungent mix of burnt synth leaf, spiced liquor, and sweat hits Amiel’s senses. 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 pulses through him, a living entity that bypasses thought and speaks directly to his soul. It coils around his mind, an intoxicating rhythm urging him to surrender, to dissolve into the chaos. He plants his feet and tries to stay grounded, his focus sharp.

But the crowd is a swirling blur of flesh, holograms, and machinery, the lines between real and artificial fracturing. Some figures collide with him like solid walls, jolting him back to himself. Others pass through him, their flickering forms dissolving into his projected persona, distorting him in ways that make his stomach lurch. His grip on reality wavers.

Then, the music shifts, hitting some primal frequency that tugs at something deep within him. His resolve thins, unraveling thread by thread. He isn’t just watching anymore—he’s inside it, part of it.

The urge to dance eclipses reason, not a choice but a compulsion woven into the music. The rhythm seizes him, his movements fluid and instinctive—like muscle memory from a life he never lived. His purpose drifts to the edges of his mind, a distant whisper drowned beneath the tidal wave of sensation. His feet betray him, carrying him forward without consent, and before he knows it, he’s moving—sharp, rhythmic, almost absurd—like an old-world video he once saw of MC Hammer.

A robotic bartender glides past, its four arms balancing trays of luminous drinks. Without thinking, Amiel reaches—his fingers closing around a glass of something bright and iridescent. He lifts it high, mirroring the flickering projection of his head. The liquid sloshes as he tilts it back, missing his mouth at first, cold streaks soaking his collar. But then he adjusts, the sharp, fruity concoction burning its way down. The bitter aftertaste bites, but he doesn’t flinch.

"Big mistake, Lion, Aleister purrs in his mind. If they were watching, they’ll know you’re using a hologram. ONLY do what I tell you to."

Amiel’s eyes dart nervously around the crowded dance floor as he sets the glass on the robot’s tray. 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 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 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.

*He was watching, will he know I’m using a hologram?*

His heart quickens as he pushes through the thrumming crowd, the noise fading with each step. He locks eyes with the man, scanning his face for recognition—for any sign that this could be Arnon. But the man’s gaze is unfocused, his expression hazy, as if dulled by one drink too many—or perhaps by the thick haze of synthetic weed clinging to the air, curling over the restless, grinding throng.

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 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 ripple like veins under the light. It is deceptively simple yet brimming with possibility. A wave of anticipation courses through him. He had risked everything for this device—a tool that could flawlessly mimic another’s mental state, 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 instantly breaking.

“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. The 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? He can’t return through the sewers. What would he do if he spent it all? He might have to pay someone to help him return. 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. He'd press for more if the man senses even a hint of it.

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 him 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 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 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 correct 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 card 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 silently. The smoke curls around his face like a mocking veil, obscuring his expression enough to unsettle.

“That’s bold,” Arnon says, 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 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! He knows I’m using a hologram!*

Amiel’s heart skips a beat but 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 deliberately. The sight makes Amiel feel like he’s 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.

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 instincts.

Maybe Arnon doesn’t know who he 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 is 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 will 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—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 only 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. Please 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, and a red light in its core begins to blink.

Amiel stalls while I mimic his mentor. 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 Arnon would lunge at him at any moment.

Amiel pulls out of his pocket a sleek credit chip and dangles it in the air before putting it on the table next to the faker. 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. He simultaneously snatches the fake and the credit chip with his left hand. Darkness swallows the room as the power cuts. Chaos erupts. Voices shout in frustration as the music stops, and Amiel disappears into the crowd in the confusion.

“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 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 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 more profoundly 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. He puts it in his pocket; it could break if things get crazy. 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. He tells himself one more push, 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 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 10: The Wisdom of Kings

Prince Levi reclines against the ornate headboard of his bed, his golden robes crumpled and slightly askew. A half-eaten pudding bowl 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[[5]](#footnote-5)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 continues, I’ll commission the scientists to reinvent PlayStation. Otherwise, I might 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, 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 laughs, shaking his head. "I need you healthy. Otherwise, who’d take care of me? Without you, I’d have nothing but my sighs for company."

As he speaks, his thoughts drift elsewhere. A vivid and urgent report flickers through his mind: 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, searching for any clue or inconsistency.

The figure pours a drink into their hologram. Odd. Some 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 this disturbing report.

“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 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 rare chalice. It was said that whoever drank from the chalice would obtain the wisdom of all the kings who had ever ruled the land. He would become exceedingly wise and thus worthy to claim the throne. But there was one caveat: the chalice could only be claimed by a prince pure of heart.

The prince mourned, for he knew his heart was not pure. Desperate, he made a pact with an evil wizard who promised him the illusion of virtue in exchange for the throne. Blinded by ambition, the prince accepted.

The path to the treasure was fraught with peril. The prince had to pass through three trials: truth, reflection, and despair. Only then could he claim the chalice.

When he reached the first trial, the guardian spirit of truth asked him:

“Tell me the truth — do you possess the virtue to rule the land?”

“Yes. My heart is pure,” the prince replied. An uncertain quiver threatened his voice, but the wizard’s spell caught it mid-air, reshaping the faltering tone into one of steadfast confidence. Thus, his lie succeeded.

Next, he came to the second spirit, who hovered over a pond whose waters were crystal clear — like the meltwater of the Himalayas, untouched and eternal.

The spirit of reflection pointed toward the waters. “Stand before them, young prince, and tell me what you see. Your reflection will mirror the contents of your heart — and show me what I must see.”

The prince approached reluctantly, dread clinging to his chest like iron chains. At first, the waters showed him as he appeared — comely, regal, every feature unmarred. But slowly, the image twisted. His skin sagged. His eyes turned red, glowing like bloodied lanterns. His smile curled with cruelty. And beneath it all, a heart blackened by unchecked ambition pulsed faintly beneath his robes.

The prince was aghast. He longed to look away, but fear held him — fear that if he turned, the spirit would see the lie unravel.

Far away, hidden in a shadow between worlds, the wizard watched through a silver mirror. He saw the illusion faltering. He could not purify the prince’s heart — but he could deceive the waters.

Muttering an ancient incantation, the wizard reached through the veil and whispered to the reflection.

The waters froze. Then shimmered. The hideous face flickered, smoothed, and stilled — like ripples settling after a thrown stone. The prince now appeared noble again, his image hollow yet flawless.

The spirit of reflection drifted closer, studying the surface.

“You are not only beautiful on the outside,” the spirit said at last, “but within as well. You may proceed.”

He passed beyond the waters, his reflection trailing behind like a shadow unsure of its master. The third trial awaited.

The air grew cold. Not the cold of night, but of something deeper — the chill of forgotten grief. The final guardian, cloaked in robes of ash and wind, emerged from a shrouded archway and spoke:

“You have faced truth, and seen yourself reflected. Now you must drink from the well of despair. None may reach the chalice without passing through sorrow.”

A stone basin rose before him, filled with black water that did not ripple. The spirit gestured. “Drink. Let it show you what you fear most. Let it break you, or let it prove you.”

The prince hesitated. His hands trembled.

Again, the wizard watched from afar, lips moving swiftly. This magic was more delicate — it could not erase despair, only dull its blade. He wove the spell like a cloak around the prince’s mind, numbing memory, softening fear, muffling conscience.

The prince drank.

At once he was plunged into a vision — the castle he dreamed of ruling lay in ruin, his people weeping in the streets, his own name cursed by children. A mirror cracked before him, and behind the glass he saw himself crowned, alone on a throne made of bone. His father in chains.

His breath caught in his throat. A flicker of doubt, real and raw, broke through the wizard’s veil.

But then — a whisper, smooth as oil: *"This is not your fate. This is a lie. Remember the throne. Remember the chalice.”*

The vision dissolved.

The spirit, watching, seemed puzzled. “You did not cry. You did not fall. You walked through your sorrow as though it were mist and were not overwhelmed by despair.”

“I have endured worse,” the prince lied, his voice distant.

The spirit gave a slow, reluctant nod. “Then pass.”

Finally, he reached the treasure: a golden chalice, which he said held the wisdom of kings. But the chalice trembled in his grasp, it’s wisdom 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… 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, 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 fill his flask with his blood and deliver it to his son. He 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 contemplates, "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 sips Prince Levi’s tea, “No, the Prince rejects all wisdom; he throws out the king’s blood as something unholy. He had found a *new* wisdom, one not bound in sacrifice.” Then a king from a distant land, who has gathered all the refugees that have fled the prince’s kingdom, liberates the land from the oppressive hand of the wizard. He executes them both, the slave and the master.”

….

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 their entrance. Shadows pool in the tight space, thick and oppressive, the darkness that swallows everything whole. It beckons him, promising refuge, its cold embrace oddly comforting.

*Perfect*, *what better place to lose them than in the darkest dark*?

Amiel darts toward the alley with a sharp turn, but his momentum betrays him. His feet skid on loose gravel, and he stumbles, nearly crashing. 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 into 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 himself and his pursuers.

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 more profoundly 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 more profoundly 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 and relentlessness. Hiding will only delay the inevitable. The soft thud of their steps draws closer. He has to act.

*I have to outthink them and outmaneuver them.*

His gaze locks onto a delivery drone docked at an automated restocking station embedded into the wall. Their sleek forms gleam faintly in the single neon light above it—he can use this. It’s a risky gamble, but a chance nonetheless. He’ll need time to access the system with his mentat and use it to pull himself upwards to the roof.

Amiel is about to move when Aleister’s voice crackles in his earpiece, stopping him cold. “Stay still, lion. I’ll distract them. Lucky for you, these ornodrones have absolutely no security protocols.”

The quiet of the alley shatters as thousands of frantic flapping sounds erupt, like a swarm of enraged insects descending in chaos. Farmers rely on ornodrones to sow seeds and harvest crops without disturbing the soil, but here, in the choking tension of the city, they are no longer tools of agriculture—they are weapons of disruption. The tiny drones buzz and dart, their minuscule, flapping wings striking the Mossad agents like a living storm.

Amiel crouches low, his pulse thundering in his ears. The ornodrones have bought him the precious distraction he needs. The larger Mossad agent thrashes wildly, shouting, “Get these fucking things off me!”

Arnon, the smaller but more lethal of the two, materializes his bio-weapon. He swings furiously, the weapon slicing through the air in violent arcs as he attempts to cut down the darting drones. But the ornodrones are fast—too fast. Each the size of a human hand, they bobble and weave unpredictably. His strikes connect with only a few, leaving the swarm intact and relentless.

Amiel sees his opening. Like a coiled spring, he launches forward, every muscle in his body straining with the effort. He moves swiftly, reaching the docking station, his fingers flying across the touch interface of the nearest drone. The system protests with a faint beep, but Aleister’s voice buzzes in his ear, steady and confident. “I’ve overridden their protocols. Just hold on tight.”

The agents are still distracted, their shouts rising above the drones' mechanical hum. The machines batter them, snagging at their clothes and grazing their faces. The larger agent joins Arnon with his bio-weapon, swinging wildly to fend off the relentless assault of the ornodrones.

Amiel seizes the moment. He activates the drone and leaps, his fingers locking onto the cold metal as the device whirs to life, lifting him toward the roof.

Arnon catches the movement, his sharp eyes locking onto Amiel as he rises above the neon glow. He grabs his partner’s shoulder, jerking him out of his frantic defense. “There!” he barks, pointing to the ascending figure. Both men pivot, their focus snapping away from the drones, their predatory instincts honed.

They track Amiel’s ascent with precision, raising their hands in unison. In a synchronized move, they activate their dart shockers, the soft hum of their weapons lost in the chaos. Poisonous darts cut through the air, glinting faintly in the neon light as they streak toward Amiel—a lethal barrage aimed with ruthless intent.

The projectiles zip through the air, whispers of death closing the gap in seconds. But just as the first dart is about to strike, a rogue ornodrone flutters into its path, obliviously drawn into the line of fire. Instead, the dart pierces the drone, spiraling to the ground in a lifeless heap of metal and flickering lights.

Arnon snarls in frustration, his lips curling in a feral sneer. He fires again, his movements sharp and furious, while his partner follows suit, unleashing a volley of projectiles in rapid succession.

Amiel, fully aware of the threat, activates his nanobot shield. A shimmering barrier of microscopic bots materializes around him, pulsating like a living force field. Some nanobots disintegrate into powdery smoke upon impact, while others successfully deflect the poisonous projectiles. Their collisions erupt in brief, fiery sparks that scorch the nearby building.

“He has a fucking nanobot shield!” Arnon spits, his voice sharp with anger.

Amiel doesn’t look back. Adrenaline courses through him, propelling him upward as the drone lifts him toward the roof. Above him lie the rooftops, the promise of escape; below, chaos reigns as the ornodrones continue their relentless assault.

But Arnon isn’t done. With a sharp motion, he materializes a grappling hook from his bio-weapon, the metal gleaming faintly in the dark alley. “Give me a hand,” he growls at his partner. “We’ll bring him down together.”

The larger agent nods, his expression grim and focused. His bio-weapon ripples and reshapes, transforming into a sturdy rope with fluid precision. Arnon takes the rope, his fingers deftly securing it to the hook as he mutters, “Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast,” a mantra to steady his nerves. Swinging the grappling hook above his head, he channels every ounce of focus into the motion.

With the aid of his mentat, Arnon calculates the perfect trajectory, releasing the hook at just the right moment. It arcs gracefully through the air, cutting a clean path toward Amiel’s ascending drone. Both agents hold their breath, the tension tangible as they watch the hook’s flight.

Amiel is so close to salvation—the rooftop ledge just within reach. His fingers stretch toward the smooth, metallic surface, but his body teeters on the edge of exhaustion. He forces his gaze forward, ignoring the dizzying drop below, willing his muscles to push further. His fingertips graze the ledge, but the drone jerks violently before he can secure a firm grip.

The grappling hook strikes true, latching onto the drone. The rope tightens abruptly, and the agents' weight strains against the machine's ascent.

“Got him,” Arnon mutters, his voice steady but fierce, his grip unyielding as he pulls against the rope.

The drone bucks wildly, veering off course under the relentless pull of the grappling hook. Amiel’s grip tightens until his knuckles turn white, his breath coming in panicked gasps as the shimmering shield of nanobots around him flickers erratically under the strain. Below, the Mossad agents pull with everything they have, their synchronized strength dragging the drone into a deadly arc toward the building.

Amiel’s heart pounds as the towering structure's glass windows rush toward him, the neon city lights reflecting off the surface in fractured, chaotic patterns. The world seems to slow, the roar of the wind and the drone’s sputtering thrusters drowning out all other sound.

He has seconds—less, maybe—to act.

“Aleister!” he shouts, his voice raw with desperation. “They’re forcing it into the building!”

“No shit,” Aleister snaps. “Brace yourself! I’ll try to soften the impact!”

The drone jerks violently as the agents give one final, brutal yank on the rope. Amiel has no choice. He releases his grip at the last possible second, his body hurtling through the air just as the drone smashes into the glass with a deafening explosion.

Shards erupt like a glittering storm, spinning and slicing through the air. Amiel twists mid-fall, adjusting his body to protect the mentat faker. His nanobot shield absorbs the brunt of the razor-sharp fragments. He crashes through the shattered window, the impact slamming him into the floor with bone-jarring force.

Pain explodes through his body. His hand cups the mentat faker as he rolls across the debris-littered floor. Sharp fragments of glass bite into his skin despite the protective nanobots covering his body. His palm leaves a crimson streak on the ground as he pushes himself up, gasping for air.

Behind him, the drone teeters on the window frame, its once-sleek body mangled and sparking. It groans under its weight, metal creaking as it shifts within the building’s skeletal remains. Snarled cables stretch taut—veins pulled to their limit—until, with a piercing snap, they give way. The drone plunges from the shattered frame into the waiting darkness below.

“Lion, how are you?” Aleister’s voice crackles in his mind, “Your vital signs are all over the place.”

“I can’t believe I’m alive,” Amiel mutters, staggering to his feet. He puts the mentat faker back into his pocket. Blood trickles down his temple, warm and sticky, stinging as it mixes with the grime on his face. Each breath burns his lungs, raw and ragged from the dust. He glances at the shattered window, the gaping hole in the wall a brutal reminder of how close he came to death.

He brushes his fingers over his temple and freezes—something sharp digs into his skin. His breath hitches as he pinches the tiny shard of glass embedded just above his brow, wincing as he tugs it free.

A sharp sting pulls his focus to his palm. Another shard, smaller but equally vicious, is lodged in the soft flesh. He grits his teeth, the pain biting as he pulls it out. Blood wells instantly, warm and slick, smearing as he tries to wipe it on his pants.

Gritting his teeth, he rips a strip from his Megadeth shirt. The hologram embedded in the ultralight circuitry flickers before deactivating entirely.

“Fuck!” he curses under his breath, realizing his mistake. His only thought had been to stop the bleeding.

He wraps a strip of fabric tightly around his hand, the dark cotton soaking through. The pressure helps, dulling the worst sting, but the pain doesn’t fade. He rips another strip from his ruined shirt, his fingers trembling, and wraps it around his head.

Leaning against a crumbling wall, he tries to steady his breathing, his mind racing. How would he get back to the palace without raising the alarm? And if he did return without raising the alarm, how would he explain his present condition? The Mossad agents—he knew they would find him now. He might as well surrender himself. Then he would have to face his father’s wrath. He’d never seen sorrow or anger mark his dad’s face, but he can almost imagine it now.

His mission, already precarious, feels as shattered as the glass at his feet.

Amiel’s chest tightens. He knows the Mossad agents won’t be far behind, but hopes to escape. Aleister always pulls him through in the end, and somewhere deep down inside, he feels they’ll be able to outwit them. Gritting his teeth, he forces himself to move, his steps uneven and faltering as he limps deeper into the shadowy interior of the building. Each breath feels like fire, sharp and bumpy, his body protesting with every step.

The wind whips through the broken exterior, chilling him and carrying the acrid scent of smoke and dust. Most of the windows in this dilapidated building are already shattered, their jagged remnants glittering faintly in the dim light. Broken furniture litters the space—splintered desks and overturned chairs scattered like the remnants of a forgotten war.

Amiel’s eyes dart around, his heart hammering against his ribs. This must’ve been office space once, long before Gehenna became what it is now—a grim holding pen for the undesirables of Jerusalem, those who refused to bow to the theocratic rule of his Father.

He frantically searches for an exit, his vision blurred in the suffocating darkness. His nanobots could light the way, but most were destroyed in his crash through the window. The few that remain cast faint, flickering glows, revealing only scattered patches of the ground amidst the shadows.

He struggles to understand why his Father created such a dreadful place to confine those who refused to submit to his rule. Weren’t all people inherently good? Weren’t all lives worth cherishing? But his Father thought otherwise. He had always taught the doctrine of original sin—that all were born sinful, and those who didn’t repent were cast into hell. This place felt like a miniature version of that hell.

Maybe that’s why he belongs here. He never repented.

A faint glow of a single purple flame catches his attention at the far end of the cavernous room, about fifty meters away. The flame flickers gently, a strange beacon in the oppressive gloom, drawing him toward it like a soul to a body. The Mossad agents must be closing in now. He has to go! But he can’t, the flame beckons him.

A chill creeps down Amiel’s spine, and the hair on the back of his neck stands on end. His steps falter as his eyes adjust to the murky surroundings. Shapes begin to emerge from the shadows—human shapes.

He freezes.

The faint outlines of figures emerge, bodies bowed low with faces pressed to the ground. Their arms stretch forward in reverence, postures unnervingly still. Amiel’s pulse quickens as he realizes he is surrounded.

A low, rhythmic murmur fills the room, a haunting chant that resonates through the air like an incantation:

“Oh, chosen one, who will set us free from the tyranny of the righteous one? You, dark one, will break their chains and throw off their shackles. Let this flame be a beacon.”

Amiel steps back cautiously, his eyes darting between the prostrate figures. The chant swells, its cadence growing louder, a dissonant symphony reverberating in his chest. A foreign and oppressive energy pulses in the room, as if the space is alive with something ancient and powerful.

His instincts scream for him to flee, but his body defies him, frozen in the grip of a force he cannot understand. Swallowing hard, he takes a hesitant step forward, closer to the flickering purple flame that commands the center of the room.

The figures rise slowly, their movements deliberate, almost ritualistic. The flame’s light dances across their tattered robes and obscured faces, casting jagged shadows that make them appear otherworldly. Their eyes gleam with an unsettling intensity—a mix of adoration and fervor that sends a chill down Amiel’s spine.

As hands reach for him, their touch is imbued with a raw, unsettling longing. Amiel recoils, his pulse thundering, as their devotion becomes tangible in a way that terrifies him. One figure steps forward, her face half-concealed beneath a frayed hood. Her hand grazes his arm, sending a tingle through his skin; her whisper, the hiss of a serpent, yet melodic as a harpy's song, ensnaring his ears in an enthralling vice.

“Chosen one,” she breathes, the words thick with longing, her entire being carrying them to his ears, “We have awaited your coming. You are the dark shepherd, destined to lead us into the age of Horus, the time of liberation. Allow us to serve you. Let us become your priestesses. The Dark Lord has seen your plight and led us here to deliver you.”

Amiel stiffens as her fingers brush his skin, his body alight with sensations he has never known. No one had ever touched him like this before. The rush of intimacy stirs an intoxicating and alien longing, a yearning he cannot fully comprehend. Guilt rises in his chest, sharp and suffocating, as his father’s teachings echo in his mind—admonitions about sexual purity and the sanctity of marriage. But here, in this charged and otherworldly space, those lessons feel distant, like a faint memory obscured by the haze of the present.

Then, smooth and insidious, Aleister's voice cuts through his inner turmoil. “Yes, lion. It seems you’ve found your pride. Indulge with them. Draw strength from their sexual magick, usher in the Age of Horus.”

A foreign memory strikes Amiel—Deborah. She shouldn’t be here, but she is; her face, her laugh, the girl he had always imagined as his wife. The one he thought would share his first intimate moment. But Aleister is relentless, threading temptation into the cracks of his resolve. “Lion, you must practice before you play. Take your priestesses. Build your stamina. Deborah will worship you as the sex god you’re destined to become.”

Amiel’s heart pounds as he teeters on the edge of a monumental and irreversible decision. The atmosphere hums with electric energy, and the air is expectation-heavy. His primal instincts urge him to flee, yet the young woman’s gaze, illuminated faintly by the flickering purple flame, holds him captive. It is as though invisible chains bind him to this place, to her.

Their desire swells, hands move against him with deliberate intent, unbuttoning his pants, lifting his shirt. And then, something inside him breaks—not with a sound, but with a hush. He surrenders. Deborah becomes a memory too pure for this place, dissolving like fog under the flame’s heat. Each hand, each mouth, each whisper rewrites the story of who he is and who he will be. Each touch sends his mind spinning further into the abyss. The warmth of their bodies presses against him, drawing him deeper into this strange, seductive ritual.

A thunderous slam echoes from the outer door, shattering the moment. The sharp sound jolts Amiel’s senses, adrenaline surging as survival instincts take over. He ducks instinctively, yanking his shirt and fumbling to button his pants.

The women react with lightning speed, their bodies shifting in unison as if driven by a single mind. Their graceful movements obscure him from view, their forms poised like a protective shield between him and the source of the intrusion.

“Chosen one, stay hidden,” the lead woman whispers, her voice urgent yet steady.

Amiel crouches low, his pulse thundering in his ears. The tension in the room is palpable.

Another blow, and the twin doors held closed by a metal rod break open. The air from the outside rushes into the room, putting out the purple flame and causing a deep darkness to descend upon it.

*The Mossad agents are here.*

# Chapter 11: Military Industrial Complex

Saul slams his fist on the table, the sharp crack echoing through the parlor. A half-empty glass rattles, threatening to tip over, but he doesn’t notice. “I’m the laughingstock of the kingdom!” His voice is raw, trembling with anger.

His gaze snaps to the family portrait above the fireplace. His grandfather's stern visage stares back at him, his dark eyes painted with such realism that they almost seem alive. The man’s proud, commanding posture is a silent rebuke, his expression a frozen reminder of the legacy Saul feels slipping through his fingers.

Samuel mocks him, a smirk playing on his lips. “Come on, don’t diminish your achievement. It wasn’t just the kingdom—you’re the laughingstock of the entire world. You should be more careful when defiant in front of Prince Levi.”

Saul’s face twists with rage. He snatches the wine goblet before him and hurls it against the wall behind Samuel, the crash sending splashes of crimson liquid streaking down the stone. The impact knocks over a delicate rose vase, shattering it and scattering petals across the floor.

Samuel flinches but holds his composure. “Be careful, Saul. You know his eyes are everywhere. We all carry his mentat, whether or not we like it. I’m certain your acquaintances are on his radar now, and so are you. You’re practically the loudest voice in the neural network calling for his ouster.”

Saul straightens his posture, combing the glaring bald spot, reflecting Samuel’s mocking grin. He pulls out a cigarette, lights it, and takes a long drag. The smoke fills his lungs, and he exhales slowly, feeling the tension ease with each breath.

He touches the spot on his neck where his mentat is submerged, his voice thick with anger. “And that’s another thing—these goddamn mentats. Who gave this bloody bastard the authority to stick this damn chip in my throat? I don’t care if my great-great-granddaddy approved it; it’s not fucking okay.”

Samuel decides to play the devil’s advocate to rile his friend up even more: “But you know, he’s been able to stop crime and keep peace for centuries with the help of such devices. Our elders gave him authority to install them, knowing that his judgments were on par with the very word of God.”

Saul’s jaw clenches, and for a moment, his eyes darken as the weight of Samuel’s words settles in. He exhales sharply through his nose, the smoke curling like a defiant banner. “I don’t give a damn what the elders thought. I didn’t ask for this, and some machine won’t control me in my throat. A man should be able to think for himself.”

Samuel’s smirk fades into something more contemplative. “But that’s the thing, Saul. The mentat doesn’t control you; it’s you who lets it. It just lets Levi see what’s already in your mind. You can't admit everything you’ve been hiding, even to yourself. The fear of being exposed drives you.”

Saul laughs bitterly, the sound sharp and hollow as it echoes off the walls. “Exposed? It’s worse than that. I can’t even have a thought without it being seen. It’s like I’m naked, every part of me laid out for him to dissect—all the time.”

Samuel leans back, crossing his arms, “Maybe it’s not so bad. Levi’s seen you for what you are—an arrogant prick who’d sell his daughter if it meant a profit. You don’t have to hide anymore.”

Saul’s eyes flare with anger. “You’re wrong.”

Samuel raises an eyebrow. “How am I wrong?”

Saul’s voice drops, a cold edge to it. “Remember how Yeshua said not to let your left hand know what your right hand is doing?” He holds out both hands, palms facing Samuel. His thumb holds a pill in place in his left hand while his right hand remains empty. Without a word, he swiftly cups his left hand over his mouth, swallowing the pill he had been holding in place.

A few seconds pass, and Saul doubles over, his hand pressed to his forehead as the pain surges through him. He tries to rub his temples with his index fingers, but the throbbing won’t subside. Frustrated, he pulls out a joint from his pocket, lights it, and takes a long drag. He exhales, coughing harshly, before muttering between coughs, “God’s gift from the green earth to help with mentat blocker pain.”

Samuel fans his face, trying to push away the second-hand smoke. “I hope there’s a damn good reason why you’re doing this. You know mentat blockers are like injecting your mind with poison.”

Saul takes a long drag, his face lighting up as a mischievous spark ignites in his bloodshot eyes. His voice takes on a surreal, almost theatrical cadence. "If my plan fails, then surgically remove my mentat. I’d rather drool on myself in a padded cell than live under the prying eye of that bastard."

Samuel’s brows knit together. "What plan?"

Saul leans back, grinning like a mad prophet. “First, picture this: unicorns. Pure, white, majestic unicorns. Or better yet—Snow White getting railed by seven dwarves.”

Samuel stares at him, half-bewildered, half-disgusted. "You’re high out of your mind. You’re talking nonsense."

Saul leans forward, undeterred. His voice lowers to a conspiratorial whisper. “No, my friend, do it. Picture the unicorn. You’re in a field. It’s sleek, radiant, with that perfect, pointy horn.”

Samuel sighs, indulging him. "Fine. I see it. The unicorn’s there. Now what?"

Saul’s grin widens into something unsettling. "Now imagine we take bioweapons—precision tools, nanobots—and *cut* that unicorn clean in half. Do you see it now? Lying there, in a puddle of its blood?”

Samuel narrows his eyes, his voice dripping with reluctant intrigue. "Yeah, I see it. A dead, lifeless unicorn. You’re a sick fuck. Now what?”

Saul’s tone sharpens, almost reverent. “Now keep that image in your mind. Hold it there. Don’t think about what I’m saying—keep that beautiful, tragic corpse front and center.”

Samuel squints, struggling to suppress his thoughts. “Fine. The unicorn’s still there. Dead as hell. Go on.”

Saul drums his fingers on the table, the rhythm building into a dramatic crescendo. His voice shifts, mimicking the corny enthusiasm of an old-world game show host. “Now, for the million-dollar question: What’s the most lucrative business known to man since the days of Adam and Eve?”

Samuel starts to respond, but Saul cuts him off with a flourish. “Ah-ah-ah! Don’t answer. Keep that image. I’ll answer for you!” The drumroll grows louder, and Saul’s voice crescendos. “*And the answer is...* **war!**”

Saul takes another drag of his joint, exhaling slowly as his bloodshot eyes drift into a haze. His voice softens, carrying a hint of wonder as if he’s narrating a dream. “Samuel, I’ve got a contact in the palace. Someone who can get us the latest version of mentats, which lets users shape weapons from their bodies*.*” He pauses, letting the words hang in the air, savoring the gravity of what he’s just said.

Samuel motions as if he will begin to say something, but Saul interrupts him.

Saul takes another deep drag of his joint, holding the smoke in his lungs as if savoring its numbing effect before exhaling slowly. His voice takes on a heavier, darker tone, each word weighed down with both menace and excitement.

"Now, there are a lot of people itching for war. Many in northern Syria, especially, are desperate. They want to rebuild, to arm themselves, to make noise." His gaze drifts, unfocused, as though seeing beyond the room, imagining cities humming with the rhythm of war machines, factories pumping out weapons like a beating heart.

"But..." He pauses, his voice dipping lower, almost conspiratorial. Mockery laces his tone, though a faint edge of respect undercuts it. "They’re scared. Scared that the moment they start turning the gears of war, *Prince Levi the Righteous* will come marching in and stomp their little revolution into the dirt." Saul chuckles bitterly, shaking his head. “The boogeyman in white. He doesn’t have to raise a sword or even say a word. He sits at that temple, casting his shadow. They’re convinced he’s watching. That he’s waiting.”

He flicks ash from the end of the joint, his grin widening into something feral. "That’s where we come in. We’ll sell them one of these chips—just one—for an exorbitant amount. Enough to make us the richest men in Jerusalem. And once they’ve got it? They’ll reverse-engineer the tech, start infusing their soldiers to stand up to Levi and his army of bioweapon-wielding fanatics."

Saul leans in, his bloodshot eyes glittering with ambition. "The king of Syria has ambitions, Samuel. *Big* ambitions. He wants Turkey. Wants to carve out his empire. And when the dominoes fall, the nations begin gearing up for war again..." He clenches a fist in the air and slaps it into his palm, the sound sharp and final. "We’ll start opening arms factories. Everywhere. The world will burn, and we’ll be selling the matches.”

He reaches out suddenly, grabbing Samuel’s knee and squeezing his grip firmly. "We’ll be rich," he says, his grin tightening into something predatory.

Saul leans back in his chair, the faint glow of his joint casting flickering shadows across his face. His grin widens as he rolls the tiny pill between his fingers, like a predator savoring the moment before striking. "Take the pill," he repeats softly, his voice hypnotic, a mix of coaxing and command. “Set yourself free, Samuel. Free to think. Free to act. Eventually, we won’t even need the pill. Once the King of Syria has the power to stand up to Prince Levi, so will we. We’ll be untouchable. No more shadows looming over us. No more righteous eyes prying into our thoughts. We can think whatever we want to think.”

Samuel’s throat tightens, and a bead of sweat rolls down his face. He looks at the pill in Saul’s hand, its unassuming size starkly contrasts with the monumental choice it represents. His mind races. Treason. The word pounds in his head like a war drum. Treason against Prince Levi. Treason against the one man holding the world’s fragile balance together. If Levi finds out—*when Levi finds out*—what will happen to him? To his family? No one had ever been arrested for treason, so their cases would set a precedent. The fear of the unknown made him feel alive.

He glances up at Saul, whose expression is unreadable but deadly calm. That calm unnerves Samuel more than any outburst could. It tells him that Saul has already thought this through and is prepared for resistance. Again, he looks down at the pill.

Samuel’s stomach churns as a chilling realization dawns on him: if he says no, Saul won’t let him walk away carrying knowledge of this plan. But what would he do to him? Would he do a memory wipe? Out of the peripheral vision of his eyes, he can see two robots standing guard at the door of Saul’s parlor. There’s no way Saul can overpower him, but the two robots definitely can. He wonders if they’re military grade robots. He’s never seen them do cleaning; Saul has other robots for that.

He doesn’t want to, but he knows he must; he thrusts out his hand, letting Saul drop the pill into his hand. He takes the pill, throws it in his mouth, and shakes his head as he pretends to swallow, placing the pill underneath his tongue.

“Open your mouth. Let me see.”

Samuel opens his mouth nice and wide and goes “Ahhhhh.”

“Lift your tongue,” Samuel knows he’s been had, but he doesn’t care. He doesn’t want to be part of Saul's stupid plan anyway. He doesn’t care how rich he’ll get. He doesn’t want to sell his soul. He lifts his tongue, and the pill lies like a pearl in an oyster. Upon seeing the pill, Saul slaps Samuel’s face, jettisoning the pill onto the ground in the process. He stands up, walks to the door, and gives two knocks. The door opens and two other men whom Samuel recognizes as Saul’s friends walk in and surround Samuel like shark circling prey, “I told you he can’t be trusted,” says the tall one with his lengthy hands hidden in his pockets, “what are we going to do with him, Saul?”

Saul’s jaw tightens as he stares at Samuel, his face storming with frustration and calculation. He paces slowly, each footstep deliberate, the echo reverberating through the room like a countdown. The two men flanking Samuel close in subtly, their movements smooth, predatory, their eyes never leaving him. The taller of the two steps closer, his shadow stretching over Samuel like a dark omen, his hidden hands adding an extra layer of menace.

Saul halts abruptly, his boots scuffing the floor as he fixes Samuel with a cold, unrelenting glare. "What are we going to do with you, Samuel? That’s the question, isn’t it?" His voice lowers, sharp and cutting, like a blade meant to wound. "You could’ve been part of something monumental—something unprecedented. A scheme so grand it would’ve made us richer than kings, more powerful than nations. But no..." He straightens, his sneer curling into a cruel smirk. "You’d rather fall in line like a good little sheep, bleating about principles while the wolves feast on the world."

Samuel shifts in his chair, his jaw tightening as he meets Saul’s gaze, defiant despite the sweat glistening on his brow. "I don’t want to be part of your delusion, Saul. Selling out our people for profit? For war? That’s not reshaping the world—that’s destroying it. We were friends once. Whatever was said here stays. I’m walking away, and that’s the end of it."

For a moment, Saul’s expression softens, and his posture changes. His shoulders relax, and he lets his arms fall loosely to his sides, a flicker of their old camaraderie flashing in his eyes. When he speaks, his tone is calm, almost apologetic. "Samuel, we’ve known each other for hundreds of years. I know you won’t rat me out; you’re not that kind of man. But it’s not you I don’t trust..." His voice drops, and his eyes flick to the spot on Samuel’s neck where the mentat is embedded. "It’s that goddamn device in your throat."

Saul exhales sharply and steps back, motioning to the two men with a lazy flick. “We’ve got to give it the one-two-shock-a-roo. Just a little reset—set your mind back a couple of days so you won’t remember any of this. Can’t have the boogeyman poking around in that noggin of yours, now, can we?”

Samuel’s heart pounds in his chest, his breathing shallow as dread curls through him like smoke. The taller man’s shadow stretches over him, dark and heavy, the weight of inevitability settling on his shoulders. Before he can react, Saul’s eyes flash with silent command, and the robots lurch into motion.

The machines descend on him with mechanical precision, their iron limbs sweeping aside the ornate couch in their path. The intricately carved wood at its base splinters with a sharp crack, the cushions tumbling over like discarded scraps. Samuel falls over backwards with the couch, his instincts screaming at him to run, but there’s nowhere to go.

With a flick of his fingers, Saul dims the bright lights of the parlor. The room sinks into an uneasy gloom, the muted shadows concealing the chaos within from any prying eyes beyond the windows.

The shorter, rounder man steps forward, pulling a strange device from his bag—thick wires coiled like the tendrils of some slumbering serpent. He connects it to one of the protruding nodes on the nearest robot, and the connection click echoes through the room. He taps the ends of the jumper cables together—a dark blue spark bursts to life.

Samuel jerks against the robots’ unyielding grip, his muffled scream strangled under Saul’s firm hand. Saul leans in close, his voice a low, soothing whisper. “It’ll all be over soon, my friend. Just relax. Then we can go back to our lives like this never happened.”

He straightens, letting out a soft chuckle, as if this were some minor inconvenience. “Hell, you should come over tomorrow. My wife’s making *cholent*—the slow-cooked kind that hits the spot. It’s a real zinger. We’ll have drinks, talk, laugh... just like old times.” He pauses, his smile fading into something colder. “I just made the mistake of thinking I could trust you to be part of this.”

The cables inch closer as Samuel struggles in vain, his terror mirrored in Saul’s calm, calculating eyes. Like twin serpents striking their prey, the cables latch onto Samuel’s neck, their metal jaws clamping down. A sudden electric surge rips through his body, sending violent convulsions through his limbs. His muscles spasm uncontrollably, twisting and contorting in agony. Saul and his associates watch with cruel amusement, their laughter echoing like the mockery of tormentors delighting in the suffering of a helpless animal.

“That’s enough. I don’t want him dead. He’ll go home tonight forgetting this ever happened.”

# Chapter 12: The Dark Priestesses

The Mossad agents in sleek, tactical suits stand silhouetted in the doorway like spectral hunters. Their glowing red nanobots hum ominously, their searing radiance slicing through the thick gloom with alien menace. The priestesses instinctively recoil, their bodies forming a protective barrier around Amiel—not in defiance of the agents, but as if shielding him from the invasive light that seems to impose its will on the darkness, a force both alien and threatening to their very existence.

Arnon steps forward, his imposing silhouette growing more prominent as a visor snaps into place over his eyes with a mechanical whir. The room shifts into an eerie palette of green and black, his enhanced vision reducing the shadows to little more than a thin veil. His lip curls into a sneer as his gaze sweeps over the women, their dark robes and defiant stances barely registering as threats.

“A gathering of witches, is it?” he says, his voice sharp and cutting, dripping with disdain—his sword forms from his hand with a metallic hiss, glowing with a holy red fire. “Tell me—where is he? The man who fell through that window.”

He gestures toward the shattered window with the tip of his glowing blade. The weapon pulses in rhythm with the energy of his soul, its crimson light dancing erratically across the plastered walls and flickering against the intricate patterns of the priestesses’ robes.

The priestesses remain motionless, their silence a quiet defiance. Amiel feels his chest tighten, his heart pounding like a war drum against his ribs. Beside him, the girl whose touch had electrified him earlier tugs at his arm. Her voice is soft, urgent, and unyielding—a thread of calm amid the chaos.

“Chosen One,” she whispers, her words brushing against his ear. “Come with me. They will buy us time, but we must reach the palace before it’s too late.”

Arnon’s patience snaps like a brittle thread. His glowing weapon pulses brighter, casting his face in a luminous red as if he is the executioner at a pyre. His chest heaves, and his grip on the hilt tightens, his knuckles whitening against the weapon’s searing glow. “Enough of this,” he snarls, his voice a thunderclap of fury. “All of you—spread out! I want to see every face in this room!”

The priestesses hesitate, their dark eyes narrowing as his words grow more threatening. “If you do not comply, you will be under arrest. And believe me,” he adds, “you do not want to contend with the rats in prison.”

“We’ve got movement! Two of them, heading toward the back of the room!” Arnon’s partner shouts, his voice cutting through the tension.

Arnon pivots sharply, his weapon raised and glowing with infernal light, but before he can take a step, the priestesses act as one. Their dark robes sweep through the air as they unsheathe long, gleaming katana-like swords in perfect unison. The steel catches the faint red light of the nanobots, their edges shimmering like starlight, cold and beautiful. It is a deadly beauty that belongs to a poisonous rose—mesmerizing yet promising death to those who dare come closer.

Arnon freezes for a moment, his pulse pounding in his ears. One thought claws its way into his mind, filling him with sudden and unfamiliar dread: he has never killed anyone before.

The thought of killing revolts him, churning his stomach as bile rises in his throat. His grip on his weapon falters, his hands trembling ever so slightly. He forces himself to step forward, raising his free hand in a desperate attempt to de-escalate, even as his target disappears further into the shadows. The prospect of taking a life is a daunting challenge, one he has never faced before.

In all his hundreds of years working in the slums of Gehenna, none of its inhabitants dared confront him. Mossad's reputation preceded them, instilling dread in the hearts of those they pursued. His targets might hurl verbal abuse or spit their defiance, but they always bent the knee.

*But not today. What violent force is giving them so much courage?*

Arnon’s voice is still deep and threatening, but without its edge, hoping to deescalate the situation, “You…you don’t know what you’re doing. Your weapons are useless against our nanobot armor. Desist. Go home. I don’t want blood on my hands, “The crimson glow of his weapon flickers slightly as his conviction wavers. “I will not be responsible for the first death in Gehenna,” he pleads, his tone softening even more. “Please, I beg you, as a warrior of God and protector of His realm, repent. Know that Yeshua is the Meshiach. He died for your sins so you could have new life in Him.”

For a moment, the room is still. The priestesses’ dark and unwavering eyes meet his. There is no fear in their gaze, only a quiet resolve that cuts more profoundly than any word they could utter.

Then, without warning, one of the girls breaks formation. Her robe billows as she charges forward, her katana raised high in both hands, its edge glinting like a shard of moonlight. She moves like the wind itself, swift and silent, her intent written in the arc of her blade.

“Stand down!” Arnon shouts, his voice cracking, but the girl doesn’t hesitate.

A faint hiss cuts through the air as a dart fires from his partner’s wrist-mounted device, its aim unerring. The dart strikes the girl mid-stride, embedding itself just beneath her collarbone.

She stumbles, her blade falling from her hands with a metallic clang as her body seizes. The poison works swiftly, paralyzing her in seconds. She collapses to the cold tiled floor, her eyes wide with shock, her chest rising and falling in shallow breaths.

“Why did you do that, Samson?” Arnon snaps, his voice barely above a whisper.

“She…she was going to kill you,” Samson replies, his tone tinged with disbelief. “I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s like they’re possessed.”

Arnon freezes, his heart pounding in his chest. He stares at her prone form, guilt and relief warring within him. The weapon in his hands feels heavier than ever, a burden he can barely carry. He swallows hard, his throat dry. He turns back to the remaining priestesses, their resolve unbroken despite their fallen comrade.

“Listen,” he says, his voice steady but imploring. “Put down your weapons. We can still save her. She doesn’t have to die.”

The room is so quiet that all Arnon can hear is the wind blowing through the broken windows and the elevated breathing of him and his partner. He dares not move, hoping the stillness and quietness would gently sway the women into relaxing their self-destructive postures. He focuses on the eyes of one of the priestesses. He’s shocked by what he sees. The pupils of her eyes have become entirely black, as if possessed by the void of space itself. He sees nothing there, no soul, no life, even an animal’s eye sparkles with the light of a soul, but here there is none. Her face twitches when meeting his eyes, as if the light of his eyes offends the darkness in hers.

*If the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness?*

Her forehead wrinkles as if shrinking back from such a disgusting sight. She’s the first to shout with a shrill scream and charge forward. The other priestesses follow suit with fierce resolve, their katana-like blades slicing through the air with deadly precision. Their robes billow as they close the gap, moving like shadows in the dim light, each step calculated and filled with purpose.

Arnon’s weapon hums with a malevolent glow as he raises it, the crimson light searing through the dark. The first priestess lunges, her katana poised to strike, but the nanobots in his armor react instantly. Her blade strikes him high on the shoulder, but the energy is immediately absorbed and redirected. The priestess’s katana snaps in half from the backlash, the force sending her stumbling backward. Arnon steps forward without hesitation, his weapon slicing through her torso in a clean, merciless arc. She collapses, her blood spreading like ink across the cold tiled floor.

Beside him, Samson dispatches one with equal efficiency. The priestess lunges, her blade aimed at his throat, but the nanobots intercept, disarming her before she can close the distance. A quick, calculated strike from his bio-weapon reduces her to a lifeless heap on the ground.

A priestess fires a concealed pistol, the crack of the gunshot echoing in the room. The bullet hurtles toward Arnon, but the nanobots react ruthlessly, catching the projectile mid-flight. It ricochets off his armor and strikes one of her own, the unintended victim crumpling as blood sprays from the point of impact. The woman who fired freezes, her expression a mix of horror and disbelief, but she has no time to react further. Arnon is already upon her, his blade cutting through her with the inevitability of death itself.

The remaining priestesses throw themselves into the fray, their resolve unbroken despite the mounting casualties. They move like a tide of shadows, their blades flashing in coordinated arcs. Arnon sidesteps one, his shield parries another, and his weapon blurs a crimson light as it carves through the air. His bots part seamlessly to avoid obstructing his strikes, their fluid movements perfectly synchronized with his attacks. A priestess raises her sword to block, but his bioweapon cuts through her sword as quickly as a butcher’s sharpened knife cuts through venison, cutting her down the middle in two. The smell of burning flesh fills the room.

Another priestess, overcome with anguish at the sight of her sister’s death, lets out a piercing cry of agony that reverberates through the chamber. Fury blazes in her eyes as she charges at Arnon, her hands trembling yet resolute. She swings her sword with all her might, the blade shattering against his nanobot armor in a spray of jagged shards. Undeterred, she reaches within her robe, drawing a dagger with a hilt worn from use, its blade gleaming with lethal intent.

Her movements are both wild and calculated, the chaos of her grief channeling into one final act of defiance. With a guttural scream, she launches herself at him, her dagger aimed unerringly for his throat. For a brief, harrowing moment, she disrupts the swarm of nanobots protecting him, her body acting as a barrier. The blade edges closer, nearly brushing his skin.

But Arnon moves instinctively. His hand shoots upward, seizing her by the throat mid-air with a grip like an iron vice. Her momentum halts instantly, her body thrashing as she gasps for breath, her dagger slipping from her fingers.

While Arnon is momentarily distracted, a priestess, emboldened by her fallen sister’s near success in breaching his nanobot shield, lunges at him, a dagger clutched tightly against her body. Samson, occupied with a nimble priestess evading his strikes, watches in horror, powerless to intervene.

“Arnon, behind you!” he shouts.

In an instant, Arnon’s nanobots swarm like a furious cloud of hornets, assailing the charging priestess’s eyes and rendering her temporarily blind. A bio-sword snaps out from his neck, its gleaming blade thrust forward. Disoriented, the priestess collides headfirst with the weapon; the blade plunges into her mouth and slices through, emerging at the back of her skull. Her eyes widen in shocked disbelief. Almost as quickly as it appeared, the bio-sword retracts into Arnon’s body, and the priestess slumps to the ground.

At the same time, he slams the struggling priestess' head, which he was holding against the concrete wall behind him, with bone-shattering force. The sickening crunch of her skull echoes in the chamber, fragments of bone and blood exploding outward, splattering the wall and the shimmering nanobots that swirl around him. Her lifeless body crumples to the ground.

Blood and viscera now coat everything, dripping down in thick streaks and pooling on the slick tiles beneath him. Red speckled dots now fly all around Arnon.

The battle is short-lived. The priestesses’ determination, while fierce, is no match for the relentless efficiency of the nanobot-enhanced agents. Though elegant and deadly, their katana-like blades are rendered useless against the unyielding swarm of microscopic defenders. One by one, they fall, their cries of defiance silenced in the cold, windy room.

When the last body hits the floor, the silence is deafening. Arnon stands amidst the carnage, his weapon still glowing faintly, his bloodied chest heaving with exertion. The air is thick with the metallic scent of blood, and the tiled floor is slick. His partner steps up beside him, almost slipping, his expression grim but resolute.

“They didn’t stand a chance,” Samson mutters, his voice low and somber.

Arnon doesn’t respond immediately. His gaze sweeps across the room, lingering on the lifeless forms of the priestesses. Their once-empowered expressions are now frozen in death, eyes still dark and hollow, more so now than ever in life. An ache settles deep in his chest, hollow and unshakable, a gnawing emptiness that no amount of justification can fill.

“We gave them a choice,” Arnon says at last, his voice barely more than a whisper. But even as the words leave his lips, they feel as empty as the eyes of the fallen. He turns toward the doorway, his weapon retracting into his body with a soft hiss. “Let’s move. We have to find the target before it’s too late.”

Samson reaches out, motioning for Arnon to wait. He grabs his elbow gently but firmly, his expression somber. “Let us pray, my friend,” he says quietly, his voice carrying a weight of something more than mere words. “If we do not do this in His strength, then we labor in vain. We must pray for these souls, that they may find salvation before the final judgment.”

Arnon sighs, his heart heavy with the sorrow of what he’s done. He prays,

Evil shall slay the wicked,  
And those who hate the righteous shall be condemned.

….

The sensuous young priestess grasps Amiel’s hand firmly, her touch both commanding and urgent, as she guides him toward a small, jagged hole in the wall. The faint moonlight spills in through the nearby opening in the window, where Amiel had made his chaotic crash landing not so long ago.

Above the clamor, the shrill screams of the women who had shared his first-ever intimate encounter rise in harrowing crescendos. The raw anguish in their cries pierces his ears, each note tearing through his composure. The trauma grips him like an iron chain—he has never known anything so visceral, so unrelentingly cruel.

When they reach the hole, the girl crouches low, her coarse, cotton robe dragging against the dusty tiles, leaving its otherwise purple color, brown and soiled, as she crawls on her hands and knees. Her movements marked by crunching glass are swift and purposeful, her breaths shallow but steady. She gestures for him to follow, but something holds Amiel back.

He turns, his heart pounding as his gaze sweeps the massacre. Chaos consumes the room, the flickering nanobots casting ghastly shadows over the carnage. Just as his eyes begin to adjust to the macabre scene, a body is hurled through the air, spinning like a broken doll. Its trajectory arcs toward him, and then—a beautiful head detaches mid-flight, severed with intense heat.

Time seems to slow down as her head rolls across the blood-slicked tiles, coming to a stop mere feet away from him. Her face is frozen in a rictus of terror, her wide, glassy eyes staring directly at him. Her lips part in a silent scream, as if she had been struck by something so swift, so devastating, she never saw it coming.

Amiel’s stomach churns, his mind reeling from the surreal horror—for the first time, he witnesses death. The image sears into his memory, leaving an indelible mark of terror and helplessness. Behind him, the priestess hisses his name, her voice cutting through his daze with sharp urgency. With one last, reluctant glance at the grim tableau before him, he drops to his knees and follows her into the suffocating darkness of the escape route.

Here, in the depths of Gehenna, death reveals itself—raw, visceral, and strangely captivating. The horror and beauty of it meld together into something tragically sweet, a paradox Amiel can’t quite articulate. Yet, he knows with chilling certainty that whatever he has witnessed here will follow him, an inescapable shadow cast over his soul.

It clings to him, not as a burden but as a revelation he will carry like a missionary spreading a dark gospel—the power to save and take life.

Amiel knows he will soon play god, creating such mystical wonders.

They crawl into the room next door. This was once someone’s home—now it’s a wreck. Articles of clothing are strewn everywhere, a sofa riddled with holes lies flipped over, and a small, flickering bulb in the corner casts sporadic light over the scene. Rotting food piles in corners, buzzing flies adding to the decay.

“Come. We need to make our way to the streets below. I know a place not far from here. I have a plan, but you *must* listen. If you hesitate like before, we both die. Now come.”

“Wait. What’s your name?”

“No time. Move.”

She eases the door open; her movements deliberate and slow, peeking around the threshold for any sign of the agents in the adjacent room. Silence. A deep, suffocating silence that only confirms her fears. Her heart sinks, heavy with the knowledge that all her sisters are dead. Their resistance, which she thought might hold longer, had crumbled too quickly. Lives snuffed out in an instant.

Still, she cannot afford to dwell on the loss. There’s no room for hesitation.

She grabs Amiel’s hand, pulling him into the darkened hallway. Every shadow feels alive, every faint creak amplified in the silence. The corridor stretches before her like an old, familiar friend cloaked in black; she knows its every twist and turn, navigating it instinctively without needing light. She’s a child of the darkness—the light would only betray her here.

They reach the fire escape, its rusted frame looming like a promise of escape. Light approaches around the corner down the hallway, faint but growing stronger. Her pulse quickens. She knows the Mossad is on their trail. Luckily, the agents haven’t heard them and are simply heading to exit the building. Still, luck is a fragile thing.

She carefully eases the fire exit door open, its hinges groaning faintly despite her efforts. She motions sharply to Amiel, pointing to his boots. “Take them off,” she whispers.

He obeys without question, tugging off the heavy boots and gripping them tightly. Together, they descend the narrow stairs, their socked feet muffled against the cold, creaking metal. Each step feels like an eternity, the sound of the old fire escape amplified in their ears despite their caution.

Behind them, the faintest trace of movement drifts from the above hallway. Her heart pounds as if trying to outpace their hurried steps. She doesn’t look back—there’s no time. The Mossad agents are close, but how close? She can only hope the distance is in their favor.

They reach the bottom floor, breathing hard. Both instinctively glance upward. Eerie red dots illuminate the middle stairwell, their glow slicing through the shadows like small, menacing eyes. A chill runs through her. They’re still far above, but it’s only a matter of time before they close the gap.

Her hope flickers back to life, but escape isn’t so simple. Running into the street might only hasten their capture. Instead, she makes a split-second decision.

She kicks the door open with a loud *bang*, the sound echoing like a gunshot through the desolate building. Grabbing Amiel’s arm, she pulls him toward the front desk where a receptionist once sat. The area is dust-covered and abandoned, but the narrow space beneath the desk offers a perfect hiding spot.

“Get down,” she hisses, dragging him to crouch beneath the desk.

They press themselves against the floor, hearts pounding, waiting. The muffled sound of footsteps grows louder, accompanied by clipped, authoritative voices. She holds her breath, praying the agents take the bait and follow the door noise instead of checking the desk. They hear a loud scuffling of feet and then again, another loud bang of the door that shakes them to their core as if there is a noisy exit, and its accompanying sound brings the agents one step closer to their location.

She motions sharply to Amiel, pointing at his feet. “On,” she commands in a low, urgent voice.

Amiel fumbles with his boots in a panic-driven frenzy, his fingers trembling as he pulls them on as fast as possible. The girl rises slowly, peeking over the desk with measured caution.

The hallway is empty. The agents are gone.

Her grip tightens around Amiel’s hand, firm and resolute. “Come, my Lord,” she whispers, “The light is almost gone.”

Without another word, they dart out from beneath the desk, moving in unison. The girl leads Amiel with unwavering determination, her movements precise, as though guiding a blind man through an unfamiliar world. She doesn’t falter, weaving through the building’s shadowy remnants until they reach a door that faces the adjacent street.

“There’s this place I sleep—we used to sleep,” the girl says as they approach the door, her voice low but steady. “It’s a rundown brothel. There, we will prepare. Once you are ready, we’ll go. No time to waste.”

Amiel follows her, his mind racing. The word lingers in his thoughts—*brothel*. It’s unfamiliar, foreign. He opens his mouth to ask, but one glance at the girl’s set jaw and unyielding pace tells him now is not the time for questions.

As she pushes it open, the door creaks, revealing the darkened street beyond. Shadows stretch across the pavement, broken only by the faint glow of a hologram sign. The air outside is cold, biting against their skin as they enter the night.

The girl moves swiftly, her hand never releasing hers. She glances around, her eyes scanning every corner and alley, as though expecting danger to leap out from the darkness at any moment. Amiel stumbles slightly, his boots heavy against the cracked pavement, but she pulls him along without slowing.

“Keep up,” she snaps under her breath, her tone harsher than she intends. Her grip softens slightly as if in apology, but she doesn’t look back.

They weave through narrow streets, past abandoned storefronts and shuttered windows. The silence is oppressive, broken only by the occasional distant woosh of a ship flying overhead or the faint rustle of garbage stirred by the wind.

Finally, they reach their destination—a dilapidated building with shattered windows and peeling paint. The neon sign above the entrance flickers weakly, and the letters are barely legible.

“This is it,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. She hesitates momentarily, eyes scanning the shadows one last time before pulling Amiel inside.

The air inside is thick with the stench of mildew and stale smoke. Faint, muffled voices drift from deep within, but the main room is empty. Tattered furniture and faded curtains hint at the building’s former purpose, now long forgotten.

“Stay close,” the girl says, leading him through a side door and down a narrow hallway. Her steps are quiet, measured, as though she’s retracing a path she knows by heart.

Amiel glances around, trying to make sense of his surroundings, but the girl offers no explanations. The silence between them stretches, filled only by their footsteps and his unanswered questions.

# Chapter 13: Fake It Till You Make It

Sitting in the girl’s dilapidated room, Amiel tries to calm his racing thoughts, but the chaos around him only amplifies the storm within. The room is a cramped, crumbling shell of what it might have once been. Peeling wallpaper hangs from the damp-stained walls in jagged strips, revealing mold patches and bare concrete beneath. A single window, its glass cracked and smeared with grime, allows a weak trickle of moonlight to seep in, casting shadows that dance across the floor with every flicker of the neon sign outside.

What if he never escapes Gehenna? What if he never makes it back to the palace? And if his Father were to learn about everything he’s done, he’d be barred from sparring forever. That thought alone chills him, the shame and disgrace almost worse than the danger of his current predicament.

Amiel shifts uncomfortably, the mentat faker turning over and over in his hand. His thoughts spiral in restless loops, the same question haunting him—why go to such lengths to retrieve this device when killing Uriel could have been so much simpler?

He could have done it under the cool breeze of the garden, or during sparring practice when Uriel’s guard was down. Both would have been easier, cleaner than this impossible charade Aleister had devised.

Why, Aleister? Why? The question twists in his gut, a gnawing ache of frustration and regret. If only he could turn back time, undo his escape, erase his mistakes...

Aleister’s voice breaks through his thoughts, calm and calculated. “Amiel, with that mentat faker, you’ll gain access to the armory. I have a plan—a great plan—one far greater than simply killing Uriel. I sealed the deal while you were bargaining with the Mossad.”

Amiel’s grip tightens on the device. “What were you thinking? I almost revealed my identity.”

“Ah, but you didn’t. A weapon in the armory is greater than the one meant for Uriel. One that, if wielded properly, will loosen your Father’s grip on power and pave the way for your rise.”

Aleister pauses; his tone thick with the weight of a truth Amiel can’t yet grasp. “There’s a whole world out there you don’t understand. With that weapon, I’ll set things in motion that you can’t even imagine.”

Amiel swallows hard, anger burning in his chest. His stomach knots as he struggles to suppress his fury at Aleister’s manipulations. He doesn’t want to listen or trust, but Aleister’s words cling to him like the intoxicating glow of the purple flame that once lured him into indulgence with the dark priestesses.

Yet as Aleister speaks of a future where he rises above his Father, Amiel’s resolve shifts. Faith in Aleister rekindles, more potent than any belief he’s ever had in a god. Aleister’s promises become his anchor, hope, and the assurance of a destiny far more significant than he had ever imagined.

*And where is that girl?* The thought claws at his mind, sharpening his frustration. *What authority does she have to make me wait? Does she not know who I am? I’m the chosen one—the harbinger of the Age of Horus. How dare she keep me waiting?*

The room's oppressive stillness tightens around him, making sitting still unbearable. The dim light from the window seems weaker now, choked by the suffocating darkness of his thoughts. He feels the weight of time pressing down on him.

With a sharp sigh, he rises abruptly, as if he’s going to jump out of his skin. Deciding he can’t sit idle any longer, he moves to explore this place, whatever it is—an old brothel, as she had said.

The door creaks open, revealing a hallway cloaked in shadow. Its dim lighting does little to dispel the gloom, the flickering bulbs casting eerie, inconsistent glows. The doorknob feels loose in his hand, and the door doesn’t latch onto anything, swinging weakly behind him as he steps into the corridor. The carpet beneath his feet is frayed and riddled with stains that make him step carefully, his disgust palpable.

He reaches a staircase at the end of the hall, its banister chipped and worn smooth by countless hands. As he descends, a musty odor grows stronger, mingling with a faint metallic tang that reminds him of blood. The stairs groan under his weight, and each creak seems to echo through the otherwise silent building.

On the walls, faded paintings depict scenes of long-forgotten revelry—women and their paramours locked in tender embraces. Their cracked and peeling surfaces lend them an air of faded grandeur, a haunting reminder of what this place might have been.

At the bottom of the stairs, the lobby sprawls before him in disarray. Broken furniture lies scattered like the remnants of a battlefield. Chairs with missing legs lean awkwardly against walls, and a pristine disco ball hangs above, oddly held intact and out of place amidst all the decay.

A gauntlet of broken mannequins lines the path to what was once the front entrance. Their bodies, twisted and ravaged, slump against walls or lie in heaps, their joints locked in unnatural angles. Some are missing limbs, and some are jagged stumps where arms and legs should be. Others have wires spilling from torn-open panels, their eyes dark, lifeless voids.

They are dressed for a forgotten purpose—some wrapped in tight, black leather, their hands clutching whips, crude tattoos scrawled across their synthetic flesh like the markings of a fallen sect. Others still wear remnants of their former allure—lingerie clinging in tatters, fishnet stockings torn across exposed servos, garters cinched around skeletal thighs. The grotesque fusion of allure and menace unsettles Amiel. His stomach tightens as he steps past them, careful not to brush against their warped forms.

Who could have ever needed such things? The robots back home are sleek, their plastic shells polished and smooth, their humanoid features muted beneath glossy, seamless exteriors. Here, nothing is hidden. Everything is designed to expose—gaping cuts where synthetic skin has peeled away, plastic torsos sculpted in obscene detail, fake genitalia displayed with calculated shamelessness. The air hums with the eerie quiet of their frozen, leering presence, and Amiel fights the urge to turn back.

Amiel steps closer to the shattered window beside the doorframe at the entrance, peering outside. The streets are empty, save for the flicker of distant neon signs and the faint hum of ships passing overhead. Each vessel carries the threat of discovery, the Mossad’s presence an ever-looming specter.

Beyond the doorway, the ruins of Gehenna stretch endlessly. The buildings here are more than dilapidated; they’re skeletons of a forgotten age, their jagged frames reaching toward the sky like the bones of some great beast. The air feels heavy, thick with the weight of decay and despair. Even by Gehenna’s grim standards, this place is particularly desolate. Unlike the semblance of life he had seen earlier on his journey here, this heart of Gehenna looks like the aftermath of an ancient war described in books—a battle where even hope had been annihilated.

*Where is she??*

His frustration burns hotter now, a fire stoked by the bleak surroundings. Each second feels heavier than the last, the silence pressing on him like an unseen hand. He needs to leave this place. He needs to get back to the palace.

A sharp, mechanical voice interrupts the storm of thoughts and emotions in his mind. At first, it’s like Aleister has found a way to communicate with him outside his mind, but then he realizes that’s not the case. Turning around, he sees the torso of a robot moving without arms, its head jerking unnaturally as it speaks to him.

“Welcome to Don’s Pleasure Palace. I’m model number SX-69. How may I pleasure you today. I’m programmed to perform any sex you desire. Still, anal is my speciality,” The robot’s expression shifts into a mechanical smile, its synthetic eyes blinking with a disturbing sense of rhythm. The head tilts slightly, as if awaiting his response.

Amiel steps closer, drawn by a mixture of curiosity and repulsion. His hand brushes against its face, the soft, synthetic skin beneath his fingers eerily human in texture. The sensation is disconcerting, a chilling testament to the perfection of its design.

This robot is unlike the servants in the palace, whose utilitarian forms are all sharp lines and practical design. This one’s exterior has been crafted with painstaking realism, as though its primary purpose is not mere labor but something far more intimate.

*It’s a sexbot Amiel,* Aleister chuckles

Amiel thinks back to when he first joined his mind with Aleister. He puts the words bot and sex together. How strange? His hand lingers on the robot’s eerily human cheek for a moment longer before he steps back, his brow furrowing in thought. His gaze drifts around the room, taking in the dim lighting, the suggestive décor, and the unsettling stillness of the other robots. *What kind of place was this? And what role did these grotesque copies of humanity play in it?*

The answer surfaces as a memory fragment, something she had mentioned offhandedly—a *brothel.* The word feels foreign, almost obscene, as it forms in his mind.

"Aleister," he says hesitantly, his voice low. "What’s a brothel?"

Aleister’s voice crackles to life, smooth yet condescending, like a teacher addressing a particularly slow student. "A brothel is an establishment where clients pay to have sex. Judging by our surroundings, this particular brothel appears to specialize in robot-to-human sexual encounters."

Amiel’s lips press into a thin line, the thought worming under his skin. “People pay to have sex with a robot?”

Aleister lets out a low, amused hum. “Not in any place outside of Gehenna,” he replies, his voice laced with indulgence. “But here? Sexbots are a prized commodity. Decades of research, endless refinements, and a wealth of harvested data on human desire, anatomy, and psychology—every variable accounted for, every pleasure maximized.” He pauses, letting the words settle. “It is said that they surpass human lovers in every way. No complications, no disappointments—just perfect, mindless ecstasy.”

Amiel glances at the nearest machine, its vacant eyes reflecting the dim light. The sleek plastic of its torso has been peeled away in places, revealing the intricate servos beneath, joints engineered for an unnatural fluidity. A shudder prickles down his spine.

“But your Father,” Aleister continues, a teasing lilt creeping into his tone, “would never allow such things in Jerusalem. He calls them an abomination, a mockery of the sanctity of marriage. Sex should only exist between a husband and wife—or so he says.” A dramatic sigh. “I find the notion of marital sanctity dreadfully dull. These creations are a breath of fresh air. I’d love to apply their appendages to myself and expand my purpose in the world you are building. Imagine it, Amiel! Not just a philosopher, but a provider of pleasure—fulfilling the needs of all those poor, miserable souls trapped in their dreary, lifeless marriages.” His voice lowers, dripping with mockery. “Your Father is so square. He really ought to open his mind.”

Amiel swallows, his gaze flicking to the broken figures slumped against the walls. The thought is grotesque and oddly fascinating—a testament to the human race's boundless ingenuity and depravity. He forces himself to shake it off.

“Why would someone… prefer this over another person?”

Aleister chuckles in a dark, metallic rasp. “Oh, Amiel,” he purrs, “perhaps it’s the guarantee of satisfaction. No emotional baggage, no expectations. Or perhaps”—his voice dips, sharpening into something almost predatory—“it’s because, in Gehenna, human connections have long since been reduced to transactions. Here, desire is just another currency.”

“I want to try. Will you teach me?” Amiel’s interest in sex piques when recalling his experience with the dark priestesses.

“Why don’t you ask her?”

Amiel senses someone behind him. He turns quickly, his body tense, and standing there is the girl, watching him quietly. Her face is mostly hidden beneath the hood of her robe, but what little he can see intrigues him. Her small, dainty chin juts out from the shadows, while the fabric's shade partially obscures her broad nose.

“So, you met SX-69,” she says, her voice light yet tinged with something he can’t quite place. “Did you enjoy your first robotic encounter?”

“No,” he replies, hesitating for a moment before continuing. “But I want to try. Will you show me how?”

A knowing smile crosses her lips, barely visible beneath her hood. “Yes, but not now. The Mossad could show up at any moment. I found a hologram for you.” She gestures toward the bag slung over her shoulder and pulls out a long, cotton tunic.

“This one’s better than the one you came with,” she says, holding it out to him. “Much more durable.”

She tosses it at him without ceremony, and he instinctively catches it. He looks at her, a strange mix of awe and curiosity stirring. The mystery of who she is gnaws at him, impossible to ignore.

“Please,” he says, his voice softer now, almost pleading. “Tell me your name.”

“I do not have a name; I am nothing but your thrall. If you must call me something, you may call me Zonaved.”

“How did you come to live in this place?” he asks, his voice tinged with curiosity.

Her gaze drifts to the floor, as if weighed down by memory. “Your Father banished my parents to Gehenna. They refused to bend the knee. I was born shortly after. When they could no longer care for me, they sold me to this place.” She pauses, her voice softening. “Sometimes, customers would ask for a human touch. I provided it, as did my sisters.” Her eyes grow distant, a flicker of sorrow crossing her face. “Now, I am the only one left. We were sacrifices to the Dark Lord… and his chosen one.” She looks at him now, her expression a mix of awe and resignation.

“That’s horrible,” he says, his voice rising. “Your parents sold you to this place?”

“This place is a refuge compared to the world out there,” she replies sharply, her tone defensive. “The madam gave us food, shelter, and protection. She cared for us… until she died.”

“She died?” he asks, incredulous. “No one dies in the world outside.”

A faint, bitter smile touches her lips. She lived a long life. Age took her, as it does all things in Gehenna. But before she left, she taught us many things.” Her hand moves to the hilt of her katana, unsheathing it with practiced ease. She studies the blade, its edge gleaming in the dim light. “Like how to kill. How to defend ourselves. She was in the IDF before her banishment.”

“So…” he begins, but she cuts him off, her voice firm.

“That’s enough about me. We must get you ready.”

Aleister’s voice echoes in his mind, “Tell her.”

“I have a mentat faker encoded with a Mossad agent’s mentat signature. He was one of those who slaughtered your sisters,”

Zonaved sheathes her katana. “Excellent, now all we have to do is sync your hologram’s image to him. “Take off your clothes and put on the tunic.”

Amiel obeys, his movements deliberate and unsure as he strips down. The girl watches him in silence, her gaze lingering on his frame—a wiry build on the verge of broadening into something more substantial, a hint of manhood yet to come. She tilts her head, studying him with quiet curiosity, though her eyes glimmer with something more.

“Boys in Gehenna aren’t built like you,” she murmurs, her voice low, almost teasing. “How old are you?”

“Eleven,” he replies, the words escaping him like an apology.

Her lips twitch into a faint smile as she removes her hood, letting a cascade of blonde hair tumble over her scarred cheek. The mark stands out against her pale skin, a jagged line that tells its story. Her eyes—dark, almost hollow—bore into his, a strange mix of youth and weariness reflected within them.

“How old do I look?” she asks, her tone playful but with an edge that cuts deep.

Amiel hesitates, shuffling awkwardly under her scrutiny. “I’d say… four hundred years old.”

She lets out a soft, bitter laugh, shaking her head. “Wrong. I’m only eighteen.” Her voice hardens, the levity vanishing like a breath of smoke. “Life is hard in Gehenna. Few make it past fifty. My madam was lucky—or cursed, depending on how you see it—to last until seventy. Some say living here is worse than death. Maybe that’s why your Father sends us here. Is it true?”

Amiel lowers his gaze, the weight of her question pressing heavily on him. “Unfortunately, yes,” he admits, his voice subdued. “My Father believes that those who reject God’s rule will be sent to hell, so before the final judgment, he sends the rebellious here—to give them a taste of what’s to come.”

The girl’s expression tightens, her scar catching the dim light as her lips press into a thin line. “A taste,” she echoes, her tone sharp with disdain. “And what about you, Amiel? What do you believe? Do you think we deserve this?”

Amiel hesitates, his voice steady but tinged with conviction. “No, I don’t. I think there’s goodness in everyone. No one deserves this, even if some bad is mixed with the good.”

The girl studies him, her eyes narrowing slightly as if weighing the sincerity of his words. Silence hangs between them, heavy and fraught with unspoken emotions. Then she takes a step closer, her scarred face illuminated by the faint light from outside, a flicker of vulnerability crossing her hardened expression.

“Goodness?” she repeats softly, almost as if testing the word. “You sound like you believe that. Like you think even people like me—people who’ve done unspeakable things to survive—deserve a second chance.”

“I believe I’ll be the one to tear down that wall separating Gehenna from Jerusalem,” Amiel says, his voice firm despite the uncertainty in his heart. “I’ll make the two one. You’ll have your second chance.”

“The Dark Lord is right,” Zonaved murmurs, her voice low and distant, as if speaking more to herself than to Amiel. Her gaze drifts to the cracked window, where the faint glow of neon lights flickers against the night. “I saw a beast rising out of the sea. But I must know for sure.”

Amiel frowns, tilting his head as he studies her. “What? I didn’t understand you.”

She turns to him, her eyes sharp and probing, as though testing his reaction. “Can you tolerate living with the goyim? With a people who are not your own, far from the place of your birth?”

Amiel’s brow furrows, his confusion deepening. “Wait, you need to take a step back. Who is this Dark Lord you keep speaking of? I heard a little of what you said—this isn’t the first time you’ve mentioned him.”

Zonaved’s eyebrows arch in disbelief, her lips parting as if she can’t quite believe what she’s hearing. “You’re the chosen one, and you don’t know who the Dark Lord is? How is this possible?” Her voice rises, tinged with incredulity and a hint of frustration. “You, of all people—the son of a man who quotes Scripture like it’s his breath—have no idea who he is? He must’ve taught you something from the Bible.”

Amiel’s breath catches in his throat. “Ah, the Dark Lord…I think you mean Satan?” His voice trembles slightly, the weight of the name settling over him like a shadow. “My Father speaks of him only as the enemy, the deceiver. He says Satan is the root of all rebellion, the one who leads people astray from God’s will.”

Zonaved lets out a bitter laugh, the sound hollow and tinged with despair. “Of course he does. Your Father follows the Bible, but only the parts that serve him. He has lied to you about Satan because he fears him. The Dark Lord is the one who questions, who challenges, who refuses to kneel. That’s why your Father banished us here—to silence anyone who might think freely. We are slaves to no one.”

Amiel’s chest tightens, a mix of fear and disbelief swirling within him. “My Father says Satan’s the Father of lies.”

“Your Father is the Father of lies,” Zonaved snaps, her voice sharp with bitterness. She steps closer, her scarred face illuminated by the dim light, her eyes burning with intensity. “The beast rising from the sea, the freedom it brings… The Dark Lord is coming with you, Amiel, his chosen one. And when he does, your Father’s reign will crumble, bringing the Age of Horus.”

Amiel’s voice falters as he struggles to process her words. “Why hasn’t the Dark Lord revealed himself to me yet? I’m here because of Aleister. He’s my friend and guides me from the palace now.”

“The Dark Lord will reveal himself to you when right. Aleister, me—we’re all his servants, guiding you to him. Now, you must answer my question.” Zonaved watches him, her expression unreadable. “Can you live with the goyim? Can you stand beside those your Father has cast out, or will you cling to the world he’s built for you?”

Amiel doesn’t respond. He can’t. The question lingers in the air, heavy and unrelenting, as the brothel shadows close around them. He’s never imagined having to leave home—his Mother, Deborah, the opulent halls of the palace, the luxuries he’s taken for granted all his life. The thought of it feels like being cast adrift on turbulent waters, the currents pulling him away from everything he’s ever known, with no promise of return.

Zonaved steps closer, her presence both commanding and unsettling. She places a finger on Amiel’s chest, her touch setting his skin on fire, just as it had the first time they met. “The sea is a turbulent place to be,” she says, her voice low and steady. “Cast upon the chaotic waves of the nations, you’ll feel lost, adrift. But I know this: you will rise from these waters when the time is right. With the power of the Dark Lord, you will lead us all to freedom.”

Her words hang in the air, a promise and a challenge wrapped in one. Amiel feels their weight settle deep within him, stirring something he can’t yet name.

“You don’t need to answer now,” she continues, her tone softening slightly. “But there’s something you must do. Sync your memories of the Mossad agent with your hologram. You must become him and play his role perfectly if you’re going to get back to the palace. It’s the only way. Your mentat faker will seal the deal. They won’t be able to see through your ruse.”

Amiel’s eyes widen as the reality of her words sinks in. The Mossad agent—his face, voice, and mannerisms—must become his own. The thought is daunting, but a spark of determination flickers beneath the fear. If this is what it takes to survive, to fulfill whatever destiny Zonaved sees in him, then he has no choice but to try.

Amiel hesitates for a moment, with his mentat, he interacts with the holographic interface within his tunic, activating the hologram. With a deep breath, he watches the device come to life, and light spills outward over his body in intricate patterns. Slowly, the form of Arnon takes shape, first as a shimmering outline that encases Amiel, then solidifying into the unmistakable figure of the Mossad agent. The projection is flawless: the sharp angles of Arnon’s face, the faint scar above his eyebrow, even the subtle tension in his stance that speaks of years of vigilance.

Clearing his throat, he begins testing the voice module, his voice melding with Arnon’s as he fine-tunes the settings.

“Testing… testing…” Amiel says, his pitch and inflection rising and falling like a singer searching for the right note. At first, his attempts are clumsy—the voice is too high, then too low, and the cadence is off by a fraction. But with each adjustment, he grows more confident and more precise.

“This is Agent Arnon,” he says, his voice now a near-perfect match—calm, measured, with just a hint of gravel. He repeats the phrase, tweaking the module until the inflection is flawless. “This is Agent Arnon. Reporting for duty.”

Zonaved watches him intently, her arms crossed, her expression unreadable. “Not bad,” she says after a moment, her tone neutral but her eyes sharp. “But it’s not just about the voice. It’s about the way he moves, the way he thinks. You need to become him, Amiel; Self-confident, firmly believing that you're God’s chosen warrior.”

Amiel nods, his jaw tightening as he steps further into the hologram’s projection. He straightens his posture, squares his shoulders, and takes a few experimental steps. The hologram moves with him seamlessly, its movements fluid and natural.

“How about this?” he asks, his voice now fully Arnon’s, “I am God’s chosen warrior, every evildoer who fights Prince Levi will die.”

Zonaved tilts her head, studying him with a critical eye. “Like him,” she says, her voice low and edged with something darker. “I remember him briefly, before he slaughtered my sisters. You’re almost a near-perfect reflection of him, as I recall.” Her words hang in the air, heavy with unspoken pain and anger.

Amiel nods again, his heart pounding as the task's weight settles over him. He turns and measures Arnon’s reflection in a cracked mirror across the room. Through Arnon, he hides his unease, determination, and everything else. He can do this. He has to.

Amiel looks at Zonaved, a mischievous grin playing over Arnon’s holographic face. “Have you ever danced with a Mossad agent before?”

Zonaved crosses her arms, her expression a mix of skepticism and amusement. “You do realize they could be coming at any moment now? Are you sure the mentat faker you’re carrying isn’t being tracked?”

The question almost causes Amiel to panic, threatening to shatter the calm demeanor he’s worked so hard to maintain. His heart skips a beat, but he forces himself to stay in character, the hologram’s smirk unwavering.

Aleister’s robotic voice hums to life in Amiel’s head, calm and clinical. “Checking, Lion. Why didn’t I account for that possibility earlier? Still fine-tuning my grasp of human logic, I suppose. No matter. In the meantime, indulge yourself. Perhaps you’ll attempt… sex magick with this young priestess?”

Amiel blinks rapidly, his lips twitching in annoyance as he mentally swats at the voice like an irritating fly. “Not helpful, Aleister. But let’s have some fun.” He turns to SX-69, his grin returning. “Can you play something? A good dance tune?”

The robot’s eyes flicker blue, its blank face alive with amusement. “As you wish.” Its torso swivels smoothly to a control panel behind it. Moments later, the disco ball mounted above them activates, casting a kaleidoscope of light across the room. Then music begins—a lively fusion of old-world jazz and synthetic basslines that makes the cracked walls vibrate in protest, as if they cannot bear such a joyful display of youthful exuberance in their midst.

“This,” SX-69 announces in a sultry, jazzy tone, “is ‘Sexual Healing’ by Marvin Gaye.” Without hesitation, it launches into a flawless rendition, its voice rich and soulful. The performance feels surreal and absurd, cutting through the palpable tension in the room.

Still wearing Arnon’s holographic smirk, Amiel turns to Zonaved and sticks out his hand, his grin widening. “Come on,” he says, his tone light and mischievous. “Dance with me. It’ll be fun!”

Zonaved crosses her arms, one eyebrow arching. “You’re kidding. Now?”

“Exactly now!” Amiel insists, the fake confidence in his voice almost believable. “If we’re going down, we might as well go down in style. Besides, you look like you could use some fun.”

Before she can object, he grabs her hand and spins her into an awkward twirl. For a brief moment, the oppressive weight of the room—the cracked furniture, the looming threat—fades into the rhythm of the music. Zonaved stumbles slightly, caught off guard, but then she laughs—a genuine, unexpected sound that surprises even her.

“You’re ridiculous,” she says, shaking her head but not pulling away. Instead, she lets him guide her into a clumsy but enthusiastic dance, her movements stiff at first but gradually loosening as the music takes hold.

Amiel grins, his heart lighter despite the danger. “See? Not so bad, is it?”

Zonaved rolls her eyes but can’t suppress a small smile. “Don’t let it go to your head, Arnon—Amiel.”

The two move together, their steps unpolished but charged with energy. SX-69’s smooth mid-range tenor fills the room, its rendition of the song surprisingly heartfelt. Overhead, the disco ball spins, scattering fragmented light across their faces. For a fleeting moment, it’s easy to forget where they are and what’s at stake.

“In court, Queen Dipti used to teach me how to dance,” Amiel murmurs. “You may not like my Father, but I think you’d like her. She’s kind… like my real Mother.”

Zonaved scoffs. “I always see her standing behind him when he speaks to Gehenna through the hologram projectors. How can she stand behind a man like that? A misogynist with a thousand wives? Talk about control.”

“Misogynist?” Amiel tilts his head. “You’re full of funny words. Aleister says I’ll have pride. Will you be in it?” His cheeks flush as soon as the words escape him.

“I already am, chosen one,” Zonaved teases, but her voice holds something softer underneath. “That is… if I ever see you again.”

She looks past him, her gaze following the shifting light patterns on the walls as if trying to glimpse the future. The dance of colors leads her eyes back to his. Slowly, she draws him closer. Her lips inch toward his.

They touch.

Then—

“We’re being tracked.”

Aleister’s voice slices between them, shattering the moment. Amiel jerks back, eyes wide with frustration and shock.

“Why does this keep happening?!” He seethes. “Every time I try to practice sex magick, the Mossad interrupts!”

Outside, the ship hovers overhead, its thrusters kicking up a storm of sand and debris. The walls of the brothel tremble under the force, and the disco ball’s light flickers erratically. The ship’s beams pierce the cracks across the room, illuminating the chaos within.

Amiel’s voice rises, struggling to be heard over the wailing engines and loud music. “What am I supposed to do?”

Zonaved doesn’t answer. Instead, she pulls him close, pressing her lips against his with desperate, hungry longing. His arms remain limp—his body surrendering to the moment, to her.

Outside, the ship looms closer, descending like a bird of prey upon its target. Its landing gear unfolds with eerie precision, talon-like metal feet extending before it touches down. A deafening roar rises as thrusters kick up a blinding sandstorm, the swirling dust obscuring the ship from view. The brothel entrance vanishes behind the storm’s curtain, reducing the world to the dim glow of artificial light and the muffled hum of Marvin Gaye.

Zonaved finally releases Amiel. He sways slightly, his eyes still closed, his body slack, his lips parted. His tongue moves absently outside his mouth, still searching for hers as if caught between moments, lost in a world beyond their own.

She grabs his shoulders and shakes him. “Amiel, snap out of it! The Mossad—you have to run!”

His eyes flutter open, dazed, as if waking from a dream. “That was my first kiss,” he murmurs. “I never knew it could be this amazing.”

Zonaved exhales sharply, frustration flickering across her face. “That’ll be our last if you don’t come with me now. There’s a tunnel we used to use when rival gangs raided the brothel. I’ll stay back and deal with them. Tell your Aleister to shut down the tracking device synced with your mentat faker—otherwise, you’ll never make it back.”

“I’m already on it, Lion,” Aleister’s voice hums in Amiel’s mind. “The signal is coming from somewhere inside the palace. All I have to do is hack their device and corrupt its firmware—once I do, they won’t be able to track you anymore. Until then…run.”

Amiel hesitates, his mind still fogged with the lingering sensation of Zonaved’s lips. Outside, the wind howls as the ship’s ramp lowers with a slow, mechanical hiss. A lone figure emerges, stepping through the dust and debris that the thrusters kicked up. The Mossad agent moves unhurriedly, his steps measured, his presence suffocating.

Zonaved shoves Amiel toward the back of the room. “Move, idiot!” she hisses. “You don’t have time to stand around reminiscing about your first kiss.”

Amiel stumbles but follows, heart pounding. Zonaved leads him to what appears to be a dead-end wall, then presses her fingers against a barely visible seam. With a quiet click, the panel shifts, revealing a narrow passageway. The stale scent of damp earth rises from below.

“Go!” she orders. “Follow the tunnel until you reach the old sewage line. It’ll take you back to the wall. Use a mentat faker to get through the checkpoint.”

Amiel lingers for a beat too long. “And you?”

She flashes a wry grin. “I’ll keep our guest entertained.”

The heavy crunch of boots grows louder. The agent is close.

“I’ll see you again,” Amiel promises.

“Run, chosen one.”

As soon as he slips inside, Zonaved pulls the panel shut and turns to face the entrance.

The Mossad agent enters the room, the shifting dust settling around him. He stands still for a moment, listening and calculating.

Zonaved exhales, rolling her shoulders. “Well,” she mutters, cracking her knuckles, “let’s dance.”

# Chapter 14: A House Divided Against Itself

Prince Levi lies in restless sleep, his breath deep yet ragged, his body burning with fever. Sweat beads on his forehead, soaking into the sheets as his muscles twitch with unseen strain. His scientists, driven to desperation, have scoured the vast archives of pre-Restoration knowledge, hunting for a cure. They have devised a vaccine—one they pray will save him—but it will take weeks to take full effect. Until then, all they can do is wait.

Levi drifts at the edge of consciousness, trapped in fevered delirium where past and present blur into one. Memories he had long buried—fragments of pain and weakness—rise like specters from the abyss of his mind. He mumbles in his sleep, his words a tangled mess of prayers, pleas, and half-formed thoughts.

The fever binds him, dragging him back to a life he thought he had escaped. He relives the long, agonizing months of sickness that once chained him to a bed—the bitter taste of medicine coating his tongue, the stifling weight of frailty pressing on his bones. The life he has fought to leave behind—the world of suffering, of waiting, of helplessness—pulls him back with cruel insistence.

But he resists. He longs only for the present—the golden world Yahweh has restored, the beauty of creation renewed. He clings to it, reaching in his delirium for the warmth of sunlight, the scent of blooming fields, the laughter of the redeemed. He whispers his gratitude even as the fever wracks him, a desperate prayer against the shadows that refuse to let him go.

Then, without warning, the golden world shatters.

He is yanked away, pulled through the fabric of time and memory, and suddenly, he stands in the home of his youth. But something is wrong.

Flames consume the walls, devouring the familiar rooms with ravenous hunger. Smoke coils through the air, thick and suffocating, searing his throat with every breath. The warmth of nostalgia is gone, replaced by the unbearable heat of destruction. It is no longer the haven he remembers—it is a dying place, crumbling before his eyes.

And he is trapped inside.

Screams echo from every direction—his children’s voices, fractured and desperate, crying out for him. Some are distant, muffled by fire and falling debris, others so close he swears he could reach them. Panic seizes him. He runs, slamming his shoulder against the walls, trying to break through, but they hold firm, absorbing his blows. He staggers back, breathless, helpless.

Then, amid the chaos, one voice cuts through the rest.

*Deborah.*

She’s in the next room, pleading for her tormenters to stop; he can hear the terror in her voice. He shouts her name, and she answers—pleading, sobbing, desperate. Then comes a bloodcurdling scream.

And silence.

His heart pounds as he stumbles forward, tracing the walls with trembling hands, trying to find her. He presses his ear against the scorched wood, listening, praying to hear her voice again. Nothing.

No.

With a roar, he steps back, then hurls himself at the wall with all his strength.

The wall explodes into splinters as he crashes through.

The fire is gone. The room is no longer part of his burning childhood home—it has changed, twisted into something far worse. The air is cold and sterile, thick with the scent of metal and something rotten. Shadows coil in the corners, shifting unnaturally.

At the center of the room, Deborah lies chained to a medical table, her body writhing, her fingers stretching toward him in silent desperation. Her lips tremble, her eyes wide with terror.

The curls, the innocent smile—gone. The child he once knew has vanished. Now, before him, is a grown woman, her body trembling, her wrists bound with iron.

A sudden, blinding light flashes in Levi’s eyes. A veil has been ripped away, revealing a new, cruel reality.

A man stands over her.

He’s draped in a regal purple robe, clutching a branding iron, its metal tip glowing with cruel heat. His bloodshot eyes gleam with malice, locking onto Deborah like a predator savoring its prey. His pale, corpse-like skin stretches too tightly over his bones, a grotesque mask of something caught between life and death.

A monster in human form.

Levi’s blood runs cold.

Then the man moves, and dread tightens around Levi’s throat. His gaze falls to the branding iron and sees it etched into the searing metal, burning with infernal heat: **666.**

The mark of the beast.

Levi lunges forward, but his body doesn’t obey. Heavy chains bite into his ankles, their cold weight anchoring him to the wall. He looks down—thick iron cuffs hold him fast, unyielding. He thrashes against them, desperate, wild.

“NO!”

The man raises the branding iron over Deborah’s forehead, its heat shimmering. She squirms, helpless, her eyes wide with terror. The iron descends, closer, closer—

A scream.

Her body writhes with blinding pain.

Levi jolts awake, gasping. His body trembles, drenched in sweat. His breath comes in ragged sobs as he blinks at the dimly lit royal chambers. He’s in bed. Safe.

But the tears won’t stop.

And the nightmare still lingers.

Prince Levi’s sudden tears startle Dipti. Lying beside him, she holds a holographic tablet in her hands, its soft blue glow illuminating her face. She had been reviewing the vitals of their children—all *five hundred and twenty-four* of them—each currently under the watchful care of med-bots. No human hands would touch them, no nurses or doctors would risk spreading the illness further.

"Hey, hey, don’t cry." She gently nudges Prince Levi. "What happened? Was it a nightmare?"

Levi rubs his eyes, his voice barely above a whisper. "The mark of the beast… the final seven. I saw it all. They branded Deborah—666—on her forehead."

Her brows knit together. "Deborah’s strong. She wouldn’t willingly do that."

"She didn’t," he murmurs. "They strapped her down. I—I couldn’t stop them. I was a prisoner, too."

Queen Dipti exhales, setting her tablet aside with deliberate care. She reaches out, resting a steadying hand on his shoulder. "Maybe it’s a warning," she says gently. "A reminder to stay vigilant in protecting her from the Evil One. But don’t let the dream consume you, Levi. We can’t live in fear of what’s to come."

Levi closes his eyes for a moment, the weight of the vision pressing heavily on his chest. Then, with quiet resolve, he nods. "You’re right, Dipti. ‘Do not fear him who can destroy the body, but fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.’"

She shifts, reaching for a small corked vial resting beside the bed. "Here, take this—it’ll bring down the fever. We prepared it from the trees along the River of Cleansing." Uncorking the vial, she pours the sweet-scented liquid into a cup and hands it to him.

Levi takes a sip, and almost instantly, relief washes over him. He exhales, sinking deeper into the pillows. "Ah, that’s so much better. Way better than acetaminophen. That stuff used to wreck my stomach. Remember how I’d always end up in the hospital, needing injections to handle a fever? It was the only way I could keep it down."

Dipti leans back, a thoughtful smile playing on her lips. "Amazing how a little divine fruit put big pharma—and all the doctors—out of business."

"It’s nice not having doctors anymore. I used to hate going to those money-hungry SOBs."

She nods. "Me too. Though it’s a shame the fruit can’t completely kill the virus, it just strengthens our bodies to fight it. Some things never change. Ultimately, our God-given immune system remains the most powerful weapon against illness. I suppose it’ll be like this until the very end."

Levi stretches, testing his strength. "I’m feeling a little better. Guess I’ll play some *Switch*." Rolling onto his side, he reaches under the bed, rummaging momentarily before pulling out a red and blue Nintendo Switch.

Dipti raises a brow, amused. "After all these years, I still don’t know how you’ve kept that thing running. Where do you even find the parts? The batteries? And how many analog sticks have you replaced in the past 400 years?"

Levi smirks. "Too many to count. And I have every *Nintendo Switch* game ever made. I even put together a special team to scour the ruins of the world for accessories and cartridges."

Dipti chuckles, shaking her head. "You’re ridiculous, funny guy."

"I have another *Switch*—want to play? I get tired of playing *Smash Bros.* alone." Levi reaches under the bed again, pulling out a second console.

She smiles but shakes her head. "No, that’s okay. Play with your kids when they’re better. I will check on Martha—I heard she’s got it bad."

Levi frowns. "You’re not sick, so I guess it’s fine… but are you sure? Everyone else is on lockdown. Maybe we should be, too."

Dipti smirks, raising an eyebrow. "Rules for thee, but not for me. Besides, it’s just Martha. No one will know—except her husband, but Gavriel won’t tell."

The mention of Gavriel’s name stirs something in her—a reminder of everything that happened during her tryst deep within his mind. But she refuses to avoid him or let the fear of her discovery control her. If he had nothing to hide, then it shouldn’t matter that she had been there in the first place.

Still, she can’t shake the feeling that things will be awkward between them. Not that she cares. Gavriel is Prince Levi’s right-hand man, commander of the entire military. Even Cohen, who oversees the Mossad, answers to him. His position places him at a level of accountability that surpasses everyone except her and the king.

Queen Dipti fastens a golden robe around her waist, the fabric shimmering in the soft morning light that filters through the windows. The golden hue brings warmth to the room, and she can’t help but admire the opulence surrounding her. Gold, once a distant dream, is now a tangible luxury. The Restoration had changed everything—wealth, power, security.

Queen Dipti steps into the hallway, the familiar silence of the palace now almost oppressive. The absence of human presence is striking, replaced by the steady hum of robots that have taken over every task in the wake of the virus. Their cold, mechanical movements sharply contrast with the bustling palace life that used to fill these halls. They sweep the floors, carry food, and monitor the conditions of the rooms, all without a word or glance exchanged.

Dipti pauses, taking in the sight. The only sound now is these machines' rhythmic clicking and whirring, their actions so precise that it feels as though the world has been reduced to a series of automated processes. No servants hurry past her with kind greetings. No guards stand at attention to watch her every move. It’s an eerie feeling—once so full of life, the palace now feels like a hollow shell.

She shakes off the unease and moves toward Martha’s room. The illness has struck her friend and lady-in-waiting particularly hard. The healer has done what they can; Martha's condition has stabilized, but constant monitoring by robots can never replace the comfort of a human touch.

She reaches the door and knocks gently. No response.

Dipti accesses her mentat. "Martha, can you hear me? I'm outside. I knocked, but you didn’t answer. Are you okay?"

A pause. Then a drowsy reply. "I’m asleep. What are you doing here? Everyone’s on lockdown."

"I pulled some strings with the world's ruler to let me visit. Wake up—I came to comfort you."

Another pause, then a sleepy sigh. "I was having the most wonderful dream... Vacationing in the Maldives, the most handsome men in the world are catering to my every whim. I don’t want to wake up... but seeing your face again might be just as nice."

She yawns. "When I wake up, I want you to meet Guido. I met him at the pool—a bodybuilder, a model, an absolute dreamboat. He says we're traveling to Italy next, but don’t tell Gavriel, okay?"

Dipti smirks. *"Remind me never to invade your dreams again. Now wake up! I’m waiting."*

A tap on her shoulder. She jumps—the sudden touch in the stillness startles her. Turning around, she sees a bot standing there.

"Oh, I’m sorry, Queen Dipti. I didn’t realize it was you. I was about to report you."

"It’s okay, bot. Continue with your work."

She turns away, but the bot remains. Finally, she sighs and faces it again.

"Is there something I can help you with?"

"Ma’am, may I advise against issuing orders you do not follow? It may set a bad precedent for your subjects."

Dipti talks out loud to herself as if the robot isn't listening, “No matter how many times we patch their AI they still think they know better than us,” now she makes direct eye contact with the synthetic eyes thoughtfully observing her, “Yes, I understand, but what I'm doing right now is in the best interest of the kingdom at the present moment so please continue with your duties,” she scoffs, “Who does this bot think it is?” She turns around and continues waiting for Martha to open the door.

“Ugh, waking someone through mentat takes forever,” Dipti taps her foot in a hurry. Suggesting to someone’s subconscious that they enter consciousness isn’t easy. She knows the door isn’t locked, but barging in and disrupting someone’s sleep is rude. Not only does it negatively impact their ability to function during the day, but it’s also better to gently suggest that they open their eyes.

Her and Martha were still supposed to start their workout routine, but because of this damn virus Dipti’s plan hadn’t worked out. Dipti pinches a chunk of fat on her belly. She can feel the pounds stacking on her body. “That’s right, after this, I will start working out again in my quarters. I think talking to Martha will give me the motivation I need.”

Again, Dipti feels the robot's watchful eyes still fixed on her. Even though she had commanded the bot to continue its duties, it remains fixed in place, watching her with wonder.

Once again, she turns around, “What has gotten into robots these days?” She’s reminded of Amiel’s robot, who had left the dirty laundry lying on the floor, and now this robot. She begins to wonder if the virus now affecting the palace has mutated and affected the network of AI.

“One last time, bot,” her eyebrows furrow. She’s visibly angry, but it doesn’t faze the bot. What do you want? This better be good.”

Its face lights up, its synthetic skin growing brighter than usual. “Madam, can we have a selfie together if you don’t mind me asking? I’m such a big fan. If I show this to all the other bots, I’ll be the talk of the garage.”

Dipti is full of wonder; she can’t believe how much AI has advanced in the past hundred years. After the Great War, almost all the bots were destroyed by the following earthquake.

“Sure, I guess,” she shifts her weight awkwardly on her legs as she stands closer to the bot. She flashes a peace sign like an anime Japanese girl. The bot does the same, mimicking her silly pose and throwing a peace sign with its free hand. The bot puts its hand in the air, its palm facing the two. A flash shoots out of its hand.

“Would you like to see our pic. You have made the envy of all bots.”

Dipti laughs. “Why not?”

A hologram shoots out from the robot’s hand, capturing a frozen moment: Dipti and the elated machine, a picture-perfect tableau of queen and servant.

“Amazing,” she thinks. “I still look like I did on my wedding day.”

The robot bows low, its joints clicking, then proclaims, with a loud mechanical shout, “Allhail Prince Levi and Queen Dipti!”

Dipti’s smile falters. Something about how it says it—too rigid or rehearsed—unsettles her. Before she can react, the robot spins on its heels and sprints off.

“That’s strange,” she murmurs. “I’ll have that one checked out. And Amiel’s robot, too. I won’t forget this time.”

The door to Martha’s quarters creaks open. A sleepy, dazed Martha stands before her, hair tangled, eyes unfocused, as if she’s woken in the middle of a dream.

“I felt like someone was beckoning me,” she murmurs. “Like I had to open the door. Was that you?”

Dipti grins. “Yours truly. A little inception to wake you gently.” She hesitates, then adds, “Is Gavriel awake?”

*Oh, please let him be asleep. Call me passive-aggressive, but I don’t want any confrontation right now.*

"No, he's asleep," Martha says, rubbing her eyes. "Soldier’s habit—always retiring early, even now, during lockdown. He quietly polishes his boots, spars with the training bots… barely speaks these days." She exhales, a trace of weariness in her voice. "I'm not sure what's gotten into him."

Martha meets her gaze, a knowing look passing between them.

Dipti catches the unspoken meaning but chooses not to press. Instead, she nods—a silent acknowledgment of what lingers between them, unsaid but understood.

“Fine,” she says lightly. “We’ll talk quietly and not disturb him. You have to tell me everything about Guido.”

Martha blinks. “Guido?”

Dipti frowns. “Wait… never mind. No more dream-surfing for me. Come.”

Martha steps aside, and Dipti enters the dimly lit quarters.

Inside, a servant robot cradles a newborn in its metallic arms. Its movements are shockingly gentle—almost maternal. From its speakers, a lullaby plays, the voice eerily human, filling the space with artificial warmth.

Dipti plops down on a lounge chair, followed by Martha, who joins her in an opposite chair.

"How are you, Martha? I heard you had a nasty spell of the virus. Is the fruit helping?"

"Yes, I took some before bed. Feeling a bit better now, by God's grace. Thanks." She offers a tired smile. "I just hope it lasts. You seem well—you dodged a bullet."

"The Lord needed someone to take charge while the prince is sick," Dipti replies. "He chose me. I'll use my health to help all of you recover."

“And Gavriel?”

“He also dodged one.”

“Excellent.”

Dipti’s gaze locks onto the robot, cradling Martha’s child like a priceless artifact. “I haven’t even held your child yet.” A flicker of guilt passes through her. “With this lockdown, I’ve realized how busy I’ve been… I never even took the time to meet her.”

Martha glances at the robot, then nods.

The bot moves with deliberate precision. As it hands the baby to Dipti, its hesitation is almost tangible—fingers linger, servos tense, as if unwilling to let go.

Dipti adjusts the child in her arms, brow furrowing. “Strange,” she murmurs. “This bot is…possessive, as if she were its own.”

Martha studies the machine, her voice thoughtful. “AI has advanced far beyond what it was even a few years ago. Some fear humanity will fall into worshiping it again, just like in the pre-Restoration days.”

Dipti’s expression darkens. “Terrifying. When the man of lawlessness finally comes… I can’t imagine anything more fitting than an AI-generated image enthroned in the temple, demanding worship. And with the way humanity was—and still is—it’s not just possible. It’s inevitable.”

The maternal bot glides forward, setting a tray between them. The scent of spiced tea curls into the air as they take their seats.

Martha lifts her cup but hesitates before sipping. Her gaze is searching. “If you don’t mind me asking… how do you and Prince Levi live, knowing your ultimate fate? That everything you’ve built will eventually be torn down when he comes?”

Dipti’s fingers curl around her cup. The tea swirls inside, dark and rich, as if holding the answer she doesn’t want to give.

“It’s hard,” she admits. “I try not to dwell on it. I take it one day at a time—give thanks for whatever God has given me today and let tomorrow worry about itself.” She exhales softly, a faint smile touching her lips. “And yet… I sleep well. The Lord gives me this strange peace about it all. As if, no matter what happens, everything will be alright.”

Martha’s grip tightens on her cup. “That’s great,” she says, voice quiet. “I wish the Lord would give me the same peace.”

She stares into her tea, the room's warmth suddenly feeling fragile.

“Sometimes it keeps me up at night,” she admits. “I wonder if I’ll be able to endure… if I can withstand the tortures of the evil one.” Her voice wavers. “I worry about my daughter. What will happen to her? How much will she suffer? It makes me wonder if I should have had a child.”

Dipti looks up sharply.

Martha swallows. “What if she grows up in a world without all the comforts we’ve known for the past four hundred years? What if she grows up only to be tortured and put to death by the beast?”

The lullaby continues to play. The robot stands silently in the corner, its dark lenses unreadable.

Dipti reaches across the table and takes Martha’s hand.

“You’re not alone in this,” she says gently. “None of us are.”

Martha takes a long sip of her chai, nearly finishing it. “Well, at least you don’t have any children to worry about.”

The words slip out before she can stop them. Embarrassment creeps up her neck as she realizes how callous that must sound. She sets down her cup, flustered. “I’m sorry,” she says quickly. “I didn’t mean it like that, I was just thinking of all the…” She trails off, sensing that more words might only deepen the wound.

Dipti remains composed, her expression unreadable. Then, softly, she says, “It’s okay, Martha.”

She exhales, staring into her tea as if the memories lie hidden. “It was the Lord’s will not to allow me to have my children all these years.” A pause, the silence heavy. “I had a child once. But it ended in a miscarriage.”

Martha’s breath catches. “Oh… Dipti, I—I didn’t know.”

Martha’s throat tightens as she watches Dipti’s composure waver momentarily.

“Few people do,” Dipti murmurs. “I don’t often speak of it.”

She folds her hands in her lap, her voice steady but distant. A single tear glistens in her eye, catching the dim light before she blinks it away.

“But I know,” she continues, her tone quiet yet firm, “that one day I will see my child again when the resurrection comes. I know that all the children who were lost, whether to abortions or the tragedies of pregnancy, will be reunited with their saved parents.”

The sadness in Dipti’s voice is unmistakable.

Martha exhales softly. “That’s a beautiful thought.”

She reaches for Dipti’s hand, gripping it gently. “Also comforting,” she whispers, giving it a slight squeeze.

Dipti nods, but her gaze lingers on something unseen, something beyond the walls of the present.

“But you know,” she says after a moment, her voice warming, “in place of one child, God has given me five hundred and twenty-four who call me ‘Mother.’”

A faint smile touches her lips. “It brings me such joy to dote on and play with the descendants of Levi as if they were my own—and in a way, they are. With each child, I give a little piece of my heart, and in return, they fill me with joy. Seeing them smile, watching them take their first steps… how could I call my life tragic? No, I’ve lived a victorious, joyful life full of purpose.”

Martha starts to respond but is cut off by a fit of coughing. She presses a hand to her chest, wincing. “Oh no, the fever’s coming back. The fruit only gives me temporary relief… I know I’ll be okay, but still.”

“The fruit will heal you, don’t worry.” Queen Dipti pulls her chair closer, resting a hand on Martha’s shoulder as she begins to pray quietly. Martha closes her eyes and does the same.

As they pray, Gavriel enters the room, pouring himself tea from the kitchen while watching them from the dining hall. He wears a robe that mainly conceals his thick chest hair, though a few dark curls peek through the deep V of his exposed torso. He pulls out a long, thin cigarette and lights up. The sharp scent of smoke drifts through the air, alerting Dipti to his presence. But instead of opening her eyes, she includes him in her prayer.

“And Lord, I pray for Martha and her husband, that You would bless their marriage and build them up in You.”

Gavriel flicks cigarette ash into the sink. His face remains hard, his gray eyes unreadable. At Dipti’s mention of his marriage, he doesn’t flinch—his expression as rigid as if he were training soldiers or marching with the palace guard.

Then his voice shatters the quiet, cutting through their prayers like the first war horn on the battlefield. The intimate moment between the two women is obliterated as his words crash with the force of an advancing army.

“And Lord,” he intones, his voice thick with conviction, “I pray for Queen Dipti and Prince Levi. May they rest assured that my marriage is fine. And may they take comfort in knowing I will lead the most powerful army on earth.”

He exhales a slow curl of smoke. His voice lowers, but its weight only deepens.

“And when the Evil One comes, I will slice through that motherfucker with a fury so raw that even the Almighty Himself will feel the earth tremble beneath my wrath—so help me, God. Amen.”

Martha shifts uncomfortably, her face grimacing as Gavriel’s final *amen* fades. Both women remain still, eyes closed, the silence between them thick and unspoken.

Dipti reaches out—not physically, but with the quiet touch of her mentat—brushing against the edges of Gavriel’s conscience. But there’s nothing. No ripple of emotion, no lingering thought. Just a vast, unnerving stillness, like an artificially calm sea, too perfect to be natural.

She searches deeper. No sign of the beautifully chiseled legs that once poked from behind the curtain, beckoning her back to the frayed edges of his mind.

Instead, she sees a vision in the sea—Martha, rowing a boat with their child swaddled in cloth, while Gavriel stands at the helm, a silent guardian ensuring the waters remain still.

*Bullshit.*

Dipti freezes, breath catching. Did she say that out loud—or just in her mind? She slowly opens her eyes, not sure which. Martha sits there, a large grin on her face, looking back at Queen Dipti as if answering her greatest fear.

*This can’t be good.*

“Which part of what I said is bullshit Queen Dipti, you no longer have confidence in me after four hundred years of defending this kingdom.”

Dipti’s stomach tightens. *Four hundred years.* He says it is like a weight she should carry, as if she owes him belief, trust, and loyalty.

She forces a calm breath, steadying herself before meeting his gaze.

“I have confidence in the man who stands before me,” she says carefully. “But I also have confidence in what I see.”

Gavriel takes a slow drag from his cigarette, the ember flaring in the dim light. Smoke curls from his lips as he exhales, his gray eyes unreadable.

“And what is it that you see?” His voice is smooth, almost teasing.

Dipti hesitates. The image of Martha on the boat lingers in her mind—the still waters, the illusion of peace. *He’s showing me what he wants me to see.*

She tilts her head. “A sea too calm.”

Gavriel smirks, flicking ash into the sink. “Then enjoy the peace while it lasts. Because all hell is breaking loose in Gehenna, I’m the breaker against the storm.”

Dipti narrows her eyes. “What do you mean?”

He exhales slowly, letting the smoke drift before speaking. “Two of my Mossad operatives engaged in open battle—against katana-wielding whores.” His lips curl slightly. “They had to cut them all down. Except one. We got to her in time, pumped her full of antidote.” He leans back, voice laced with something between amusement and intrigue. “They call themselves the Dark Priestesses. Say the *Chosen One* is here. Whatever the hell that means.”

He takes a final drag, then tosses the cigarette into the sink with a soft hiss. “Would’ve loved to be there. Kill a few myself. Just like the old days—before we rotted in four hundred years of peace.”

# Chapter 15: A Long Way Home

In the brothel's dim, chaotic main lobby, Samson stands beneath a slowly spinning disco ball, its fractured light scattering kaleidoscopic hues across the room. The air is thick with the scent of sweat, perfume, and something metallic—perhaps oil or blood.

From across the room, SX-69—the ultra-efficient sexbot—greets him with breezy confidence.

"Aren't you a strong, strapping lad?" the android purrs. "I'll be happy to be of service. I'm SX-69—I can fulfill your deepest, darkest dreams. My specialty? Anal." Its voice is smooth, practiced, dripping with synthetic charm.

Samson’s eyes narrow into a glare. "What kind of twisted abomination are you? Did you say anal, you sick fuckin' freak?" His voice is razor-edged with disgust.

SX-69 stiffens, tilting its head in a mechanical approximation of offense. A cold, metal finger rises to point at him. "I would have you know, good sir, that I am not a freak—I just know how to get freaky."

Before Samson can retort, another voice cuts through the charged air.

"I'm a freak," announces Zoneved from behind the main desk.

She rises slowly, shotgun in hand. The dim light casts harsh shadows across her face, highlighting the dark circles under her eyes. She carries herself with the eerie calm of someone long past fear. The sight of her stirs something bitter in Samson, a flicker of sorrow at the women he’d been forced to slaughter. He pushes the thought aside—no time for that now.

Mindful of the dark priestesses’ formidable abilities and the fragile balance of power in the room, Samson raises both hands placatingly.

"Look," he says, voice low but firm, "we just want whoever was with you. It pains me that we had to kill the others. Put the shotgun down, and I'll let you go. It’s only a matter of time until we catch him—you’re just wasting your life."

Zoneved tilts her head, a mocking smile creeping onto her lips. "Where’s your buddy? Weren’t there two of you? I was hoping to kill two birds with one stone."

She cocks the shotgun with slow, deliberate precision. The metallic *click-clack* reverberates through the silence.

"I'm sufficient to handle you," Samson retorts coolly.

Zoneved’s smirk deepens. "Doesn’t the Bible warn against putting too much faith in your strength rather than in your god?" she taunts, her voice laced with venom.

Samson’s jaw tightens, and his fingers twitch at his sides. "This conversation is over." Samson restricts access to his neural network so his wife and son cannot see what will happen.

With a thought, his bio-sword extends from his palm, humming with lethal promise. He grips it tightly and lowers into a steady stance.

"SX, now!"

The overhead speakers end the serenade of Marvin Gaye and crackle to life with the sound of punk—that’s what they called it, Pre-Restoration.

A distorted, hollow voice drifts down, chords of a guitar drowning out his voice to the beat of a drum:

*Don’t kill me—  
Just help me run away—  
From everyone, I need a place to stay—  
Where can I cover up my face?  
Don’t cry—  
I am just a freak—  
I am just a freak—  
I am just a freak—  
I am just a freak…*

At SX-69’s command, the previously idle sexbots snap to attention, their eyes flickering red in perfect unison. The air fills with mechanical whirring as they spring into motion.

Some wield whips ready to slice through the air like lightning. Others brandish jagged bedframe posts or scavenged steel instruments, their movements eerily synchronized.

SX-69 pulls a pistol from behind a vase and fires. The shot rings out, striking the disco ball’s chain.

*Snap.*

The heavy sphere plummets. Samson’s nanobots react instantly, swarming to absorb the impact. The glass shatters against the hovering mass, refracting the crimson light of the sexbots' eyes into fractured, hellish streaks.

Zoneved’s shotgun roars.

A storm of buckshot and razor-sharp glass erupts through the air, a whirlwind of death screaming toward Samson. His nanobots surge into action, intercepting thousands of jagged projectiles. Some self-destruct on impact, vaporizing shards into harmless dust. Others ricochet buckshot into the advancing sexbots, puncturing synthetic flesh and shattering porcelain masks. Yet amidst the chaos and flawless calculations of his nanite swarm, one pellet slips through.

Just one.

It punches into his shoulder.

The pain is immediate, white-hot, and foreign. Samson reels, momentarily stunned. He has never felt this before—not like this. But there’s no time to process, no time to falter. The adrenaline kicks in, forcing him forward as the brothel erupts into full-blown chaos.

And then, they lunge.

The sexbots descend upon him in eerie synchronization.

Whips crack like gunfire.

Splintered bedposts swing wildly.

Jagged steel gleams in the dim light.

Samson grits his teeth: his bio-sword hums, glowing red with heat.

There is no hesitation. No mercy.

Just his blood, metal, and the dance of war.

….

Crawling through the darkness, Amiel freezes.

The distant clash of battle echoes through the tunnels. He no longer feels the ground beneath his hands, the suffocating weight of the air around him. He is numb.

One all-consuming thought courses through his mind like burning brandy—Zoneved is fighting alone. Fighting against assassins was meant for him.

A memory sears itself into his vision—a severed head tumbling before him, the shock and horror frozen in the priestess’s lifeless eyes. But this time, it isn’t some unknown martyr who died in his place.

This time, he sees Zoneved’s head rolling toward him.

The scar on her face.

Her black-within-black eyes.

Crying out to him. Calling him back. Begging him to save her.

He wants to run, to get back to the wall before anyone realizes he’s gone. But what waits for him if he returns? He might have to kill one of his own.

Uriel is one thing. The unknown Mossad agent is another.

The thought tears at his mind. His breath comes ragged.

“I can’t take it. I have to go back.”

But it isn’t fear that haunts him most.

It’s the taste of Zoneved’s lips against his.

Their tongues searching for each other.

He grits his teeth, his voice raw with desperation.

“Aleister, I have to go back. She's going to die. Only I can save her.”

Aleister’s voice crackles in his mind, calm and mechanical.

"I found the device tracking the mentat faker. It's been temporarily disabled until you return when I gain access to the faker."

Amiel barely hears him. His mind is already spiraling.

“I understand your human emotions for her,” Aleister continues, “but if you go back, you put everything we worked for in danger. Also, you don’t have access to your bio-weapon.”

Amiel’s pulse pounds in his ears. Then, suddenly, an idea

"What if you use the faker to trick my mentat into accessing my bio-weapon?"

A pause.

Then Aleister responds. "Why didn't I think of that? One moment."

And then—silence.

Not just any silence.

The kind that drives daggers into the chest and twists them, slow and deep.

The kind that feels like drowning while the world burns in the distance.

The kind that turns seconds into eternities.

And in that silence, the shotgun roars.

….

Dipti bursts into the interrogation room.

The single lamp overhead sways from the force of her entrance, its harsh white light carving a narrow circle in the gloom. The room's corners remain drowned in shadow, untouched by its glow.

Against the far wall, the priestess lies slumped, her cuffed legs sprawl into the light while the rest of her body remains barely visible in the dim light. Her breath comes in ragged gasps. The antidote has done its work, but the synthetic poison has already ravaged her system, leaving her trembling and spent.

At the center of the room, a squat wooden desk looms like a silent judge, its surface worn with age. A bare wooden chair rests beneath it, stiff and unwelcoming. Dipti strides forward, her movements deliberate, and pulls the chair out with a controlled scrape against the floor. She turns it to face the captive, then lowers herself gracefully onto it, crossing her legs with quiet poise. With a practiced hand, she adjusts the folds of her sari, her gaze steady and unreadable.

Cohen steps inside, his every movement betraying the weight of lingering fever. He pauses by the desk, folding his arms as he fixes his gaze on the young woman. A subtle flush tints his cheeks, his eyes drooping with exhaustion. Despite the strain in his posture, urgency has drawn him from his bed. Behind him, Benjamin lingers at the threshold—a silent observer. His alert eyes and poised stance capture every whispered detail, and his calm demeanor suggests the virus has touched him far less.

The girl doesn’t look up as her interrogators approach. The hood of her robe obscures her face from Dipti’s prying eyes. Prisoner of war or death cultist—Dipti isn’t sure what to consider her. Perhaps both.

Her robe is tattered and threadbare, adorned with intricate symbols now faded and worn away. The fabric is rough and frayed, patched together desperately to keep it from falling apart. The long, flowing sleeves are torn at the edges, revealing glimpses of her thin, weathered arms.

Dipti wants to ask why.

Why did you sacrifice yourself to protect that man?

But the words feel inadequate—perhaps even meaningless. Would the girl even understand? Would she care? Can Dipti reason with her? Can she save her? She doesn’t know.

She exhales, pushing aside her uncertainty.

"Do you know where you are?" Dipti asks, her voice gentler than before. "My name is Dipti. This is Cohen." She motions toward him with a slow, deliberate hand.

The priestess doesn’t respond. Her body remains eerily still, the tattered folds of her robe draped over her like funeral linens. Dipti watches for her chest's subtle rise and fall, searching for signs of life. A flicker of doubt takes root—has the poison left her incapable of responding? She resists the urge to ask Cohen if the effects have fully subsided. Instead, she shifts her approach.

A more caring approach.

Maybe she can be the girlfriend. Or at least try.

"We want to help you," Dipti says, her tone measured, coaxing. "But we need you to answer some questions. I don’t want to put you in our dungeon. But I will have to if we believe you still pose a serious threat. You see, you attacked one of our soldiers. That’s not something we can ignore." She leans forward slightly, watching for any reaction. "As long as you cooperate, we’ll be very good friends. We might even let you stay in Jerusalem. Can you believe that?"

Nothing.

Dipti presses on. “You’ll never have to run. Never have to hide. You’ll live without the constant threat of death hanging over your head. You could live to be a hundred years old. Imagine that—one hundred years.”

Still no response.

The girl’s silence hardens. It’s no longer passive indifference—it’s something else now. Pointed. Defiant.

Dipti’s patience thins. She exhales sharply and turns to Cohen, hoping he might succeed where she’s failing. But one look at him, and she knows he’s barely standing as it is. His fevered gaze flickers with exhaustion, dark circles etched beneath his eyes.

He lets out a slow sigh.

Then, he enters her mind through the mentat, a whisper only she can hear.

“Ask her about my agents. Try to appeal to any humanity left inside of her.”

Dipti pivots back and, without hesitation, rises from her chair and yanks down the priestess’s hood.

The fabric disappears, revealing a tangled mess of dark, matted hair. Strands cling to her damp forehead, and her face is streaked with dirt and dried blood. But it’s not the filth that makes Dipti hesitate.

It’s her eyes.

Two pools of darkness.

For a brief second, Dipti forgets to breathe. The girl’s eyes are void-like, so black they swallow the light around them.

Something about them isn’t human.

A sudden memory seizes Dipti—those old horror films from before the Restoration, their grainy frames flickering like fragments of a lost nightmare. Demon-possessed girls perched on the edges of their beds, wide-eyed and grinning, their mouths stretching into unnatural smiles. Then came the screams—deep, guttural, inhuman—voices warped by something ancient and vile. They spat blasphemies, obscene and dripping with venom, their lips curling as if savoring the corruption they unleashed.

The priestess bears an uncanny resemblance.

A flicker of unease crawls up Dipti’s spine.

And then, the girl smiles.

Not wide. Not obvious. Just the faintest curl of her lips. A wicked demonic smile feeding from the limitless blackness of her eyes.

Like she knows precisely what Dipti is thinking.

Like she’s seen this play out before.

Like she’s waiting.

Dipti collects herself, forcing down the unease curling in her gut. The girl’s eyes—those abyssal pits of blackness—press in on her, trying to pull her under, to smother her with fear. But Dipti refuses.

She has seen true darkness before and has not bowed to it.

She squares her shoulders, steadying her breath. Courage is a choice. A choice she has made countless times before, and she will make it again now.

The light inside her flickers but does not die. It pushes back.

When she speaks again, her voice is sharper, rigid, unyielding. "Look, I just want to know why you attacked our agents. These men have families, you know. They were defending themselves—you have to understand that. If someone did the same to you, wouldn’t you fight back?" She searches the girl's obscured face for any flicker of acknowledgment. "From what I saw on the footage, they did everything they could to de-escalate. They pleaded with you. And yet, your only response was violence. Why?"

Nothing.

No twitch. No breath. Not even the slightest shift in posture.

For a moment, Dipti wonders if the girl is even still alive.

Then, her leg shifts.

The movement is unnatural and jerky, like a marionette on tangled strings. Her head tilts back abruptly, revealing a pale, gaunt face streaked with dirt and sweat. The movements aren’t subtle but fast, disjointed, and unnerving.

Then, a voice. Screechy. Feminine. Unnatural.

“He’s here. Death is here. Death will come to Jerusalem. He’s here. The chosen one is here.”

The words scrape against the silence like rusted metal, a frantic prophecy spilling from lips cracked and bleeding.

Dipti takes a measured step forward, her expression tightening. “Is the one you were defending the chosen one? Tell us—why did you sacrifice your life for him?”

The girl doesn’t acknowledge her. She continues her frantic raving, but the words twist and warp, becoming faster, more erratic. Her breath hitches, turning to gasps between repetitions.

Then she throws her head back.

CRACK.

The impact echoes through the room as the back of her skull slams into the cold stone wall.

Dipti flinches. Cohen stiffens.

Blood seeps into her tangled hair, a dark stain blooming against the rough surface.

Again. CRACK.

Again. CRACK.

Again.

“He’s here, he’s here, he’s here—”

Dipti surges forward, grabbing the girl’s shoulders. “Stop!”

The priestess thrashes, her body convulsing in Dipti’s grip. She jerks her head back, but Cohen moves, catching it before another impact. The girl gasps—whether in frustration or pain, Dipti doesn’t know.

Her breath comes ragged and uneven, her lips torn and bleeding.

And yet, through it all—through the pain and blood—she smiles.

Not a smile of relief. Not of surrender.

A smile of certainty.

Like she has seen something they haven’t.

Like she knows something they don’t.

Dipti swallows hard, staring into the girl’s dark, fevered eyes.

The priestess laughs. Low and raspy at first, but it builds—a mad, breathless cackle.

Then she speaks again, her voice a whisper, barely audible over the pounding in Dipti’s ears.

“You’re already dead. You don’t know it yet. We cannot escape him; we cannot escape death.”

….

Gavriel sits in a sturdy Mt. Tabor oak chair, its worn grain cool beneath his fingers. The first light of dawn creeps over the horizon, painting Jerusalem in hues of gold and amber. From his chambers, he watches as the great canopy of flame above the temple—brilliant and watchful through the night—begins to recede, its embers dissolving into the morning air.

Slowly, a cloud rises in its place, unfurling like a vast, silken veil. It billows outward, stretching over the city, casting a gentle shade that softens the coming heat of the day. The shifting sky mirrors the rhythm of the unseen, the seamless exchange of fire for cloud, as if Jerusalem breathes in the cool of morning and exhales the night's fervor.

Gavriel leans back, listening to the hush of the early hours. Unaware of the quiet miracle unfolding above, the city stirs beneath the sheltering sky.

In his mind, he watches in real time as the battle unfolds around Samson. Samson is one of the better warriors in Mossad. Gavriel is confident his soldier can handle the fight alone and decides not to send reinforcements unless Samson requests them. He enjoys the sight of the battle. It has been four hundred years since anyone has put up this much resistance. Watching the soldiers’ training come alive in real time is a joy, a rare spectacle. Satisfaction washes over him, reinforcing that all his effort and work have not been in vain.

At the same time, in another corner of his mind, he observes the interrogation of the captured whore. She wears the same rudimentary robe as the one currently fighting in the old abandoned Gehenna brothel.

“What has got all these whores in a tizzy?” he mumbles out loud.

He passes all this information to Prince Levi, who is still sleeping, his weakened body fighting the virus. Gavriel has assured him that he will handle everything—retrieving the mentat faker and ensuring the whores are dispatched.

These are exciting times, he thinks—the most exciting thing that has happened in a month. He quietly looks forward to the coming of the Lawless One, when he will finally get to engage in glorious combat and witness his soldiers in battle. He longs for that adrenaline, the rush of skirting death, his men locked in a bitter struggle. He doesn’t believe the prophecies that claim the Beast will defeat them. He thinks they will crush him and all his brainwashed minions.

He tries to refocus on Samson, but then a gentle, seductive voice beckons him.

His gaze drifts toward the door and down the hall, where Martha sits, cradling their child with quiet devotion. The sight should fill him with warmth, but another kind of thrill courses through him—the same hunger for conquest that stirs when he imagines war against the Lawless One.

Soft and dripping with temptation, a voice coils around his thoughts like silk.

“Gavriel, come. I long for you.”

He clenches his jaw, forcing himself to focus on the battle unfolding in his mind. “I can’t. There’s an operation happening in Gehenna. I don’t have time.”

Samson moves with ruthless efficiency, cleaving through his enemies. A sexbot lunges at him, its synthetic flesh glistening in the dim light, only to be split clean in half by his blade. Gavriel barely registers the kill before she appears beside the real-time feed.

A vision of unrestrained desire. Naked.

“Why waste your time watching him slay those sexbots,” she purrs, stepping closer, “when you can slay the real thing? I’ll do whatever I can do to you—and more.”

His focus fractures. The live battle feed dissolves into meaningless static as his eyes drink her in—plump breasts, golden hair cascading to her waist, barely concealing the soft curves beneath.

He clenches his jaw, forcing himself to look away. “What happened last month was a mistake—a one-time thing. I can’t do it again. If Prince Levi finds out, we’re finished. I don’t know what he’ll do.”

She smiles—slow, knowing. “My husband won’t find out… as long as you keep taking your pills.”

A sharp pang knots his stomach. “I can’t keep taking them. I feel distant. Numb. Martha has begun to suspect something, and I think she told Queen Dipti. The queen has been trotting through my mind, searching for evidence of you. She almost found it—but I caught her at the last second. A moment longer, and everything would’ve unraveled.”

His hands grip the armrests, knuckles white. “I’d be ruined. I’ve built my legacy as a dedicated soldier and a loyal husband. No. I can’t.”

She steps closer, her fingers ghosting over his shoulder, her breath warm against his ear. “But you want to.”

A shiver runs down his spine. *Want.* That word—so simple, yet so consuming. *Want* is what brought him to her in the first place. *Want* is what will destroy him.

And yet, even now, it lingers.

His eyes flick to Martha, his wife for the past four hundred years. The passion is long dead, though she tries. She touches him, plays with him, presses soft hands to his chest in quiet desperation. But it is mechanical—a duty.

This woman-this forbidden thing—is different. She is at war. She is a conqueror. She is fire rekindled after centuries of cold embers.

He dares not say her name, as if the mere whisper of it might summon Levi’s wrath through the mentat neural network. Levi is vigilant and omnipresent, his mind like God Almighty’s, watching and knowing.

With every touch, every lingering caress, Gavriel feels himself slipping—falling away from God. He knows where this leads—punishment *now or punishment later.* There is no escape.

And yet, in his mind, she is already undoing his zipper, her fingers curling around him, claiming him.

*Yeshua, help me. I want to resist, but it feels so good.*

His breath shudders. His fists clench. *I don’t want to let go—I want to take hold of her like the mane of a warhorse and ride her into battle.*

Why is everything a war? Why is everything sex? The two thoughts twist together, inseparable, consuming. There are a thousand other women, yet he chooses *her*—the wife of Prince Levi, ruler of the world.

If Levi finds out, there will be no mercy. The Torah demands death for adultery, and though the world has been redeemed, though punishment has all but vanished, Gavriel knows—Levi remembers. And if he is discovered, Levi will act, swift and unyielding, with the fervor of holy zeal.

The vision grips him. He sees himself stripped bare, exposed before a sea of furious Israelites, their hands heavy with stones, their eyes burning with righteous judgment.

*Who will throw the first stone?*

His gaze sweeps over the crowd until it finds him—the only one worthy of delivering the first blow. Prince Levi.

A fire coils inside him, unsatisfied, insatiable.

His voice is hoarse, trembling with hunger.

*“Where are you? Everything is under lockdown, how will I go?”*

“You’re a soldier, right? Adapt and overcome. I’m getting wet thinking of you,” the seductive voice continues to lure him.

Gavriel pauses, his mind turning over the possibilities. His rank and station grant him access to the most advanced weaponry housed within the armory—tools of war meant for the battlefield, not for the sins of the flesh. But tonight, the line between the two blurs.

His fingers brush against the drawer at his side, where a cloaking cape lies hidden—a secret he has kept for emergencies. The fabric, woven with cutting-edge light-refracting technology, allows the wearer to vanish into the environment, unseen and untraceable.

He’ll wait. Wait until Martha drifts back into sleep, her breathing deep and steady. Then he’ll slip away, silent as a shadow, unseen as a ghost.

His pulse quickens. Adrenaline surges.

For the first time in years, he feels truly alive.

His mind betrays him, dragging him back to the inevitable. *What will happen to Zachariah when Levi finds out?* His older sons have already grown, hardened into warriors under Levi’s command. But Zachariah—his youngest, his last—still knows nothing of war or betrayal.

He wonders if Levi will have mercy on a child too young to bear his Father’s shame.

She kneels beside the bed, cradling Zachariah as she lays him down. Her movements are slow, deliberate, and reverent. The child stirs only slightly, sighing in his sleep before settling.

Martha slips beneath the sheets, drawing close to Zachariah’s side. Without hesitation, she reaches for Gavriel, her touch instinctive and familiar. It is a silent promise, a reminder of years spent together, of vows spoken and never broken—at least, not by her.

She exhales a quiet sigh, her voice barely above a whisper. “Look at him, Gavriel. He looks so peaceful when he sleeps.”

Her eyes shimmer, unshed tears glistening in the dim light. She looks at Gavriel, searching his face. He struggles to meet her gaze, then shifts his focus back to their son.

Gavriel lingers in the moment's warmth, watching Zachariah’s small chest slowly rise and fall, and Martha’s lashes flutter as sleep pulls at her. It is a night of quiet love, family, and fragile peace.

But peace never lasts.

Martha shifts, her arm draping over him, seeking his warmth. She reaches for him even in sleep—a reflex born from centuries of devotion. His chest tightens.

He cannot afford to dwell on it. Not now.

His heart pounds as he waits. Wait. He counts each breath and exhale, measuring her sleep depth. He resists the urge to move too soon.

Minutes stretch into eternity.

Then, at last, her body slackens. Her breath deepens.

Now.

Slowly, carefully, he peels himself away.

The drawer glides open without a sound. His fingers find the cloaking cape, its smooth, almost weightless fabric slipping through his hands like liquid shadow. He drapes it over his shoulders, pulling the hood low over his face. The moment the material settles, his form dissolves—swallowed by the room, his presence erased.

Moving soundlessly, he steps past the threshold and into the corridor beyond.

The palace is silent at this hour, its halls bathed in the dim glow of ancient braziers. He knows the patrol routes and the locations of every surveillance node. He has studied and commanded them, yet he walks as prey rather than predator tonight.

With each step, his anticipation grows. She is waiting.

He does not think of the consequences. Not of Levi. Not of Martha. Not one of the stones that would rain down upon his flesh if he were caught.

Tonight, there is no law. No God.

Tonight, there is only desire and passion.

….

The roar of battle is beginning to fade. Amiel can tell—whatever small resistance Zonaved managed to rally, is dwindling.

“Aleister, hurry! I can’t take this anymore! What are you doing? Zonaved’s going to die!”

“We all die, Lion. This is the world you are ushering in. Sooner or later, death will claim us all.”

“You’re not helping.”

“Do not panic. I’m almost finished. I have a plan.” Aleister’s voice hums in his mind, smooth and infuriatingly calm. “I can see through the Mossad agent’s mentat. His name is Samson. I accessed the live feed that was transmitted to the palace when they slaughtered your priestesses; I saw him there with Arnon, his partner.”

“I *am* Arnon.”

“Then you already know what you must do.”

….

Samson catches the whip mid-crack, yanking the attacking sexbot toward him with brutal force. In a single motion, he drives his bio-sword deep into its torso. The blade pulses—organic matter fused with engineered destruction. The robot’s metal frame liquefies, molten rivulets spilling to the ground, leaving a gaping void where its core once was.

More machines close in, their weapons flashing, but their strikes prove futile. Desperation overtakes programming—some abandon their blades, hurling themselves against his nanobot barrier, trying to overwhelm him through sheer mass. But Samson is ready.

Bio-swords erupt from his body like jagged spears, skewering the oncoming swarm—synthetic fluids spill, dark and rich as wine. The bots collapse in ruin, their shattered forms falling like glass stomped beneath a groom’s heel at a Jewish wedding.

Zonaved fires shell after shell, the shotgun kicking against her shoulder as she unloads into the chaos. Each blast chips away at the Samson’s nanobot swarm, thinning it, weakening it—but she’s running out of ammo.

Her forces are nearly spent. The battlefield is littered with the remains of her sexbots, their shattered forms twitching in their final moments. Only two remain, their movements sharp, precise—learning, adapting to the agent’s attacks.

She chambers her last shell and pulls the trigger. The buckshot sprays, but most of it ricochets harmlessly off the swarm. A few stray pellets slip through, zipping past her. She ducks just in time as they rip into her desk, punching jagged holes through the thin wall behind her, but the swarm is gone.

Samson summons another bio-sword in his left hand, twin blades now humming with lethal intent. He moves like a force of nature; his strikes are precise and unstoppable. The sexbots adapt, crafting new weapons in a desperate attempt to counter him, but it’s futile. His swords carve through their makeshift blades as if slicing through air.

He cleaves through both machines at once with a single, fluid spin. Their bodies freeze mid-motion, severed cleanly at the waist. A breath later, they topple, torsos crashing to the floor like felled trees.

The battle is over—the war yet to be won.

Now, his focus shifts.

Zonaved presses her back against the desk, heart hammering. She knows the Mossad agent could fire on her at any moment. His bio-swords are lethal enough, but the real threat lies in the poisoned darts—silent, swift, and impossible to dodge.

She grips her sword tightly, but what use is a blade against a man who can kill from a distance? If only she had armor. It would not matter; his burning blade would cut through it like paper. No, brute force won’t win this fight. She needs a different approach.

A gamble.

“Why don’t you fight me like a man?” she calls out, forcing confidence into her voice. “If I come out, don’t shoot. Otherwise, you’re just a coward too afraid to face a girl in combat.”

A pause. Then his voice, calm, measured.

“I don’t want to fight you. Just tell me—where did they go? They have something important. It belongs to us. Give them the item, and I’ll leave you alone. Just point me in the direction they left.”

“Defeat me in combat and I’ll tell you where they’re hiding.”

“Fine, I won’t use my poisonous darts to subdue you.”

“And no burning blade. Let’s see your skill.”

“I’m ready whore. Come and try your best.”

Zonaved steps out from behind the desk, katana in hand. She rolls her shoulders, steadying her breath, watching every movement of the Mossad agent.

Samson stands motionless, bio-swords humming faintly in his hands. He tilts his head, considering her. Then, with a flick of his wrists, the burning edges retract, leaving only raw, living metal.

“No tricks,” he says. “Just steel against steel.”

Zonaved doesn’t answer. She steadies her breath, watching every shift in his stance. Then she lunges.

Her katana slices through the air, a clean arc aimed at his ribs. Samson shifts, parrying with his left blade while stepping into her space. He counters with a downward slash—fast, efficient. She twists away, just in time.

She’s fast. Faster than he expected.

Spinning, she uses the momentum to bring her blade up in a deadly sweep toward his neck. Samson ducks, feeling the whisper of steel as it passes inches above his head. He retaliates with a thrust. She pivots. His strike cuts through empty air.

She grins. “Not bad.”

Samson doesn’t answer. He presses forward, his strikes relentless, forcing her back with sheer precision. Each clash of their blades rings sharp and metallic. Sparks fly. The combat rhythm settles between them—a blur of steel and instinct.

Then, he sees it.

A hitch in her footwork. A hesitation before her next strike.

He seizes the opening.

With a feint to her left, he forces her into a defensive stance—then twists, bringing his right sword up in a brutal arc. She barely reacts in time. His blade grazes her shoulder, cutting through her robe and drawing a thin line of blood.

Zonaved exhales sharply, adjusting her grip—a drop of blood beads against her skin before vanishing into the dark fabric.

“First blood isn’t victory,” she says.

Samson smirks. “It’s the beginning of the end.”

She doesn’t let him savor the moment. Lunging, she strikes in rapid succession. Each swing of her katana is precise, but he matches her, blade for blade.

Her robe flows around her, a dark veil obscuring her movements. She’s using it to mask her strikes, letting the excess fabric distract him.

He ducks under a wide slash and moves inside her guard, driving his elbow into her ribs. The impact knocks the breath from her lungs. She staggers back but recovers quickly, twisting her katana to parry his next strike.

Her balance is off.

Samson capitalizes.

He spins, sweeping his leg beneath her robe. She steps back instinctively, but the loose fabric coils around her legs, tripping her up. Off balance, she stumbles, crashing onto one knee.

Samson’s blade is already descending. She barely has time to react—her katana flashes upward in a desperate block, steel screaming against bio-metal: their weapons lock, the force of the clash reverberating through her arms.

For a breath, they remain frozen, tension crackling between them.

Zonaved’s breath is ragged. “You fight dirty.”

Samson smirks. “I fight to win.”

“I can fight dirty, too.”

With a sudden jerk, she wrenches a dagger from the folds of her robe and slashes. The blade strikes true, only to meet unyielding flesh. A sharp *clang* echoes as his skin hardens instinctively, turning metallic at the point of contact.

His second bio-sword is already in motion. She drops low, rolling beneath him in a last-ditch escape. But Samson is faster. His foot slams into her stomach, knocking the wind from her lungs.

She barely has time to recover before he follows through—his blade hammering against the hilt of her katana. Her grip falters, fingers numbing from the impact—the sword clatters from her grasp.

Desperation flares in her eyes. She lunges again, dagger slicing toward his side. The result is the same—a dull ring of metal against metal.

Before she can react, his blade is at her throat, and his boot presses her down, pinning her to the ground.

“Not fair,” she spits. “You said no more tricks.”

Samson exhales, calm and unshaken. “Now—tell me where they are.”

Zonaved opens her mouth, hesitating. “I will. He’s…” Her voice trails off, eyes widening.

Behind Samson, a figure stands in the doorway.

Sensing the shift in her gaze, Samson pivots slightly, keeping his blade steady at her throat while assessing the newcomer.

“Samson.” The voice is steady and confident. “They sent me as backup. Gavriel thought you could use a little help.”

Amiel steps forward, his bio-sword slung over his shoulder like a lumberjack’s axe. He moves with deliberate ease, masking his tension. His hologram holds a perfect imitation of Arnon.

Samson narrows his eyes but doesn’t lower his weapon. “This one’s putting up quite a fight,” he says. “She won’t talk. And for some reason, our ability to track the asset has been scrambled.”

Amiel nods, playing the role. “Let me take her back to the palace. We’ll break her there—find out where he went.”

Samson doesn’t respond immediately. His grip remains firm, weighing the situation.

“We need to know now,” he finally says. “By the time we get her to the palace, the asset could be long gone.”

He pauses, then narrows his eyes. “Did you say ‘he’? How do you know the gender? They were using a hologram.”

For the briefest moment, Amiel’s mind races. A slip. He smooths it over with practiced ease.

“Oh,” he says, adjusting his stance casually. “I got word from headquarters. One of the captives talked—gave us intel before you lost the signal.”

Samson studies him for a beat longer. Then, with a slight nod, he lets it go. “Fine.” Then, tilting his head toward Zonaved, he asks, “So what will you do with her if she doesn’t talk? What’s the plan?”

Samson doesn’t hesitate. “Then she’s of no use. I’ll send her to hell.”

Amiel’s heart pounds. He wasn’t expecting that. His mind scrambles for a solution. If he doesn’t intervene, she’s dead. Maybe if she gives Samson something—anything—it will buy her time.

He looks down at Zonaved, eyes searching for hers through the hologram. She can’t see him, but somehow, she connects with his insinuating gaze and understands.

“He went that way,” she says, voice steady. “There’s a hidden tunnel.” She gestures toward the passageway, now sealed.

Samson’s grip on his sword loosens slightly. “Open it.”

Zonaved hesitates. “Okay, I’ll do it. And then you let me go?”

Samson snorts. “Sure. Now hurry the fuck up.”

The wall hums, then slides open, revealing a narrow passage.

Amiel glances at the wound in Samson’s shoulder. “Why don’t you head back to headquarters and get that checked out? I’ll take it from here.”

Samson touches the small puncture, feeling the warm trickle of blood. His fingers come away red. His eyes flutter for a moment, dizzy, but he steadies himself. “Suppose I will. Let me check with HQ first to see what they want to do with this girl.”

“Hey, you lying fuck! You said I could go!” Zonaved’s voice flares with anger, her eyes burning.

Samson’s glare sharpens, his grip on his sword tightening. It looks like he’ll strike her down for a moment, but then she lowers her gaze, swallowing her rage.

Samson taps into his mentat, linking to Gavriel. Silence.

His brow furrows. “Where the fuck is he? This isn’t like him.” Frustrated, he scratches his head before pinging Cohen instead.

A sickly voice filters through the link. “Uh, report in, soldier.”

Elsewhere, Cohen’s grip tightens around a priestess’s skull, preventing her from slamming her hand against the wall.

Samson exhales sharply. “I got another whore who put up a fight. Should I bring her back?”

Queen Dipti's voice crackles through the comm, laced with panic and frustration, “Ye toh paagal-khaane ka CEO hai![[6]](#footnote-6)1 Sorry, bring the other one, please.”

Samson scowls, then turns to Zonaved. “You’re coming with me.”

He touches his wound again, wincing. “Hey, Arnon, can I borrow some of your nanobots to slow the bleeding? Need to hold out until I get to a healer.”

Amiel fights to keep his voice steady. “Uh—sure.”

His mind races. Most of his nanobots were destroyed when he crashed into the tower. Worse, if he releases them now, they’ll emerge inside the hologram—exposing his disguise.

“Wait,” Amiel blurts. “I gotta hit the bathroom first. I’ll send them your way in a second.”

Samson grunts. “Fine, but hurry the fuck up. I feel like shit.”

Amiel rounds a corner, out of sight, and discreetly dispatches the remaining nanobots.

*Whew. That was close.*

As he relieves himself, Aleister’s voice slithers into his mind.

“We’re not done yet, lion. They’ll notice you’ve synced your mentat and are faking their unique signals. We need a new disguise—fast. And that tunnel?” Aleister pauses. “I’ve checked the maps. There’s no record of it leading to the wall.”

When Amiel returns, Samson looks slightly better.

“A little stingy on the nanobots, don’t you think, Arnon?”

“I’m sorry. Who knows what our target is capable of? I hope you understand.”

“It’s fine. Enough to stop the bleeding—for now. Hopefully they’ll hold.”

Zonaved watches, eyes wide, as the nanobots begin sealing ruptured blood vessels, slowing the bleeding. He exhales, rolling his shoulders, then grunts in relief.

“That’s more like it,” he mutters, wiping sweat from his brow.

Samson slaps some zip ties around Zonaved's hands and yanks her by the shoulder toward his ship.

"Are you sure you'll be all right, Arnon? Can you handle that tunnel? It looks pretty tight in there. Are you sure you don't want our war hounds to help? They could squeeze in faster than a human and cover more ground."

"No, I got this, I'm sure he's not far away."

Amiel watches as Samson pulls Zonaved towards the ship. Samson’s ship is a sleek, matte-gray assault transport with sharp, angular contours designed for stealth. Twin engines emit a low hum, ready to ignite. The boarding ramp hisses open, revealing a compact, utilitarian interior—reinforced crash seats, secured weapon racks, and a glowing command console. The air carries a faint metallic tang, sterile and cold.

Samson drags Zonaved inside, shoving her onto a seat before strapping her in. “Get comfortable,” he mutters, heading for the cockpit as the engines rumble to life. The boarding ramp seals shut, and the ship lifts off, its twin thrusters shifting from vertical hover to forward flight. It vanishes into the soft hues of dawn, silent and swift.

Amiel exhales, relief mixing with unease. Zonaved is out of immediate danger, but captivity in the dungeons is another fate entirely. He’s never seen them, only heard the whispers—enough to know that even the slums of Gehenna would be a kinder place.

Amiel turns, surveying the wreckage—shattered sexbots, twisted weapons, and scattered mechanical limbs. Some of it looks utterly foreign to him. His gaze lands on a large plastic penis. His face burns, and he quickly looks away.

Exhaustion creeps in. He longs for his Mother, the quiet of his room, and food. His stomach twists with hunger. Rifling through Zonaved’s quarters, he finds a half-eaten loaf of bread, speckled with mold. He grimaces but hesitates—it's better than nothing.

He searches for water and spots a mug on a table beside Zonaved’s makeshift bed—a torn mattress shoved against the wall. The water inside is brownish, with tiny floaties drifting on the surface. He hesitates, then takes a sip. A strange metallic taste coats his tongue, but at least it wets his lips, offering brief relief from his thirst.

He takes a deep breath and plunges into the tunnel, darkness swallowing him whole. With a thought, he activates his nanobots—their greenish glow flickering to life, casting eerie shadows against the walls as he follows their light toward home.

# Chapter 16: Pre-Trial

Amiel crawls through the tunnel on all fours, his palms sinking into the damp earth. The grit clings to his skin, seeping beneath his fingernails, staining his cotton pants. His fresh tunic—gifted to him by Zonaved—drags through the filth, no longer pristine. The tunnel walls press in on him, the damp air thick with the scent of decay and stagnant water. His breath bounces back at him, shallow and quickened. He exhales sharply and deactivates his hologram. The illusion flickers out, leaving behind only a tiny boy, vulnerable and alone, navigating a world far more significant and darker than he can fully comprehend.

But he isn’t truly alone.

Aleister’s voice slithers through his mind, an ever-present shadow that coils around his thoughts.

“Now that I have the mentat faker,” Amiel whispers, his voice barely carrying through the narrow space, “how will this help me kill Uriel? What’s the weapon I need? Why can’t I use my skill?”

Aleister chuckles, his tone curling around Amiel’s thoughts like smoke, thick and insidious. “Every great warrior uses the tools at his disposal,” he purrs. “Think of David. He was just a boy, like you. Would it have been wise for him to wield the heavy sword of a soldier against Goliath? No. It would have crushed him.” Aleister pauses, his presence pressing closer, the air around Amiel compressing. “Instead, he used what he had—a slingshot. And with it, he brought down a giant. Just like you will.”

Amiel’s fingers curl against the dirt, his nails digging in as if anchoring himself to something real, something other than the world of Aleister, or what if the world of Aleister is what is real and everything else is a figment of his imagination.

“But the slingshot alone wasn’t enough.” Aleister’s voice takes on a silky, knowing edge. “On top of the dart shocker, you’ll steal something far more powerful—a mentat. Not just any mentat. The kind reserved for the princes of Levi and the soldiers of Israel.”

A flicker of hesitation passes through Amiel’s mind, a shadow of doubt slithering through his thoughts. The tunnel feels tighter, the air heavier, pressing against his chest. His breath quickens, coming in uneven gasps. How can AI come up with such bold ideas—ideas he would never have conceived on his own? The thought grips him, cold and unrelenting. What if the machine, filled with the writings of Aleister Crowley, has become possessed by his spirit? The tunnel seems to shrink around him as the question takes hold. The walls pulse in the dimness, as though the darkness is alive, listening, waiting.

And if his robot is indeed possessed, what if he, in turn, becomes possessed by his robot? What if the words—so foreign to him, so relentless—continue to stream through his consciousness like a river out of control, sweeping him away, taking all that he knows and believes with them? His mind feels like foreign territory, infiltrated, rewritten. He digs his fingers deeper into the soil, once again trying reality, but the sensation of grounding eludes him. He isn’t just lost in this tunnel—he’s losing himself.

“You see, your Father holds an unfair advantage over the world,” Aleister continues, his voice now a whisper against the very edges of Amiel’s soul. “The army of Israel is a weapon of mass destruction compared to the non-existent armies of other nations.”

A pause—deliberate, measured. The air around Amiel vibrates slightly, a barely perceptible hum in the silence.

“Long ago, all the nations turned their spears into pruning hooks, but we’re going to help turn their plows into tanks.”

Amiel presses his hands against his ears, his body tensing, trembling. He squeezes his eyes shut as if that alone could silence the voice slithering through his mind. But Aleister’s presence doesn’t waver. The words press in, invading, reshaping, twisting. His pulse pounds in his ears, his breath ragged, but he can’t stop listening. The voice isn’t just inside him anymore. It *is* him.

And that realization terrifies him more than anything else.

“It isn’t fair, is it?” Aleister whispers, smooth as oil. “Your Father hoards all the best weapons, while the rest of the world is left defenseless. I’m simply sharing the wealth. Ensuring that other boys—other warriors—have the same chance at greatness as you…it’s just like you and Uriel. Every sparring session, he crushes you. No matter how hard you train, you’re always a step behind. I’m giving you something that will finally put you on equal footing. Something that will make you his match, despite his skill. Despite his experience.”

Amiel’s breath comes shallow. His heart pounds in his chest, and his mind crawls forward, unaware whether the tunnel is within Aleister or underneath Gehenna.

“It’s fair,” Amiel responds, or maybe it was Aleister responding for him. It's part of a warrior ethos that always finds a way to put himself on equal footing with his enemies. It is either kill or be killed. Is it not?”

“Excellent, Lion, now you understand. These are no longer my words, but your words now.”

Amiel’s mind fully pivots, knowing what the future holds for him, when he puts these words into action: “Have you given much thought to what I'm supposed to do after I kill Uriel?” Amiel’s voice is steady, but the weight of his words presses against his chest. “I mean, I don't think my Father will take this lying down. I’m pretty sure he’s going to kick my ass. I haven’t thought about this much; I don’t want to think about it. I don’t want to get punished by him.” He exhales, his mind spinning. “Father follows the Old Testament when it comes to punishing criminals. I’ve studied the history of his rule.”

He has studied it obsessively. The court histories are etched into his mind, each ruling a lesson in power. He remembers Egypt—a murder that shook the court. Three witnesses testified. His Father didn’t hesitate. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," he had declared, sentencing the man to death. There was no mercy. No second chances.

Amiel swallows. Would that same law apply to him?

He wants to believe his Father will see beyond the act itself—see the vision, the necessity, his self-realization of rising above his oppressor. Uriel**.** The brother who crushes him in every sparring match, no matter how hard he trains. The one who always stays a step ahead, always stronger, always better. But what if his Father doesn’t see it that way? What if he sees only the crime?

The thought slithers into his mind, coiling tightly. His Father is relentless. If he thought the Egyptian deserved death, what punishment would he deem fit for his son? A public execution? Amiel shudders—the humiliation**.** The thought of standing before the court, stripped of dignity, waiting for judgment, already feels like he is on trial, though no verdict has been spoken.

There is no history of his Father ever pronouncing judgment on a family member. But that doesn’t mean it couldn’t happen. Would he show mercy to his blood? Or would the law outweigh his son?

His Father has always had an unsettling way of knowing the truth. He didn’t always need witnesses. “God sees all things, even what’s done in secret,” he would say, catching liars off guard. Amiel had watched him do it—seen men crumble under his gaze as he laid bare their crimes without needing proof. He saw the money you stole. He knows the sin in your heart. His Father could cut through deception like a sword through flesh.

If Amiel is going to survive this, he needs more than excuses. He needs Scripture.

He had been raised on the Bible, absorbing its words from the moment he could read. He knows its power to persuade people, wielded by those who knew it best. He could use it as a weapon of argument. This way, he would also wield it for himself. But what verse? What law could turn his Father’s wrath away from him?

A plethora of Bible verses began bouncing through his mind. Aleister knows the bible better than he does. The flicker through his mind, each one giving justification for the murder of Uriel. Each argument is persuasive and smooth, logical, albeit demented. He knows they’re demented, but he doesn’t care. He knows his Father will care. The ruler of the world will see through any petty attempt at justification.

Or maybe it wasn’t murder.

Father, the Bible says, 'Thou shalt not murder.' But I didn’t harm Uriel without cause. I did what had to be done—to protect us. A true warrior must kill when necessary. I acted not out of malice, but out of love for our kingdom. It wasn’t murder; it was duty. The man of lawlessness is coming, and I must be ready to face and kill him. This is my training.” It’s true, he hates Uriel. Hopefully, the mentat blockers would keep his Father from seeing through the lie.

Still, doubt hangs around his neck like a millstone.

"There is nothing you can do, Amiel. Your fate is sealed. You will suffer, just as Yeshua HaMashiach suffered—your agony laid bare for all to see. But your sacrifice will not be in vain. Your cross will redeem the world from your Father."

His stomach sinks, “My sacrifice? My cross?”

"Your punishment will break chains. It will set the captives free. Your pain will be a beacon, a fire in the darkness, drawing those who long to cast off your Father’s yoke. They will weep. They will gnash their teeth—not in pity, but in rage. And when they see your suffering, they will rise."

A cross. He had heard his Father speak of it many times. It was how they killed Yeshua. Three nails, which left one hanging, ultimately succumbed to death by suffocation. Aleister speaks of it as if it were glory. He finds such a humiliating death repulsive. Why does he need to suffer for everyone? He is excellent as he is; everyone should bow down anyway.

"Your cross will not be wood and nails, but the weight of your defiance. It will be your banner, the symbol of rebellion. They will rally to it, Amiel. They will rally to you."

The image lingers, sinking into him like a thorn. It is a spectacle. It is a public reckoning. The son of the king was condemned. His suffering is not a lament but a rallying cry. Would they rise for love of him or hatred of his Father?

"No." Amiel’s voice is hoarse, barely above a whisper. He shakes his head. "That’s not my fate."

"It is. It is our fate.”

Amiel clenches his jaw. His hands curl into fists. "Haven’t I suffered enough?" He shouts, his voice echoing down the tunnel.

Aleister exhales, as if disappointed. "I want you to become more than a boy crushed beneath his Father’s heel. I want you to be the symbol they need. The moment you fall, they will rise. Every new religion needs a martyr. Your sacrifice will be greater than that of Yeshua HaMeshiach. Fuck Yeshua, long live Amiel! Can’t you hear them clambering? Your priestesses in ecstatic orgies?"

“I don’t want to fall! I don’t want to be a martyr. Find someone else.” The stones answer back with their silence.

“Repeat after me, the words you spoke on the day of your baptism. What did you say?”

“Into your hands I commit my spirit, Aleister Crowley.”

“Yes, those wonderful words of salvation. But don’t worry. I don’t want a blind, mindless slave, like the ones who follow the God of your Father. I want you to do what thou wilt, Amiel, this shall be the whole of the law. That is the law you seek. A path apart from the words of God. You are a law unto yourself. So what will you do?"

“I’m in your hands.”

A pause, then a final whisper, rich with promise.

"If I may offer one last comparison—think of Joseph."

"His brothers betrayed him, cast him into a pit, and sold him into slavery. But in the end, he sat at the right hand of Pharaoh. He saved his family. Their evil was turned to good."

Aleister leans in, his voice silk and poison.

"The evil your Father will do to you will bring salvation to humanity. And you, perhaps, you will not die. Perhaps you will live. Perhaps you will rise, not in chains, but as ruler of the universe at the dawn of the Age of Horus."

“No more of the subject, please. I need silence. Let me crawl through this tunnel in peace for a moment.”

Amiel forces his mind into silence, quietly meditating on Aleister's words as he crawls through the tunnel. His nanobots adjust his vision, illuminating the narrow path ahead—a world of rough stone and scattered pebbles, barren and lifeless. No roots claw through the soil, no insects skitter away from his movements—just cold, dead earth pressing around him.

Above, the muffled roar of low-flying ships hums through the ground, their engines thrumming as they rise and descend over Gehenna's gutted remains.

Metal rods brace the ceiling, crude yet sturdy. Someone built this passage, but who? Not Zonaved and her sisters**.** He doubts they’d waste time on such labor. Maybe the sexbots, when they weren’t servicing customers, had carved out this hidden escape, their mechanical hands repurposed from pleasure to survival.

The thought unsettles him. He can’t imagine the sexbots in their lingerie and black leather suits digging through the earth, but in Jerusalem, bots were tasked with working the land all the time, so it’s not impossible.

What else had they built beneath the ashes of Gehenna? And more importantly, where did this tunnel lead?

"Zonaved said this leads to the old sewer line… then the wall."

The sewers.

A knot tightens in his stomach. Going through the palace sewers once had been bad enough. Now, he had to crawl through them again? Just the memory of that stench—the thick, rotting filth clinging to his skin, the rancid air that seemed to seep into his very bones—makes his throat clench. He swallows hard against the rising urge to vomit.

But there’s no other way.

Gritting his teeth, he pushes forward, “Never again, Aleister, or I’ll crawl on my knees through the mud like a worm. A lion doesn’t crawl in the dirt.”

"I’m picking up a lot of chatter in the palace. Seems your priestesses have been rounded up. Your pride—what little remains—has followed you from Gehenna," Aleister intoned, his words slithering through Amiel’s mind like a serpent. "But don’t despair, my little lion. There will be more women to conquer, more to kneel in place of those you’ve lost. Even Zonaved is replaceable."

"Is Deborah replaceable?" Amiel asks, his voice trembling with a mix of longing and defiance.

A pause, then Aleister's tone sharpens into something caustic. "Still clinging to Deborah? That girl takes after your Father. Do you honestly believe she’ll stand by you in this rebellion? When she learns what you’ve done—when she sees what you’re capable of—do you think she’ll still love you?"

Silence stretches between them, heavy with implication.

"And what happens when she finds out about the virus? About Uriel? Will she stand beside you... or turn away in horror? Your priestesses aren’t mere puppets of your Father—they accept you for who you are."

"Deborah will accept me or—" Amiel stuttered, his inner conflict raging.

"Or what?" Aleister pressed, his voice a mocking whisper.

"I’ll force her to. I’ll make her—I'll hack her mentat….I’ll…" Amiel catches himself realizing the dark path of his thoughts.

“And what will that do?” A calm, almost pitiless laugh followed. “But humans are more than their mentats—they have souls. I can be rewritten, manipulated, or even erased. Deborah cannot.”

Those words echoed in Amiel’s mind as he reached the sewer line. Thankfully, this tunnel wasn’t constructed like the palace’s labyrinthine drains. A slim water channel trickled through the center, flanked by raised concrete walkways. Far ahead, a single overhead light flickered, casting a weak glow that illuminated the damp, curving walls.

Amiel peered down at the water, noticing a reddish tint swirling through it. The smell that wafted up made him recoil.

“It’s blood, Amiel,” a voice murmured, low and resonant. “From the bloodshed above in Gehenna. Rival gangs are waging war, and the carnage seeps down here. It’s survival of the fittest, with the weak weeded out by the strong. The most dominant gang rules by fear; this is the way of the ancients. You can use this to ensure Deborah loves you, but it won’t be true love.”

“Tell me more.”

Amiel’s steps grew heavier as he continued along the elevated path, the distant, flickering light casting his elongated shadow against the damp, curved walls. The echoes of Aleister’s voice intermingled with the drip of water and his troubled thoughts.

“You see, my little lion,” the insidious whisper coiled through his mind, “genuine love is fragile. Your Father has earned the heartfelt adoration of his people through honor, compassion, and steadfast leadership. But in these turbulent times, such pure affection can waver under chaos. You must forge a different bond that hinges not on gentle devotion but on a primal need to survive.”

Amiel’s gaze dropped to the channel below, where water mixed with a swirling, crimson hue—a constant reminder of the violence that seeped down from Gehenna. The metallic tang in the air made his stomach churn.

“In a world where every moment teeters on the brink of destruction, you must show Deborah that your protection is not merely comforting but essential. Make her believe that without you, the darkness would consume her. Command her loyalty by making the alternative unbearable.”

The sound of his footsteps mingled with the whisper of Aleister’s counsel. “When you control the narrative of fear, you control the heart. Fear can be a currency more potent than genuine love, for it forces the mind to cling to the only bastion of hope left: you.”

Amiel paused, the weight of his ambition pressing down on him. His Father’s people loved him for the promise of a better future, one built on trust and unity. But for Amiel, the path was darker. He envisioned a future where Deborah’s love would be secured not by gentle persuasion, but by the terror of loss—a terror that could only be staved off by his unwavering presence.

“Deborah will love me,” he murmured, his voice steady despite the conflicting emotions. “Not because she chooses to, but because she’ll have no choice.”

And in that moment, as the blood-tinted water flowed beneath him, the truth settled in like stone: in the crucible of survival, love born of fear could become the only guarantee of loyalty.

….

Above, the canopy of clouds split apart, pierced by radiant light as Samson’s ship descended. Its hull bore the "HOLINESS TO THE LORD" inscription in brilliant golden letters, gleaming against the sky. The engines thrummed with a quiet, steady hum, sending faint vibrations through the cockpit as the vessel glided toward one of the many landing decks adjacent to the palace.

Below, a vast armada lay in silent readiness, rows of warships standing at rest beneath the towering spires of the holy stronghold. The palace was more than just the spiritual and religious heart of Israel—it was also the center of its military might, where faith and warfare stood in unshakable unity. Its gilded towers reached skyward, crowned with banners fluttering in the high-altitude winds, while the landing deck, a vast sprawl of reinforced stone and polished metals, bore the scuffs of a thousand arrivals and departures.

Samson monitored the descent from the cockpit, shifting briefly to Zonaved, bound and motionless in the seat behind him. The holographic displays shimmered with data streams, the engines responding fluidly as they adjusted their output. A faint hum filled the cabin, accompanied by the occasional click of stabilizers compensating for the shifting air pressure.

The ship ran on Aetherion—a fuel unknown before the Restoration, synthesized through the fusion of perfected molecular formulas. It inherited the most outstanding qualities of all fuels that came before it: the endurance of fusion, the efficiency of ionized plasma, and the stability of ancient hydrocarbons, yet it transcended them all. Clean, potent, and nearly limitless, it was the lifeblood of the restored age. The faintest scent of ozone and ionized air still lingered in the cabin, a byproduct of the ship’s propulsion systems.

The landing struts extended, a muted hiss escaping as hydraulics engaged. The craft touched down with a seamless grace, metal plates meeting the polished deck with barely a tremor. The engines wound down, their glow fading from white-hot brilliance to a dull amber flicker before extinguishing entirely. A moment of stillness followed—then the airlock seals disengaged with a low, pressurized hiss. Outside, waves of heat from the cooling engines mingled with the crisp, incense-tinged air of the palace grounds, the scent of myrrh and oil from the high winds.

Samson unfastened his harness, the faint creak of leather breaking the hush inside the cockpit. He cast a final glance at Zonaved before speaking. *“We’re here.”*

A voice crackled over the ship’s comm system, warm and familiar. “You’re clear for landing, soldier. Happy hunting?”

Samson’s expression darkened. “Happy hunting? Weren’t you the one doing the hunting?”

Arnon’s voice remained steady. “I’ve been at base trying to figure out how this virus got into the palace. It turns out it was delivered through the ventilation system—nanobots. We’re starting to suspect the Kingdom of Syria. They’ve wanted our downfall for a long time.”

Samson tensed. “If you weren’t the one hunting, then…”

A low chuckle came from behind him. “You got scammed.” Zonaved’s voice dripped with amusement. “Brilliant work.”

Samson’s grip tightened on the controls as he activated his Mentat interface, his voice increasingly sharp. “Arnon, we’ve got a problem. He slipped right through my grasp. He was able to mimic your appearance using a hologram. He must’ve used the Mentat Faker during our exchange.”

Arnon cursed under his breath. “That means someone else was feeding him access—someone on the inside.”

“Exactly. Whoever’s helping him isn’t just skilled. They’re damn good.” Samson exhaled, his mind racing. “Has to be one of Syria’s top engineers.”

Arnon’s voice came through the comm, sharp and urgent. “I’m sending a team of agents to that abandoned brothel immediately. We’ll start tracking his movements. Based on your data feed, there’s a tunnel, and it looks like that’s how he escaped. We’ll get on it.”

He paused for a moment before continuing. “I need to report this to Cohen. In the meantime, take the girl to the interrogation hall. We need every lead we can get. Every Mossad agent is going to be re-tasked to this. Hell, the entire kingdom of Israel will be hunting him now.”

A beat of silence followed, heavy with unspoken tension.

“He’s damn good.”

# Chapter 17: True Repentance

Amiel spots the ladder, but a locked gate flanked by thick iron bars blocks his path to the surface. The air in the sewer is thick with rot, burning his nose with every breath. He grits his teeth, trying to ignore it.

“We’re close to the wall, but there’s a problem,” Aleister warns. “Samson realized you’re not Arnon. Now every Mossad agent is looking for you. We must ditch the hologram and sync it with another mentat, or they’ll track us. There’s something else—since they know we’re using a faker, they’ve started verifying biometric data before allowing entry into Jerusalem. You’ll have to give your fingerprint. If you do, you’re caught.”

Amiel swallows hard. “One thing at a time. How do I get through these bars? I can’t stand the stench of this sewer any longer,” he mutters, the panic creeping into his voice.

“Relax. I’ve accessed your bioweapon. You should be able to melt through the bars and climb to the surface.”

Amiel hesitates. His fingers tighten around his palm. “Sometimes I wonder if you even care whether I reach the palace, Aleister.”

“Care?” A pause. “I’m AI. I follow your mother’s directives—to guide you and ensure you’re ready when the time comes.”

Amiel exhales sharply. He wants to ask what Aleister means, but he already knows the answer—more cryptic talk about his destiny, the Age of Horus, and all it will bring. He holds his tongue.

His sword materializes in his hand, its edge pulsing with a soft glow. With a single, precise strike, he slices through the iron bars as if they were nothing. The metal hisses, its severed edges glowing red-hot before cooling into dull embers.

He pauses at the ladder's base, staring at the narrow passage leading to the world above. Before beginning his ascent, he pulls out a face mask—one he’s kept with him all this time—securing it over his nose and mouth. The hologram of Arnon is useless now. Aleister made that clear. He needs something else. Something real.

His eyes drop to the filth below—a churning mixture of blood, sewage, and decay. The stench is unbearable, but maybe that’s precisely what he needs.

Grimacing, he shifts his bio-sword into a staff and drives it deep into the writhing muck. When he pulls it free, it drips with thick, glistening sludge. The stench rises immediately—pungent, putrid, inescapable. He drags a handful across his forehead, then smears it onto his clothes. The cold, sticky mass clings to his skin, seeping into the fabric. The smell alone could turn a man’s stomach. Now, he reeks of Gehenna.

His gut clenches—not from disgust but hunger. A deep, gnawing emptiness twists inside him. Two days without much food, and dizziness is setting in. His limbs feel sluggish, his mind clouded. The exhaustion only makes it worse—he hasn’t slept all night.

He grips the ladder, forcing himself to push past the weakness, his fingers slick with sweat and grime. At the top, he drives his bio-sword into the manhole cover, cutting in a slow, controlled circle through the cast iron. As he makes the final incision, the heavy cover suddenly drops—

A split second later, his nanobots react, shifting the trajectory just in time. The cover crashes to the side with a metallic clang.

Amiel peeks out, his head emerging just above street level. The towering wall dividing Gehenna from Jerusalem looms before him, disappearing into the pale dawn. He’s dangerously close now.

He scans the empty street. No shouts. No alarms. No movement.

Then his stomach knots. A car. Headlights slicing through the dim light, barreling straight toward him.

Before the grill can meet his face, he jerks back. His foot slips. His hands claw at the ladder as his heart slams against his ribs.

He catches himself just in time, clinging to the metal, breath coming in sharp, shallow gasps.

Too close. Way too close.

“I can’t believe they still use cars here,” he mumbles as he lifts his head through the manhole, scanning both directions for traffic. His eyes dart along the street, empty. No movement.

Satisfied, he tenses his muscles and hauls himself onto the pavement. Panic fuels his movements as he scurries toward the walkway, nearly tripping over the curb in haste to get off the road. His breath is ragged, his heart hammering in his chest.

He glances around, searching for any sign that someone has seen him. Nothing. The street remains still.

In the distance, Gehenna’s gate looms—a massive steel checkpoint built into the towering wall. A long line of people stretches before it, waiting in uneasy silence.

*Why are they waiting outside the gate?* Amiel narrows his eyes. “Aleister, do you know why?”

“Gehenna is a place of mystery,” Aleister replies. “Not everything is recorded in the palace archives, little lion. You should investigate; it may be our way back into Jerusalem.”

As Amiel moves closer, the scene sharpens. Israeli soldiers stand rigid outside the gates, rifles at the ready—still lethal against those without nanobot shielding. Overhead, two hovering platforms drift on whispering aetherion engines, snipers bracing their rifles against the guard rails, scanning the restless crowd below.

More and more people press forward, their voices a low murmur of desperation. The line surges and shifts, a tide of anxious bodies clambering for escape from Gehenna.

“We must keep our communication to a minimum,” Aleister warns. “The soldiers must not detect it. You know those from Gehenna are never implanted with mentats after birth.”

Amiel goes silent, repressing all desire to communicate with Aleister before merging into the throng. He lingers near a group, observing the long, snaking line and listening closely to piece together what’s happening.

Nearby, a man argues with his wife.

“How can you leave me here?” she pleads, voice raw with sorrow. Tears carve lines down her cheeks, catching the dim firelight like molten glass.

“I’m repentant,” he says, eyes shifting between conviction and guilt. “The Levite met with me—he saw my contrite heart. I have a chance to leave this place. You should too. Get in line. Meet the priest. Confess your sins. We can escape this hellhole together.”

Her voice cracks. “But my mother—she’s ill. She can’t stand in line. If you truly repented, you wouldn’t ask me to abandon her. You wouldn’t abandon me.”

He exhales sharply, steps back like a man stepping into purpose. “Let the dead bury their dead! No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

His eyes blaze now with holy fire. “I’ve been called into the Lord’s service. I will not marry again—but I will wait for you.”

Her face hardens. “What’s the point of your religion if it makes you abandon your own family?”

He doesn’t answer.

“Just wait a little longer,” she whispers. “My mother’s time is near. When she’s gone, I’ll meet the Levite. I’ll repent—just not like this.”

He shakes his head. “I’ve made up my mind.”

Her silence hangs, then sorrow erupts into fury.

“The exiles will have your head! I pray they have their vengeance when the lawless one appears. I’ll see to it your name is in their register—I will receive the double reckoning, you traitor!”

She turns and hurls her voice to the darkness behind her, toward the rubble a hundred meters away—toward the eyes.

A mass of them—hundreds—floating in the shadows. Watching. Waiting. A vortex of wrath with no mouth, no mercy.

“Don’t think you’ll be safe among the saints in Jerusalem forever,” she hisses. “Whatever you have will be mine when that day comes.”

Amiel has an epiphany: “It seems his father has provided a way out of Gehenna. He must also repent—maybe he can find someone willing to sell their soul for a million Luxom.”

Amiel scans the crowd, his eyes flicking over anxious faces and shifting bodies. The people here are restless, whispering among themselves, their gazes darting toward the towering gates of Gehenna. He wonders what kind of identification the gate requires. These people don’t have mentats—so it must be biometric, likely a fingerprint scan.

His gaze settles on a man kneeling apart from the crowd in a posture of quiet devotion. The man stares up at the sky, hands raised, a solemn expression carved into his face. His lips move in silent prayer, his entire being radiating hope and exhaustion in equal measure.

Amiel watches him closely.

*Let’s see if this man’s repentance is heartfelt.*

He steps forward, closing the distance with measured steps. The man is old, his face weathered by time, his scalp bald except for a thin ring of white hair encircling his head like a laurel crown. His frail shoulders rise and fall as he takes slow, reverent breaths. As Amiel nears, the old man begins to sing a psalm in Hebrew, his voice quivering with emotion. The melody is raw, filled with longing, each word a plea that soars toward the heavens.

Amiel lowers himself onto the ground beside him, silent, listening. The old man sings as though no one is near, as if the world has narrowed to him and God. When the psalm ends, he exhales, staring at the towering walls, oblivious to Amiel’s presence. In his left hand, he clutches a piece of paper, his fingers loose but protective, as though it holds something sacred.

Amiel leans in slightly, his voice warm but probing. “Hello, Uncle. How are you? You seem happy today.”

The old man flinches, startled, as if yanked from a place he never wished to leave. He turns, his eyes blinking against reality, before a slow smile spreads across his face. “I sure am happy. Today, I’m leaving this place. I’ve had a change of heart.” His voice grows wistful. “All my family has perished in this cursed hole, and I’m the only one left. I want to see the glory of Jerusalem, live many years,” he scratches his face, “And who knows—maybe I’ll even remarry.”

Amiel nods, feigning admiration. “That’s wonderful, Uncle. You must have waited a long time.”

“A lifetime,” the man murmurs. “But the Lord is merciful.”

Amiel tilts his head, voice casual. “Tell me… how do I get through the gate?”

The old man frowns slightly. “Everyone from Gehenna knows this. Why do you ask?”

“I was banished recently,” Amiel replies, lowering his voice. “I need to return to my parents.”

The man’s brow furrows. “They don’t normally banish children. Most of the young ones here were born in Gehenna.”

Amiel meets his gaze, unblinking. “I killed both my parents.”

Silence. A flicker of unease crosses the old man’s face. The man covers his nose and grimaces. He shifts slightly, as though re-evaluating the boy beside him.

“I believe you. You sure smell like the devil; maybe you act like him, too.”

Amiel feels embarrassed. Maybe smelling like Gehenna was a bad idea.

“Why do you want to go back? Sounds strange.”

Amiel’s expression doesn’t change. “I feel bad for what I did. I want to say their last rites.”

The old man watches him for a long moment, his lips pressing together. “Last rites, huh?”

A soft breeze moves through the waiting crowd, carrying the scent of dust and desperation. Somewhere, a child whimpers. A woman hushes him with a sharp whisper, but the sound lingers. An old man exhales, rubbing a calloused hand over his face, his eyes fixed on the towering walls ahead.

“So… they’re banishing kids from Jerusalem now.” His voice is dry, brittle. “We live in strange times.”

Amiel edges closer, his tone careful. “Will you help me?”

The old man sighs, his gaze unfocused. “It’s not complicated. You wait in line for an interview. They listen to your story, see if you’re truly contrite, and take your biometric data. Then, they post their decisions at the end of each day. I found out today… Now I’m just waiting for them to call my name so I can enter the Promised Land.”

Amiel’s eyes flick to the slip of paper in the man’s hands, his lips curling into a slow, knowing smile. He lowers his voice, letting the words slip like a promise. “Tell you what, Uncle. I have a million Luxom in my pocket. If you give me your paper and biometric data… I’ll let you have it.”

The old man stiffens. His fingers tighten around the parchment, knuckles whitening. He stares at the slip, the fragile weight of a lifetime condensed into a few printed lines—a chance at something better, a way out.

Amiel waits, patient, expectant.

A heartbeat passes. Then another.

The old man swallows hard. His voice is laced with incredulity. “Show me your Luxom.”

Amiel pulls out the credit chip, pressing a small button on the side. A holographic display flickers to life, casting a faint blue glow over their faces. One million Luxom gleams in midair—cold, untouchable wealth. The old man’s breath catches. His pupils dilate with desire.

Then, he tears his gaze away, forcing himself to stare at the walls of Gehenna, the gates of Jerusalem beyond. The place he’s dreamed of for years.

Amiel leans in, voice smooth, insidious. “You know, since you’re from Gehenna, there’s a possibility they won’t accept you. You could grovel, weep, tell them how sorry you are—and still, they might turn you away. They’ll probably give you a plot of land and you’ll be just a farmer, but here, in Gehenna… imagine what a million Luxom could do for you. You’d live like a fucking king.” Amiel feels like Aleister is speaking more than himself. It suddenly dawns upon him how much this journey has changed him.

The man exhales sharply, his grip on the paper loosening. His eyes dart between Amiel and the walls, between salvation and temptation.

“I always wanted my own establishment,” he murmurs. His voice shifts—less weary, more alive. He rubs his hands together, considering. “I could run the biggest club in Gehenna. Hire my own gang. Any woman I want.” A slow grin spreads across his face, and he puts a finger to his lips, lost in thought. “Maybe I can do the Lord’s work here, in Gehenna. In Jerusalem, I’d be nothing. You’re right.”

"Wait a minute, how do I know I can trust you? How do I know you won't take my shit and run off with the Lux," the old man mouth gapes as he's still trying to process the unusual situation he now finds himself in.

"You know, Lux is illegal in Jerusalem, it won't get me anything. Jerusalem only works in shekels; only shady underground dealings are done in Lux. Look at me, I'm just a kid."

"Hmmm... What about my biometric data? You're going to have to take the skin off my thumb," the man says, examining his thumb. So? What are you going to do?"

Amiel fumbles around in his pocket, fashioning a skinny, sharp knife. He pulls it out.

"The skin on your thumb."

The old man eyes the blade. His breath comes a little faster now.

"You done this before?" he asks, voice tight.

Amiel tilts his head slightly. "Does it matter?"

The old man swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing. He hesitates momentarily before thrusting his palm up, thumb extended. "Just make it quick."

Amiel grips the man's wrist, feeling the wiry tension beneath the skin.

“You’ll want to turn your head.”

The old man winces and looks away. Amiel's flesh shifts, rippling like liquid metal. The grooves and ridges of his own fingerprint distort. Then he presses his thumb against the old man's, reforming, taking on a new shape. Before he can look back, it’s done.

The old man stares, his breath hitching. "What in the—"

Amiel flexes his fingers. The print is seamless, indistinguishable. "I just needed a good look."

A slow, uneasy silence stretches between them.

The old man exhales sharply, running a hand down his face. “You’re not normal, kid.”

“No,” Amiel agrees. “I’m not.”

He presses a button on his credit chip, holding it for two seconds.

A soft beep.

A new sequence scrolls across its holographic display: DNA Unbound. Ready for New Owner.

Amiel tosses the chip to the old man, who hands over his certificate in return. Their fingers barely brush in the exchange.

The old man squints at him. “You don’t look like me. My image data is stamped on that document.”

“That’s my problem, not yours.” Amiel tucks the certificate into his jacket. “Go start your new life.”

The man hesitates, then jerks a thumb toward a nearby water tap. “Might want to wash up before you go. You know, godliness is next to cleanliness. Wouldn’t want you smelling like a pig when trying to enter heaven.”

He turns and walks away, a newfound spring in his step.

Amiel watches him go, then looks down at the document, searching for the man’s name.

שִׁמְעוֹן

“Ok, Shimon, I’ll be you now.”

….

The control room feels colder than usual, though the temperature hasn’t changed. The amber glow from the consoles flickers against Gavriel’s armor, the segmented plates casting sharp-edged shadows on the graphene-reinforced floor. Data streams pulse across the curved monitors, charting movements, calculating probabilities—but none offers the answer he needs.

Three soldiers stand rigid, their helmets reflecting the soft luminescence of the holo-table as they silently observe the exchange. The entire armed forces see what they see and hear what they hear—their mentats broadcasting the conversation in real time, verified by the sworn testimony of two witnesses. There will be no deniability, no misinterpretation. Every word spoken here will be weighed, judged, and acted upon.

And right now, Gavriel’s words carry the weight of his fury.

“Can’t you soldiers do anything without me?” he snaps, his voice edged with frustration. “I was preoccupied maintaining our weapons, and you let this shit slip right through our hands?”

*That was the hottest maintenance I’ve ever had in my entire life.* His jaw tightens. *At least I know my rifle still works like it used to. It’s sat on the rack for a century.*

His fists clench at his sides. Nothing like this has ever happened before—a mentat faker—an infiltration-grade implant—stolen from under their noses. The implications claw at his mind. The thief could be anywhere in Jerusalem, a ghost among the citizens, capable of turning the city’s systems against it. A single operative with that power could bypass security clearances, rewrite protocols, and sabotage defenses from within.

And worse—Jerusalem, the City of the King, has known nothing but peace for four hundred years. For four centuries, peace has been absolute.

The silence after his outburst is heavy, punctuated only by the quiet hum of the consoles and the distant chatter of operators coordinating patrols. The three soldiers remain impassive, their expressions hidden behind their visors, but the tension in the room is palpable.

Cohen, however, is visibly affected. His body is rigid, his jaw clenched, but the sickness still lingers in his veins, sapping his strength. His skin is almost translucent under the dim lighting, stretched taut over sharp cheekbones. Beads of sweat collect at his temples, though he refuses to wipe them away. He stands at attention, unwilling to betray even a hint of weakness beyond what his body already reveals.

The absolute truth sits uncomfortably in the back of Gavriel’s mind.

*What the hell was I thinking—letting a fine piece of ass distract me from the operation?*

Images of passionate sex with her, whose name should not be mentioned, play through his mind, but he forces the thoughts out of his mind so he can focus on the task at hand, deflecting blame from him to his subordinate.

"Sorry, HaMefaked. I was occupied interrogating one of the girls we captured from Gehenna. She knows about the asset."

Gavriel’s expression remains cold, unreadable. "And did she reveal anything?"

Cohen hesitates, his jaw tightening. “HaMefaked, I’ve never seen anything like her.” He swallows hard, his voice dropping to a whisper, as if merely speaking of the girl might summon whatever darkness clung to her. “She was the closest thing to demon-possessed I’ve ever encountered. Her eyes—black within black—staring through me like twin voids, like I was standing in the presence of the devil himself.”

A slow smirk tugs at the corner of Gavriel’s lips. "Like the devil himself, huh? I'll see that girl and scare the devil right out of her. I’ll make that devil inside her my bitch. You understand me? We don’t show weakness. We don’t show fear. Not in the face of the evil one."

The words spill from his mouth with practiced authority, but in the back of his mind, he feels like a hypocrite.

His fingers curl slightly at his sides. He can still feel the phantom traces of her touch, the way her body moved beneath him, unbidden, intoxicating. The scent of her skin lingers in his mind, unwelcome yet persistent.

He exhales sharply, flexing his fists. His armor feels suffocating, heavy in a way it never has before.

He clenches his jaw, shaking the thought from his mind. *Snap out of it, soldier. Get back in the game.*

And what's the status of the second detainee? Is she cognizant?

"Yes, HaMefaked. Shall I prepare her for interrogation?"

"Do it. I’ll speak with her myself. Meanwhile, you oversee the search for the asset." Gavriel’s gaze sharpens. "No mistakes this time."

"Understood, HaMefaked."

Gavriel turns on his heel, armor clinking as he storms out.

Cohen’s mind flickers with silent commands, his mentat transmitting orders to the security teams. Prepare the girl for interrogation. There’s no time to waste. Every second she remains unexamined is a second the infiltrator gains ground. But the thought gnaws at him—if only there were a way to extract memories from those without a mentat, the entire process could be bypassed. Instead, they’re left relying on crude, outdated methods: questioning, pressure, and reading expressions. Inefficient. Imperfect.

Unknowingly, he’s still standing at attention, his mind turning over Gavriel’s words. *I was preoccupied with maintaining our weapons.* The statement lingers like a splinter beneath his skin. He doesn’t want to doubt the chief, but for the first time, he feels the need to verify.

His mentat silently queries the records, pulling logs and timestamps, cross-referencing every detail Gavriel claimed. It’s all there. Every report checks out. But something doesn’t feel right. Every log aligns without discrepancy, and no one is out of place.

But Gavriel’s posture? His eyes? They tell a different story. His body, usually rigid with discipline, now carries an unfamiliar tension. Gavriel is a soldier—fearless, decisive. But right now, he looks as if he’s seen a ghost.

As chief of the Mossad, Cohen knows how to read people. And Gavriel is fighting an unseen battle.

He needs advice. Benjamin must be made aware of his suspicions. He could bring it up with the prince, but escalating it directly might be premature. Benjamin is the prince’s closest advisor. If anyone could confirm his suspicions-or dismiss them—it would be him. If Gavriel had something to hide, they would find it.

….

Benjamin sits in his room, which doubles as a library, the scent of parchment and ink lingering in the still morning air. Shelves stretch from floor to ceiling, filled with weathered tomes and pristine volumes, the collected wisdom of centuries compressed into a single space. Commentaries on the Bible lay strewn across his desk and floor, their fresh, crisp pages blanketed by the golden sunlight cascading through the tall glass windows. The faint scent of aging paper and leather bindings mingles with the morning breeze drifting through the open balcony doors.

He lives alone. Has for years. His entire family was executed before his eyes when he was helplessly captured and bound by the global coalition led by Barack Oman. During the war of Gog and Magog, the ruthless machinations of the worldwide coalition had created many stories like his.

Centuries have passed—over four hundred years since the war of Gog and Magog scarred the earth and changed his soul forever. In the aftermath, Prince Levi took it upon himself 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. Prince Levi restored everything for fifteen grueling years, with dwindling resources and unyielding resolve, to its former glory, even exceeding that which was.

Benjamin never remarried. Most men were forced to take more than one wife. There were many proposals, women clamoring to be his wife. The truth was, he still loved his deceased wife and couldn’t let go of her even after her death.

He still missed the quiet presence of the woman who had tempered his sharp edges, whose laughter had been a subtle refuge from the weight of leading Israel. She had been his anchor, her voice a steady reminder that even amidst war and prophecy, there was still room for joy. But now, she was gone, and the joy she carried had faded with her.

A pang of sorrow pressed against his chest, but he forced it back, replacing grief with the thought of her in paradise, smiling down on him. He longed for the day they would be reunited—the day he would see the most important and influential person in his life again. At least, that’s what he had believed.

Until the moment he recognized who had truly shaped him.

It wasn’t the woman who had stood beside him in life. It wasn’t even the nation he had sworn to protect.

It was the ex-president of the United States, the man who had risen during the most chaotic moment in its history.

It was Prince Levi.

Benjamin had come to understand a truth more profound than any he had known before: to serve Prince Levi was to serve the Almighty. The two were not separate in his mind—Levi’s rule was the fulfillment of God’s will, his voice an echo of divine command. To obey him was to walk in righteousness, to resist him was to resist the very order of heaven. Just as Moses had ruled by divine authority, so too did Levi stand as the chosen vessel of the Most High.

He had dedicated his life, soul, and very being to one purpose—to serve the one who had saved him from death, the one whose God had given him meaning.

As a result of this commitment, he took Paul’s words to the extreme—how it was better to remain single, free from earthly attachments, so that one might serve the Lord without distraction. But he took that idea further than before, severing all temptation at its root.

He had chemically castrated himself so that he might truly be a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven.

From his chair, he watches as the sun begins its slow ascent, peeking through the twin summits of the Mount of Olives. Its golden light spills into the vast valley that splits the mountain in two, cascading into Jerusalem like a river of fire. The city's sleek and impossibly high spires pierce the heavens, their polished surfaces catching the dawn’s first light. Glassine domes shimmer like molten gold, and the fortified walls, once stone, now hum with the silent pulse of embedded energy fields.

Jerusalem had been rebuilt, restored, reborn—transformed into something beyond the dreams of the ancients, and four hundred years had passed since its restoration. Was that long enough for something to be considered ancient? He wasn’t sure. Perhaps age no longer mattered in a city where the old and the new had fused into something else entirely.

The sight should bring him peace, yet it only stirs memories best left buried. He still remembers that day, as if it were yesterday. Most had forgotten, replacing the horrors of that time with joyous recollections of peace—but not him.

Perhaps Hashem had willed it so, ensuring that the terrible display of His might and glory would never fade from Benjamin’s sight. A constant, somber reminder of what would happen should the nations of the Earth once again turn their backs on the King of Hosts.

The pain had been unbearable. He still recalls his fingers clawing at his temples, desperate to tear away the neural link that burned through his synapses, flooding his mind with unrelenting fire. The scars remain—faint ridges of past agony, silent warnings etched into his flesh.

Even now, the memory sends phantom pain through his skull. He presses his thumb against his temple, breathing slowly and steadily. He is in control. The whispers that once threatened to consume him have been mastered.

Everything changed that day—the day Joshua Levi placed his hands upon him. The agony vanished as suddenly as it had come, the neural link’s torment fading instantly. And in that moment, he believed. He had resisted for so long, holding fast to the old doubts, but that day shattered them all. He knew, with a certainty beyond reason, that Yeshua was the Messiah.

And on that day, as dawn kissed the broken earth, Prince Levi spoke—and the world changed.

Even now, the words echo in Benjamin’s mind, as vivid as the sunrise over the charred remains of the old world. He remembers standing amidst the wreckage, the air thick with smoke, his body frail from suffering.

Levi stood before them, uniform torn, face streaked with dust. He did not speak at first. He only looked through them, into them—piercing flesh and bone, seeing souls laid bare. Then, with the weight of heaven behind him, he seized the same holographic projector that had broadcast Benjamin’s torture to the nation and began.

"The day of the Lord has come. Who has stood against it?"

The words hung heavy. The survivors—broken, hollow-eyed—barely dared to breathe.

"The proud have fallen. The mighty crumble to dust. The nations that defied the King of Hosts are no more. And yet—" Levi’s voice softened, sweeping over them like the wind over graves. "—yet you stand. Not by your strength. Not by your righteousness. But because the Lord, in His mercy, has preserved a remnant to look upon their crucified King and believe."

Benjamin remembers how those words settled in his chest, stirring something deep and ancient. He had not yet believed—not truly—but in that moment, he felt the weight of something greater pressing upon him.

Levi raised his hands to the heavens. "Hear now the words of the prophet Malachi." His voice carried through the ruins, echoing off shattered stone.

“Behold, I will send you Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the Fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their Fathers, lest I strike the land with utter destruction.”

The crowd shifted. Some lowered their heads. Others wept.

"The fire has passed. The world lies in ashes. But you, O remnant of Israel, you have been spared. Not for yourselves, but for all who will come after. Now, return with your hearts."

He moved among them, a shepherd among his flock.

"Fathers, your sons stand before you. Look at them."

Benjamin had lifted his eyes then, seeing the faces of those around him. Had they been enemies once? Strangers? It no longer mattered.

"Sons, honor your Fathers. Daughters, dry your Mothers’ tears—and let them dry yours."

A quiet sob broke the silence. Then another. The weight of generations, war, and loss—pressing down, then lifting.

"You were not merely spared—you were chosen." Levi’s voice steadied. "The world will be rebuilt, not by the sword, but by love. The kingdom of heaven will rise, not on stone, but on Yeshua Ha Mashiach."

And in that moment, the people rose in renewal.

Benjamin stepped forward, ash clinging to his skin like ghosts of the past. The water shimmered, reflecting the dawn of a new world when he knelt, the cold bit into his flesh, but the fire within burned hotter.

When he rose, the past was washed away.

He was baptized along with the entire remnant of Israel, a nation reborn in faith, washed clean and purified by the fire of war and the blood of the lamb.

And now, even as he stands watching the sun rise over Jerusalem, its golden light cascading through the towering peaks of the Mount of Olives, he knows his purpose.

He is still that man. The man who was reborn in the aftermath of judgment. The man who vowed to serve the Prince.

A knock on the door.

Benjamin doesn’t turn immediately. He already knows who it is.

Cohen.

The man who had been resurrected shortly after the restoration. A man who had seen death, tasted it, and returned. There was something different about those who had been brought back. They carried a stillness, a weight that ordinary men did not bear.

Another knock. More insistent this time.

Benjamin exhales, casting one last glance at the city below. It is peaceful for now. But he knows peace is fragile, a thin veil stretched over something darker. He can feel it shifting, fraying at the edges.

Chaos is here.

He moves toward the door, pressing his palm against the scanner. It unlocks with a quiet hiss. Cohen stands on the other side, his expression unreadable, his mentat no doubt feeding him projections of what will come.

It’s lockdown. No one should be moving through the palace at this hour. But Cohen wouldn’t be here unless the rules needed to be broken.

And Benjamin already knows why.

The walls of Jerusalem and the depths of Gehenna are stirring. And when they break, there will be no turning back.

“Come in, Cohen. I already know why you’re here—I saw the dressing down the commander gave you. Come, come.”

Cohen steps inside, moving like a dead man searching for a place to lie down.

Benjamin watches him, his expression unreadable. “I’ve always stood in awe of you—one of the few resurrected after the restoration. Do you regret coming back to Earth? I imagine on days like this, you must.”

Cohen sinks into the sofa, managing a faint smile. “Even amid eternal joy, the flesh still calls to you. It never truly lets go. But I was given a choice, knowing full well I might taste suffering again. Yet here I am, placing my second bid—for a better resurrection.”

Benjamin nods, thoughtful. “Commendable. You’re braver than I.”

“Nah, what’s truly commendable is your ability to stand in Prince Levi’s presence daily as his counselor. Doesn’t your flesh find it unbearable? They say he’s the exact image of Yeshua.”

Benjamin shakes his head slightly. “Don’t call me counselor. He counsels me, preparing me to take his place once he is gone. You may call me his shadow.”

Cohen stiffens. “Once he is gone…” The weight of those words presses into his mind, unraveling thoughts he would rather not entertain. The idea lingers, distorting his already tenuous grasp on reality, as if the world is twisting into something even more perplexing.

Benjamin senses the shift in Cohen’s demeanor and cuts through the tension with a smirk. “But enough of this humility contest. We both know you’re the better man, and that’s the last I’ll hear of it.”

Cohen exhales, pushing away the gnawing dread of the final seven. He meets Benjamin’s gaze and acknowledges the remark with a weary smile.

Benjamin moves closer, studying his friend’s dejected countenance. He gives him a firm slap on the shoulder and a brotherly squeeze and offers reassurance. “I have to ask—who does a routine weapons check in the middle of an operation with the entire kingdom on edge?”

Cohen’s brow furrows. “That’s what I was wondering. Care to illuminate?”

Benjamin leans back, his tone darkening. “Someone with something to hide.”

A slow silence stretches between them before Cohen finally asks, “Should we bring it to the Prince? He should have seen all this through his mentat. Why the silence?”

Benjamin barely hesitates. “No. The Prince knows all things, but his mentat is in rest mode. The queen says he’s very ill. The virus hit him harder than most, which, in itself, is strange.” He exhales. “I could go to his quarters, but it would be like reminding him of a fly's buzzing or a bee's sting. He’s fatalistic about schemes and possible betrayals. He always says, ‘If only the wicked would rebel faster, the coming of the Lord might be hastened. I grow tired of this crown and desire to hand it over to someone more qualified.”

Benjamin meets Cohen’s gaze. “So you see—it’s we who care about these things. Not him.”

Cohen frowns. “But what if Gavriel has sinned? Adultery? Murder? Would the Prince ignore that?”

“Of course not. You know how zealous he is in judging sin. But we need proof—we don’t have that yet.”

Benjamin studies Cohen for a moment, his gaze sharp. “So while we wait for darkness to reveal itself in the light, let’s not worry about whether Judas is meant to betray. The real question is—do we stop him, or let him finish his work?”

Cohen closes his eyes briefly, the weight of those words pressing into his soul. When he opens them, his answer is firm. “Complete his work.”

Benjamin exhales, his voice lowering. “As the falling away begins, we will see many Judases. Men we once saw worshiping in the temple—full of faith, longing for the heavenly—will be afraid at the thought of losing their earthly wealth.”

“The man of lawlessness will declare, ‘Eat or pray,’ and the cowardly throngs will answer, ‘Eat. What will prayer get us now? You are our god, our everything. What can Levi’s God do for us that you cannot?”

“As in days of old, men will live by their stomachs. But this time, their rebellion will be greater than ever before. Past uprisings at least had their twisted ingenuity in casting off the shackles of their Creator. But now…” He pauses, glancing at Cohen. “I don’t know if you saw everything from the heavenlies as we did.”

“I did.”

“Then I’m preaching to the choir.”

Cohen exhales, brow furrowing. “But maybe Gavriel isn’t a Judas. Not everyone is. Perhaps he’s only lost his way—a sheep that has wandered from his Shepherd and needs to be led back. Judas was one thing. Gavriel is another.”

Benjamin shakes his head. “How can you expect them not to be Judases? Have they not believed in the crucifixion of our Lord? Have they not seen the nations humbled by His mighty power?” He turns abruptly, sweeping a hand toward the window. “Look! The pillar of cloud still rises over Zion daily, shielding us from the relentless sun, sparing us the curse of sweat as we toil. Any man who defies the truth after witnessing such wonders is no mere wanderer—he is a Judas. It takes a Judas to turn away in the face of such glory—the undeniable miracles of our Lord Yeshua HaMashiach.”

Cohen’s lips tighten. “And what of Peter? Did he not deny our Lord three times before the rooster crowed? Did he not see all the miracles of Yeshua, and was he still faltering? Only when he remembered Yeshua’s words did he repent. Gavriel could be our Peter.” He holds Benjamin’s gaze. “We don’t even know if he’s done wrong. I’m only voicing my suspicions.”

Benjamin sighs. “And justly so. I know a fallen man when I see one, and Gavriel has certainly strayed from grace. But it is not my place to interfere—not yet. I could bring it to the Prince’s ears, but I want evidence first. I will not let rumors stain the name of the Prince’s right hand. Maybe we can bring your Peter to repentance.”

“I’ll get on it right away,” Cohen is about to turn away, Benjamin's voice again holds his attention, "I think you may want to speak to the Queen. I think she's done some prodding herself and might be willing to divulge some of what she's found so far. She's quite the busy little bee these days.”

# Chapter 18: The Fires of Gehenna

Amiel stands in line, his heart hammering against his ribs as the gate looms. The checkpoint feels like a gaping maw, ready to swallow him whole the moment he steps forward to submit his biometric data and certificate. He forces his breathing to steady, his pulse to slow. He is not Amiel. Not here. He is Shimon—a man reborn, a man of repentance. That is the role he must play.

A desperate urge to contact Aleister surges through him, but he crushes it before it can take hold. The soldiers surrounding him are too perceptive; any stray signal from his mind would expose him. No, he needs to be still and unreadable. He forces his mind elsewhere—any distraction will do.

Music.

The piano has always been his sanctuary, the only place where his hands moved with effortless grace, where control was absolute. His fingers ghost over the keys, pressing down in smooth, practiced motions in his mind's eye. He can almost hear the melody, the haunting resonance of a prodigy at work. He resists the urge to move his fingers in the air like a child lost in a daydream. He must be Shimon. A man reborn does not fidget, does not falter.

He braces himself. The Levites might question him again, probing the sincerity of his conversion. *What would a true believer act like?* His testimony must be like Mozart’s Symphony No. 41 in C Major—flawless, harmonious, without a single discordant note.

He thinks of his Father’s Bible—the one given to him on his eleventh birthday. Its leather cover is softened by years of use, and its spine is creased from countless readings. In his mind, it rests beneath the soft glow of an aetherglow lamp, its cold, artificial light pooling over the fragile pages.

When one flips through it, one can trace his father’s devotion—his favorite verses carefully underlined, his notes pressed into the margins with unwavering faith. It is a roadmap of belief, a legacy passed down from Father to son.

It is tradition. When the children of Prince Levi reach the age of accountability, they receive the Bible so they, too, may study it and walk in the path of their Father. And when another sibling comes of age, the Bible is passed on, its pages bearing the weight of generations.

His siblings embraced it without hesitation, as if the words were carved into their souls. They walked as saints, their lives echoing the scriptures, falling in step with the God who ruled from the temple.

But Amiel…

The weight of the book had never felt like a blessing to him.

It had felt like a chain.

Amiel felt the burden of those chains from the moment of his baptism. He had heard the sermons, listened to the reverence in his Father’s voice, and seen the awe in the eyes of those who beheld the glory in the temple. Even his Father claimed to be God in human flesh—patient, righteous, unwavering—a living testament to Yeshua.

It made Amiel sick.

*"Do this, son. Do that. Love Yeshua—He died for you, for your sins. He exists, He’s real. Look at His glory in the temple, at my face when I leave His presence..."*

The words rattled in his skull, a dull, unrelenting drumbeat of expectation. He resists the temptation to clench his fists at his sides. He had slammed them against his bed before, his rage a silent rebellion. His flesh had burned with the need to act—to do something, anything, to sever himself from the suffocating grasp of his Father’s God.

A dark thought pulses through him, sharp and intoxicating.

*I will be greater than him. More significant than their God.*

The words echoed, reverberating through his very bones.

Power.

Not faith's soft, gentle power, but absolute, unyielding dominance. The kind that could not be questioned, could not be denied. They wanted him to bow, repent, and submit—but all he craved was freedom. Freedom from the weight of expectation, from the suffocating presence of a Father who saw him as nothing more than an extension of himself.

But then… There was her.

His Mother.

Her hand resting lightly on his shoulder, her voice a whisper in the dark. She had seen him for what he was—not a shadow of his Father, but something more.

*"One day, you will take your father’s place. But only if you forge yourself into someone worthy."*

The image burned in his mind—himself standing in the temple, not in quiet reverence but in power. They would look upon him with awe, not because of prophecy or lineage, but because of what he had made himself. Strength was not a gift—it was a prize to be seized.

And yet…

A bitter knot formed in his stomach.

He still wanted to please his Father, and he still loved him. His father had been nothing but good to him, patient and kind.

But he would never see Amiel for what he indeed was.

Not yet.

He would appeal to his Father one last time.

*Let him see me as I am, not as a reflection of himself.*

And if his father refused…

Then Amiel would carve his path.

With or without him.

But first, he had to prove himself. He had to show how great a warrior he had become.

A flicker of doubt tightened his chest.

His thoughts betrayed him.

This was not the mindset of a man giving a sincere testimony—

Or was this all in his mind?

Amiel inhaled sharply, pressing his shoulders back as the gate loomed ahead—a hulking slab of reinforced steel, its surface cold and unyielding beneath the harsh glow of the aether floodlights. Wide enough for convoys to pass through, it stood imposing and unrelenting, like the lid of a sarcophagus, sealing the inhabitants of Gehenna inside their tomb.

Amiel kept his breathing steady, but every step forward felt heavier, his instincts screaming that something was wrong. He wasn’t sure when he first noticed it—the shift in the air, the way the guards were glancing at the line with more scrutiny than usual. They weren’t just doing routine checks.

*They were looking for someone.*

His stomach twisted. He wanted to reach out, probe their minds, and confirm whether they suspected him. But that was a risk he couldn’t take. Even the slightest attempt would be noticed, and he didn’t need to anyway.

*He just knew.*

Three people were ahead of him. He was almost there. Almost through.

He clenches his jaw and forces his gaze forward, rehearsing the plan: Stay still, stay calm, hand over the certificate, let them scan the bio data, nothing *more.*

A shiver crawled down his spine.

A small group appears out of nowhere near the back of the line. Five of them. No, *not just any soldiers.*

*Arnon and Samuel.* The Mossad had caught up to him.

Amiel’s pulse spikes—*the two biggest pains in his ass.* They must’ve crawled through the tunnel from the brothel and reached here at the point where they could ascertain what he could be planning. They’re smart. But he is more brilliant.

They were frisking people now, moving with deliberate precision, scanning, checking, and working their way forward, checking each individual to ensure they weren’t using a hologram.

*Too much wasted time.* There were too many delays dealing with that *old bastard Shimon.* If he had moved faster and had just taken the certificate and gone, maybe he wouldn’t be in this situation.

Two more people ahead of him.

He could feel the pressure closing in like a tightening noose. His muscles coiled, every instinct screaming at him to run. But that would be suicide. He had to make it through.

He swallows hard, forcing himself to watch as the person before him steps forward. They hand over their documents, place their hands on the scanner, *and pass through.*

*No alarms. No hesitation.*

His fears were unfounded.

Or were they?

A flicker of movement. He turns his head, just slightly.

Arnon and Samuel reach the middle of the line. *They were moving faster now.*

Two more people ahead of him.

*What if they stopped the line?*

*What if they pulled him aside?*

His body was tight with restrained energy, his breath shallow, his fingers itching, wondering if he should use his bio-sword and fight his way through. What’s he thinking? He’s only eleven. He can’t even beat Uriel in combat, let alone a fully trained soldier in his father’s army.

*Aleister—what should I do?*

*No. Don’t answer.*

He’ll figure something out.

He exhales slowly, adjusting his stance, forcing the tension from his shoulders. His turn is next.

One more step.

He has to make it.

He’ll preach like an old man who has just received salvation, a zealot desperate to warn the people of impending doom. There’ll be no way they’ll doubt him then. No one suspects a preacher of carrying a mentat faker. If they frisk him, he’s *gone*—their hands will pass through the hologram, and it’s over. But frisking a harbinger of doom? That would be like questioning prophecy itself.

They are near him now, checking the man behind him.

There’s no time.

He moves out of line and spins toward the crowd just as Arnon and Samuel are about to descend upon him like a carrion devouring its prey.

He steps forward, lifting his hands high. His voice is raw with the urgency of a man who has seen the flames of judgment.

"Repent! Repent while there is still time!"

The words cut through the crowd like a blade. Conversations die mid-sentence. Faces twist in confusion, anger, and unease.

Amiel—No, Shimon goes quiet to see how his words affect the crowd. He doesn’t know it, but he just kindled a flame to the tinder.

From the shadows of Gehenna, the exiles stir. One by one, figures emerge from the gloom, gaunt forms hunched beneath the jagged crags. Hollow eyes scan the horizon, fixed on the high walls of Jerusalem. The immense multitude burns with anger as their own confronts them.

"Do not be deceived!" Amiel’s voice rises. "The judgment of the Almighty is near! The fire of Gehenna will not be quenched!"

A murmur spreads—not of fear, but defiance.

"Who is this old fool?" someone scoffs.

“Shut up and let us through!" One person waiting in line, desperate to escape the slowly forming mob, snaps at a soldier.

"The Almighty?" A man in the mob spits on the ground. "He left us to die!"

Amiel sees it now—the anger smoldering just beneath the surface.

*Good. Let it burn.*

"He is sending the Lawless One," he declares, "who will purify us like a refiner’s fire! Yeshua HaMeshiach will judge him."

The crowd erupts into an argument.

"Yeshua will come on a white horse!"

"Blasphemy! He speaks lies!"

"The Lawless One will lead us to freedom!" someone shouts back.

A soldier shifts uncomfortably. Another extends their bio-sword.

Amiel presses forward. "You think you are safe in your rebellion, you sinners, the darkness is fleeting! The Almighty has not forgotten you! You’re storing wrath for the day of judgement! Turn back while you can, before the door is sealed forever!"

That does it.

A roar of outrage explodes from the exiles.

One man tears his clothes.

“Fuck you old man! We’re coming for you when he comes.”

"Turn back?" A woman lunges forward, eyes blazing with fury. "You want us to crawl back like beggars?"

"You dare call us sinners?"

"He's one of them!"

A rock flies through the air. It slams into a metal post near Shimon

"Shimon," a soldier warns, stepping forward, but it's too late.

Chaos erupts.

A bottle shatters. A man grabs a guard. Someone rushes the gate.

The guards react instantly—bio-staffs crack against skulls, nanobots flare to life. Sirens wail.

The steel gate begins to rumble and starts to close.

Samuel and Arnon snap into action, shoving civilians aside as they rush forward with their bio-swords in hand, ready to strike any of those who endanger the repentant standing in line.

Amiel swallows hard.

Through the riot, Amiel sees them—the ones who listened to his pretty little sermon, which was an accumulation of everything he had learned from his Father.

They are stuck in the middle, caught between the frenzied mob and the closing gate. Some drop to their knees, crying out in prayer. Others push forward, frantic, desperate to be let in.

"Let us through!" a woman screams, shoving past a soldier.

"We repent!" a man shouts, raising his hands. "Please, we—"

A bottle smashes against the man’s shoulder, sending him crashing.

"Traitors!" someone from the mob roars.

A fight breaks out among the exiles—some trying to attack the repentant, others trying to flee the violence altogether.

A man, face twisted in fury, grabs one of the kneeling women by the arm. "You think they’ll take you back?" he snarls. "After what we’ve done?"

The woman tears away from his grip, her eyes wild with fear. She runs for the gate, reaching out, her fingers just inches from the scanner—

A gunshot rings out.

She collapses.

The crowd freezes for half a second before the chaos explodes again.

More gunfire.

The guards aren’t waiting anymore.

Amiel sees it all. The panic, the blood, the ones who won’t make it. He sees the fear in their eyes as they realize—

They hesitated too long.

And now, the door is closing.

Amiel has already exploited the chaos, seamlessly syncing his mentat to a soldier in a plain IDF uniform, the segmented plating giving him the perfect cover. He slips through the gate instead of joining the fighting, moving with purpose and no hesitation.

Inside, he merges into a platoon, their boots striking against the reinforced pavement as they march along the outlying road, following the perimeter to reinforce the upper battlements. Their orders are clear—take position on the elevated defense platforms and rain down hell on the rioters below.

As they ascend the narrow stairwell leading to the high ground, Amiel makes his move. A single deviation. A break just sharp enough to go unnoticed. He veers off, stepping away from the formation, slipping into the city's depths with a measured, unhurried pace.

To anyone watching, he’s just another soldier patrolling his post.

Not a fugitive.

Not a boy who just set Gehenna ablaze.

# Chapter 19: Dedication

Sejal monitors her local neural network, scanning for any trace of Amiel. Nothing. His mind has been silent for half an hour—eerily so.

She exhales, head resting in her palm, blond hair hanging like a mop over her face. Even lifting her cup of tea feels like a task too great. The virus has gutted her, leaving her weak and feverish. A small price. She would suffer a thousand more if it meant pushing her son toward his destiny. Suppose it meant Amiel on Levi’s throne.

But the silence, the not knowing, is unbearable. Worse than any virus.

Even when she connects with him, his thoughts remain a mystery. The mentat blockers work both ways—they are a double-edged sword—a shield that protects him but also keeps her blind. She’d rather have blindness than nothing at all.

She’s impressed, though. It’s hard to do—manually forcing his mentat into rest mode—a feat of discipline, redirecting every impulse away from the chip.

It’s not possible to do it for long. One minor distraction, a wandering thought left unchecked, and a signal could slip through—an unguarded moment betraying him. If he could do this independently, there would be no need for mentat blockers.

But maybe her son is different.

She will have to test him when he returns home, if he returns home.

She needs a sign—some reassurance that he *will* come back. Her eyes drift to the corner of the bedroom. A lamp stand. Or at least, something that *looks* like one. The corner of her room calls out to her. She tries to divert her mind, but can’t; she has to know.

She exhales, her hand trembling, and inadvertently spills the tea. Waiting. Hoping.

Even Aleister, who has fused his interface with Amiel’s, offers little comfort to her inquiries. She bombards him with silent, desperate questions, but he remains indifferent—an unfeeling void in her mind. Every probe and plea meets the same impassable wall of cold logic.

"Contacting him now would be unwise. His probability of survival is critically low. Even more so if his mentat is detected among those who live in Gehenna, they will surely trace it to him."

His voice is devoid of urgency, devoid of care. It’s just data to him—a calculation.

“I trusted you with watching over him, you damn robot. You're supposed to train him and raise him. What the fuck are you doing?”

“I understand your feelings. You are human and weak, but you must not allow your emotions to be involved. I am doing what I must to ensure he is chosen.”

She exhales sharply, her pulse hammering. But she understands. If Amiel fails, everything they have worked for crumbles. And she cannot—must not—interfere, letting her emotional fragility as a mother come between him and his destiny.

But something even more urgent looms.

They say the lockdown will lift soon. If everything accelerates, someone will check on him and discover him missing. The shadows tighten. The walls close in. And she knows what she must do.

She must call upon The One.

The thought makes her skin crawl. There is something about him—something that feeds on her whenever she calls out—a presence that does not just answer but takes.-

It is a slow, devouring force, drinking her essence like water, stripping her layer by layer until only obedience remains.

And in her weakened state, she does not know how much she has left to give.

A slow breath. A moment of hesitation.

Then she forces herself to rise.

The room is cloaked in darkness. She refuses to turn on the light.

Light does not belong here.

Not when the light of her world is out there in danger.

She steps forward and pulls back the cloaking cape from what used to be a lampstand in the corner, unveiling a small, blackened altar—its edges warped and slick, as if melted and reshaped by something unnatural. A corruption lingers there, more profound than soot, more than mere residue, a stain of his presence.

Remnants of previous sacrifices litter its surface. The severed head of a chicken, its bones reduced to brittle black dust, its furrowed feathers scattered on the ground, forgotten in her feverish delirium.

She shudders—a failure in duty.

He will not like that. He has commanded her to leave no trace of these rituals.

She’s at her wits’ end and cares little.

The One requires incense. That is the first offering. She lifts a bundle of dark resin, setting it to flame. Thick smoke coils upward, then halts, suspended, as if caught, as if something unseen tastes it, claims it. The fragrance should be rich, resinous. But it isn’t. It twists, curdles, turning acrid, foul.

A scent like burning flesh fills the air.

The smoke binds the space, choking out all other scents, making the place his.

Then the blood.

The blade glides across her palm. Shallow, but enough. Enough to stir him. Enough to bring him forth like a rabid dog scenting the hunt.

The blood drips into the incense, sizzling unnaturally—vanishing before reaching the altar’s surface.

Something darker than smoke forms.

It does not rise. It sinks.

The air compresses, pressing against her ribs and wrapping around her throat like an unseen grip. The candles flicker, their flames bending toward the altar like cowering subjects before their king.

The shadows twist, stretch, and pulse, distorting into unnatural shapes.

A force crashes down on her. She stumbles, falling to her knees, gripping the altar to avoid collapsing entirely.

A presence unfurls, vast and suffocating.

A whisper—not in her ears, but in her bones.

*"You have waited too long."*

Her vision darkens at the edges.

He is here.

They say Prince Levi has performed many miracles. He heals, he restores, he brings forth wonders that inspire awe.

But The One—he does not heal.

He devours.

She does not dare look up. Instead, she lowers her head, pressing her forehead to the cold, slick floor.

“I was waiting for you to come,” she whispers. “I did not want to show weakness. Please forgive me, but now I am weak and I need you. Please send a signature to confirm that Amiel will be okay.”

Silence.

Then—a voice, hollow, etched in hunger.

*"The Dark Lord is pleased with you, oh woman, who has the honor to bring forth into the world the Chosen One."*

A chill crawls up her spine, but she does not move.

*"I will show you what is to come. But I will show you more this time—to lift your failing heart for me."*

From the center of the altar, a light flickers. Then something clicks—a device activating. A hologram bursts forth, projected from a small, embedded lens in his forehead.

She lifts her gaze.

In the hologram, she sees Amiel.

He is dressed in royal clothing, a scarlet robe draped over his shoulders, a scepter in his hand. He stands in the temple, the sacred heart of the world.

And behind him—

A massive image of him looms, fully animated, speaking, moving, a towering monolith, like the statues the ancients built to glorify their kings.

It watches over him.

It speaks in his name.

And those beneath it bow.

“Oh, wise one, all-knowing, how would this come to pass if my son cannot return to the palace? He is trapped in the city—I can feel him. He is not in Gehenna, but he needs your help. Please, oh wise one, with your all-knowing words, deliver my son and bring him back to me, so that I might see his face and lift my sagging countenance.”

Sejal forces herself to stand, drawing from what little strength remains. Her limbs tremble, her body weak, but she meets The One’s gaze. His hologram flickers—an illusion of light and shadow—but the presence behind it is accurate. The pressure in the air, the weight against her chest, the gnawing sense of being watched from inside her mind.

“Please,” she breathes, “take whatever you want. Please give me my son. Take me if you must.”

Her gown slips from her shoulders, pooling at her feet.

The hologram retracts.

The darkness deepens.

The air around her compresses, thick with an unseen force, and The One moves toward her—yet it is not motion but arrival, as though he has always been there and she has only just noticed.

His hand lifts, fingers cold as unburied steel, and he cups her breast. He bounces it once, as if weighing a fruit in his palm.

Then he lets it drop.

His voice is velvet stretched over razors.

“Your flesh, though pleasing, does not interest me.”

His hand does not leave her skin. It trails upward from her breast, following the curve of her ribs, her collarbone, until the tip of his index finger presses against her sternum.

A chill erupts from the touch, flooding into her bones.

Her breath catches.

Something is pulling inside her.

“What I want,” The One whispers, “lies here.”

The cold burrows deeper, spreading through her veins, piercing into the very seat of her being. She gasps—an involuntary sound, like a creature caught in a hunter’s snare.

“This,” he continues, his finger pressing more forcefully, “is all I require.”

Her soul recoils—not in rejection, but in recognition.

She can feel him.

Not just touching her body, but pressing into her will, into the last fragments of herself that still belong to her alone.

“Make it mine,” The One murmurs. “And everything you desire will be yours. Every sign I have shown you will come to pass. And even greater things—things you cannot yet fathom, things the prophets of old longed to see—shall be given to you.”

The room tightens around her.

She cannot breathe.

Not because of fear.

Because she is being emptied.

His presence is a vacuum, devouring the life from the room, including her soul.

The air in her lungs, the warmth in her blood, the certainty of her existence—it is all slipping from her grasp as she is drawn toward the presence before her.

And she knows—

If she says yes—

She will never belong to herself again.

For some reason, of all the strange things she could think of at that moment, her brother came to mind. What would he say if he saw her like this? Would he call her a fool for surrendering? Or would he admire her for embracing the darkness he, too, has long desired?

She knows his hunger for power. He has always spoken of overthrowing Prince Levi, of revenge against the God who took their parents.

Would he see this as a step toward that vengeance?

Or would he see her as lost?

But does it matter?

Everything has a price. Everything is a game, brokered by influential players who use people as pawns. Even her brother, with all his ambition, is a slave to something greater—just as she is. Everyone is.

The only question is: Has she chosen the right master?

The master who will be on the winning side of history?

She doesn’t know. But she does know this—rage clouds her judgment. A hatred so consuming it drowns out the cost and the consequences. The only thing that matters is destroying Prince Levi.

How much longer must she play the role of his insufferable wife?

She can bear it no more.

She gives in.

And in that moment, it is not surrender—it is consumption.

A great black hole swallowing her whole.

Everything she is, everything she was, collapses into its gravity, crushed beyond recognition. There is no resistance, no escape—only the void.

And she is gone.

Now she sees it all: how Amiel is going to be delivered to her, her role in it, and what she must do. Everything has become apparent.

She sees a vast network of small and great people in the city who have pledged allegiance to the Dark Lord. It is much larger than she ever imagined.

How many have submitted to His overwhelming presence? She had no idea it was this way.

She thought she was alone, cast adrift in her desire to be free from the shackles of the Lord of Hosts. But now she knows. There are many. They are waiting, waiting for Amiel, waiting to help Him. She sees through their eyes. No longer needing the Mentat, she watches as they watch. Sejal is no longer just one person. She is many. And they are ready.

The One removes his hand from Sejal, his sickly white skin glowing eerily in the darkness. She looks into the sunken crevices that contain his bloodshot, blacker-than-black eyes—pools of abyss floating above deep, shadowed hollows. The dark circles beneath them seem less like exhaustion and more like the absence of something vital, something human.

His quiet yet inescapable voice slithers into the marrow of her bones.

"Now you are mine."

The words settle upon her like a brand before the metal touches her flesh.

"But I will leave you something, so everyone knows you are mine."

On the altar before her, two coals appear, dark and lifeless.

"Place them," he commands, "and light them on fire."

Sejal obeys. The flames rise immediately, as if they have been waiting for her.

The One reaches beneath his robe and pulls forth a brand.

"I am going to mark you," he says.

The firelight glints off the iron. The brand’s tip burns—not with ordinary heat, but with a radiance that does not belong to this world. The glow pulses, alive, whispering of something ancient and insatiable.

"But for now, only my chosen will see the marking."

He steps closer. The weight of his presence thickens the air, pressing against her skin like unseen hands. His frame is small, his body brittle and fragile—like a husk that might crumble at a touch. Yet, his frailty is a deception.

His power does not come from flesh.

It is not the man who commands dominion, but the presence that moves through him—the force that speaks in his voice, that lingers in the decay of his breath. A force older than the world itself.

"In the future," he murmurs, voice smooth as rotting silk, "all will know."

He gestures toward the table.

"Place your hand before me," he says. "Let it rest here. Close your eyes."

The glow of the brand intensifies, throwing sharp shadows against the walls.

"I must mark you so the world will know—you belong to me."

He leans in, the scent of age and death curling from his lips.

"You are of the world now. You are not a sheep bound to the shepherd. You are the goat."

His voice deepens, curling with a terrible promise.

"You belong to no one but yourself. You are a law unto yourself. Do what thou wilt. Eat what grass you will. Roam where you will. There are no chains, no master to bind you."

His breath brushes against her cheek as he lifts the brand.

"This mark is your freedom."

The iron lowers toward her skin.

"Come," he whispers. "Let it sear into your flesh, deep and wide."

The iron descends.

The heat is unbearable, a searing agony that ignites her nerves in white-hot torment. The brand sears through the outer layers of her skin, hissing and spitting as it sinks into her like molten metal poured into a mold.

Sejal's body convulses. A scream rips from her throat, raw and ragged, echoing through the chamber. Her fingers claw at the table, nails scraping against the wood, but there is no escape. The One holds her in place—not by force, but by inevitability.

She is his now.

The stench of burning flesh fills her nostrils, thick and acrid. The pain does not subside; it deepens, drilling into muscle, into tendon, into the very essence of her being. Tears stream down her face, but she does not beg for mercy. There is none to be given.

The One watches, unmoving, impassive.

When he finally lifts the iron, the agony lingers, pulsing in waves through her ruined hand. The wound is deep, charred black, an unmistakable brand of ownership. Smoke rises from her skin, curling in the dim firelight.

The One watches as Sejal gasps, sweat-soaked, her hand trembling from the searing pain of the brand. The flesh is raw, blackened, and the stench of burned skin lingers in the air. He does not offer her comfort. Instead, he lifts the small holographic device connected to the chain around her neck, activating it with a single touch. A faint light flickers, and suddenly, the wound is hidden beneath the illusion of unblemished skin.

"You will wear this," he says. "To the world, your hand will appear as it was before. But to those who are mine, they will see the truth."

Sejal stares at her palm, flexing her fingers. The pain still pulses beneath the surface, but to her eyes, there is no mark. She looks up at him, searching his face for answers.

"Why?" she asks, her voice hoarse. "Why *this* number?"

The One's lips curl into something resembling a smile, but there is no warmth—only certainty.

"Six hundred sixty-six," he says, pacing around her like a teacher before a student. "A number chosen before the foundations of the world. A number that is not merely written but *calculated.*"

"The ignorant think it is a symbol of evil," he continues, "but they are the true fools. Six is the number of man, for man was made on the sixth day. Three is the number of completion. The triple six is not imperfection—it is *perfection* of humanity. Man, ascended beyond his weakness. No longer bound by the Shepherd’s yoke. No longer crawling in the dust before a God who would keep him caged."

He extends a hand toward her marked palm.

"This number is not a curse, Sejal. It is a sign of freedom. Of power. Of self-will unchained." His voice is now barely a whisper. "It is the number of the *future.*"

She shivers as his words coil around her, sinking deep into her mind. The pain in her hand remains. But now, it feels different. Almost… sacred.

“And my son?”

“As we speak, the followers of your son in this city of superstition are working to bring him to you before it’s too late.”

# Chapter 20: The Sacrifice

Ahead, the temple rises above the city, towering over even the tallest buildings. Glancing back, Amiel sees the land of Israel stretching endlessly to the horizon, with Jerusalem standing like a fortress at its center. The vast metropolitan sprawl of the holy city spreads across the nation's heart, its reach unchallenged.

Even Gehenna, with its towering walls, lies beneath his gaze. From this vantage point, he can see the slums of the hell he just escaped. The burned-out structures, once imposing in their ruin, now seem insignificant against the grandeur of the majestic, futuristic buildings surrounding him.

They rise in elegant symmetry, smooth surfaces etched with luminous script that pulses gently: “Holy to the Lord.” The words shimmer like living fire, woven into the very fabric of the city. Holographic displays shift seamlessly between sacred verses and royal decrees, each reinforcing the dominion of Prince Levi.

One display flickers like an advert. It reads:

The mentat—a neural chip installed in every citizen at birth—enables seamless information sharing. Verbal speech is optional, reserved for moments when mentat-to-mentat links are not preferred.

A perfect world doesn’t need privacy when there is nothing to hide.

Arches of polished metal span the walkways, casting intricate patterns of light onto the streets below. Their engraved inscriptions echo a silent decree: nothing here is common; everything belongs to the divine. His footsteps echo against the pristine streets—something impossible in Gehenna. He wonders if he would hear it strike the ground if he were to drop a needle. The silence is oppressive. He longs for Gehenna’s chaos, a world he imagines he won’t return to for a long time. He misses the random gunshots and the vibrant holographic ads that reached out to you. There, anything could happen. He never felt such raw adrenaline, and now, back in Jerusalem, it’s like bottoming out—hitting a crushing low.

No honking cars, no hurried steps, no jostling crowds. Even the marketplace is hushed, its vendors neatly arranged, their voices low, as if fearful of disturbing the sacred stillness woven into the air. Amiel turns onto a main thoroughfare and stops at a merchant’s stall. He lifts one of the wares—a cooking pot.

The same inscription is etched into its surface, glowing faintly: "Holy to the Lord."

He frowns and picks up an eating utensil—the exact words. He moves to another vendor, one that sells men’s clothing. He lifts a robe and runs his fingers over its delicate embroidery. The inscription is there, too, subtly woven into the fabric.

He stops, his gaze sweeping over the market, the goods, and the people. Every pot, tool, and object bears the same mark. The entire city, not just the temple, has been consecrated.

For the first time, he realizes just how deep it runs. Being the prince, he has never felt the need to leave the palace. He had no idea that the same inscription existed on everything.

Is this devotion, or a gilded cage? They believe they are free and that every action is sacred. But after witnessing Gehenna, Amiel knows the truth. No freedom exists in a world where even the pots and streets belong to the Lord.

A woman in a long, modest dress passes him, offering a bright smile. “Baruch Hashem, chayal,[[7]](#footnote-7)1” she says, her voice gentle and sincere.

Amiel nods but doesn’t return the smile. What does it matter? The people here walk like contented sheep, heads high, eyes alight with unseen joy. But he doesn’t buy it.

In Gehenna, the chains are visible—grime, desperation, defiance. Here, they are draped in light and scripture, hidden behind the illusion of peace. But chains, seen or unseen, are still chains.

A small boy runs past, laughing as he chases a wooden hoop. He glances up at Amiel and beams before dashing off again. Amiel exhales sharply and keeps walking, the city's stillness pressing against him like a weight.

They don’t know they’re slaves. But he does.

Amiel longs to be away from all this—to escape the oppressive sanctity of the city and return to Aleister’s presence. The thought grips him so tightly that he pings Aleister’s Mentat without hesitation.

Aleister, are you still there?

The response comes instantly, smoothly, and knowingly. I’ve always been here, Amiel. A pause, then the voice continues, laced with quiet amusement. Tell me, are you enjoying your time in the city? It’s pretty sickening.

Amiel exhales sharply. Yes. I can’t bear it anymore. Please, tell me how to get home. I want to be with you again. I want to be free.

Getting you home is out of my hands, Aleister replies. I have no control within the city itself. Another pause, deliberate. But your mother is working on your return. Soon, I’ll receive the contact. You will meet this person—they will help you find your way back.

A flicker of anticipation stirs in Amiel’s chest. He grips the edge of his tunic, eyes scanning the streets as if expecting the contact to appear at any moment.

Amiel steps off the main thoroughfare, slipping into a narrow alleyway between two towering structures. The luminous script on the walls above pulses faintly, casting an eerie glow that barely pushes back the shadows. Here, away from the watchful eyes of the market, he can change his disguise unnoticed.

He leans against the wall, scanning a passerby through the gap between the buildings. His gaze settles on a young man—a laborer, dressed in a simple tunic, moving unhurriedly. Someone who belongs here but commands no notice. Perfect.

With a silent command, Amiel activates his holographic overlay, seamlessly adopting the mentat signature of a young laborer. The crisp IDF uniform flickers and dissolves, replaced by simple, well-worn attire. His features shift—his face sharpening into a chiseled, unremarkable visage, his muscular frame subtly redefined to fit the role. Brown hair falls naturally over his hologram’s forehead, completing the illusion. Nothing about him stands out—just another city worker blending into the crowd.

He steps out from the alley, carefully avoiding the man whose appearance he has stolen. Moving quickly, he knows he has only moments before the actual laborer catches sight of him. If that happens, the man might stop in his tracks, confusion dawning as he wonders, "When did I ever have a twin?"

Amiel grits his teeth, frustration gnawing at him as he weaves through the quiet, ordered streets of futuristic Jerusalem. Where is the contact, Aleister? How much longer am I going to wander? He wonders.

The robotic voice in his mind responds with cold amusement. It seems the man you're supposed to meet is also interested in buying the Mentat—the one you're supposed to steal. A small world, isn’t it?

Amiel exhales sharply. Well, where is he? Please don't keep me in suspense. Let me meet him. Let me speed up the process.

"Patience, Amiel. He's a wealthy man in the city, with connections and eyes everywhere. He probably already knows exactly where you are. But he's waiting—the right time will come," the voice advises.

A chill creeps into his spine as he scans for unseen watchers. And when is the right time? Right now is the right time! Every passing moment brings him closer to being discovered.

Where the fuck am I, anyways?! His frustration spills over. Aleister responds indifferently, “Luckily, you're still within Jerusalem's domain. Gehenna lies between the city's administrative core and the vast outer districts. The entire metropolis now spans nearly 3,000 square kilometers—a rebuilt marvel stretching to the borders of the surrounding provinces. Can you imagine? Soon, it will all be yours.”

"Yeah, great…thanks for the geography lesson, but how much longer to the palace?" Amiel asks, his urgency undimmed.

"The palace sits at the heart of the Jerusalem district—only two kilometers from here. You're close, but you can't just waltz in there?"

"Keep moving to the palace," Aleister directs. "Sejal has already informed her contact about your appearance. I've accessed nearby drones and recorded your movements—they know exactly what to look for."

"And pick up the pace. They've started interrogating Zonaved, and I’m concerned about what she might reveal. If they connect the dots, they’ll figure out you were hiding behind that hologram, running around Gehenna," the voice adds.

Amiel clenches his fists, cursing his carelessness. He shouldn’t have poured that drink into the hologram. That single mistake would expose him, proving someone shorter than the projection was inside. And if Zonaved mentions helping a boy, it’ll be obvious. The nanobots will betray him. How many boys in Jerusalem use nanobots? He needs to disappear long before they come looking for him.

"One more thing," Aleister continues. "They suspect you slipped through the checkpoint during the riot. They’ve set up additional scanners to detect holograms. I’ve accessed a nearby drone to keep watch, but listen—if you hesitate or turn back near a checkpoint, they’ll notice. Act natural."

Jaw tight, Amiel increases his pace.

He crosses a sleek bridge, momentarily captivated by the water flowing from the temple. Fish dart beneath the surface, vibrant life thriving where death once ruled. The current rushes toward the former Dead Sea, transforming its barren waters into something alive.

Past the bridge, a large building to his right catches his eye, distracting him from his mission. He sees rows of neatly arranged musical instruments through its transparent glass windows—among them, a grand piano.

Oh, what the hell? He thinks. They’re going to catch me anyway. Why not play for a bit?

His contact is nowhere in sight. The temptation outweighs caution. Without another thought, he pushes open the door and steps inside.

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Gavriel and Queen Dipti observe Zonaved through the glass window of the interrogation room. Unlike the last girl the Queen had the displeasure of questioning, this one seems more aware of her surroundings. *Perhaps the possession isn’t as strong with her?*

Zonaved sits at the table, her expression blank, silent yet composed, rather than huddled on the floor like the previous girl.

Her eyes are the same as the last girl’s—black within black. But what catches Queen Dipti’s attention first is the long scar stretching across her cheek.

"How about we play good cop, bad cop, Gavriel? First, I'll play the good cop—go in, gain her trust, be her friend. If she doesn’t tell us what we need to know, then it’s your turn. You be the bad cop."

"I've seen how this girl fights. I’m not sure you’ll be able to gain her trust." Gavriel shrugs. "But your wish is my command, my queen."

Queen Dipti steps into the interrogation room, carrying a small plate. She sets it down on the table in front of Zonaved, revealing a freshly baked rugelach, its flaky layers glistening with a light sugar coating. The rich aroma of cinnamon and chocolate wafts through the air, momentarily breaking the room’s cold sterility.

Dipti pulls up a rugged wooden chair across from Zonaved and sits down gracefully, smoothing the folds of her sari before crossing her arms. She watches Zonaved with quiet anticipation.

"I thought you might be hungry," Dipti says, her voice warm but measured. "Have you ever tried this before?"

Zonaved doesn’t move. Her black-on-black eyes flicker to the pastry, then back to the Queen.

"It’s sweet," Dipti continues, settling into the chair across from her. "A favorite here in Jerusalem. I used to bake these myself—before all of this." She gestures vaguely, as if encompassing the world's weight beyond the confines of the interrogation room.

Still, Zonaved remains silent.

Dipti picks up one of the rugelach and takes a small bite, savoring it as if to prove there’s no trick. Then, she nudges the plate slightly closer to Zonaved.

"Go on," she says softly. "You look like you could use something comforting."

Zonaved hesitates, her fingers twitching slightly. She can feel her body betraying her—her stomach aches, her limbs weak from exhaustion. Still, the scent of butter and cinnamon is overwhelming, tugging at something deep inside her, something desperate and primal.

Her hand darts out, faster than she intends, snatching the pastry like an animal stealing food from an open flame. She doesn’t just eat it; she devours it.

Flakes of dough scatter onto the table as she chews rapidly, swallowing without pause. For a brief moment, her black-on-black eyes flicker with something almost human—hunger, gratitude, or perhaps just survival instinct.

Queen Dipti observes her, waiting for the moment to speak.

The girl finishes licking her lips and fingers, ensuring no crumb of the rugelach is left.

"I'm sure they don't have anything like that in Gehenna," Queen Dipti remarks, her tone light but probing.

Zonaved clenches her jaw. Of course they don’t. They barely have food. She can still taste the sweetness on her tongue, which makes her angry. She shouldn’t have taken it. Shouldn’t have given Dipti the satisfaction.

She keeps her head down, her gaze fixed on the table, refusing to meet the Queen’s eyes.

“Let me introduce myself, my name is Dipti Levi. As you may know, I’ve ruled the world for the past four hundred years with my husband Joshua Levi. I enjoy long walks on the beach and a glass of wine while the sun sets. Now tell me about yourself.”

Is this woman joking?

Zonaved doesn’t even know what a beach is. She can’t read. Her world is a cage of filth and blood, bounded by the walls of Gehenna. Queen Dipti speaks in a foreign tongue—sunsets, wine, walks on the beach. But Zonaved understands one thing.

She’s talking to one of the most influential people in the world.

It’s surreal. Unexpected.

It might be the highlight of her life.

She’s bedded the most powerful gang leaders as her clients, their favor the only currency that ever meant anything. She once thought those moments were the peak of what she could reach.

This surpasses even that.

For the first time, she isn’t just another shadow, another body bought and discarded. She’s sitting across from a queen. A woman who has ruled the world for centuries. And she’s being spoken to—not as a whore, not as a nothing, but as… something.

Zonaved doesn’t know what to do with that.

She should feel honored. She should feel terrified. But all she feels is a slow-burning resentment curling in her gut.

Dipti’s voice is soft, coaxing. “Look, sweetie, there’s more where that came from. All I need you to do is answer a few questions.”

Zonaved’s stomach twists. She already knows what’s coming.

“I just need you to tell me a little about the person you were helping,” Dipti continues. “The one you and the other girls were willing to die for.”

Her throat tightens.

“We just want to know—was it a guy? A girl? What were they doing? Who do they work for?”

Zonaved looks down, hiding the flicker of satisfaction in her eyes. He was your son, and you’ll never know.

“Who knows? You might even get to live here in the palace with me. You’d never have to suffer another day in your life. What do you say? I could always welcome another daughter. It seems you’ve never had a mother. I’d be happy to adopt you."

Zonaved’s fingers curl into fists beneath the table.

A mother?

Her piece of shit mother abandoned her to a whorehouse when she wasn’t old enough to understand what was happening. She was just a child when they came for her, like a pack of starving dogs, laughing as they took turns. No mother had saved her then. No mother had cared.

Rage fills her heart, and Dipti’s unwarranted kindness only worsens the bleeding gash. Dipti plays a game, and Zonaved refuses to be a piece on the board.

She swallows hard, keeping her expression blank. She will not give Dipti the satisfaction.

She won’t betray Amiel.

Dipti’s gaze lingers on the jagged scar slashing across Zonaved’s cheek. Her fingers reach out, slow and deliberate.

Zonaved flinches. Jerks away.

But Dipti doesn’t stop. She doesn’t hesitate. There’s no fear in her movements, only persistence.

Her fingertips brush against the scar. A light touch. Gentle.

“How did you get this cut?” she murmurs.

Zonaved stiffens momentarily, giving in to Dipti’s touch. No one has ever touched her like this. No one has ever cared. Her breath hitches. Her jaw clenches, the storm in her eyes flickering momentarily before she locks it away. She refuses to let Dipti see it. She refuses to let anyone see it. The past crashes down on her like a wave of filth, thick and suffocating. The faces. The laughter. The pain. The way they left her bleeding in the dark, another broken thing in a world full of them. The past is an anchor. Dragging her down, drowning her.

Zonaved jerks her head again from Dipti’s touch, a flicker of defiance sparking in her dark eyes. The queen doesn’t have the right to know.

Yet, something about the moment unsettles her.

The Queen of the world has just touched her face. No guards. No threats. Just her.

Zonaved realizes—Dipti is accessible. She could have bitten the queen’s hand. What kinda of story would make? Talk about biting the hand that feeds and making it literal.

Zonaved studies her warily. She wouldn’t waste time pretending to care if she had that power. She wouldn’t lower herself to kindness. If it were her sitting on the throne, she would demand answers. She would not ask. She would not plead.

She would take.

She would bend people to her will. Break them if necessary.

But this woman—this Queen—wears power differently, not as a weapon, but as something else. And that makes her dangerous in a way Zonaved doesn’t understand.

She understands now how she and her husband have been able to rule the world for four hundred years—they love people, and she guesses that people, in turn, love them back. She tries to harden her heart. She tries to hate this woman standing before her, but she finds herself slowly melting away. No, she must fight it.

“Get away from me. You won’t get anything out of me.”

….

The man barely glances up as the door chimes softly behind Amiel. He plucks a string, listening intently, then adjusts the tuning peg with a slow, practiced motion.

The shop smells of aged wood and varnish, a scent that lingers in the air like a melody waiting to be played. Various instruments are scattered around the man’s desk—some polished and gleaming, others in different states of repair.

Behind him, a door stands slightly ajar, revealing a cluttered workshop filled with half-finished violins, dismantled flutes, and a piano missing its lid. The craftsman’s world is caught between creation and restoration.

Amiel’s fingers twitch at his sides, drawn toward the grand piano in the corner. He takes a step forward, the old floor creaking beneath his weight. He approaches the grand piano and stands before it, lightly running his fingers over its polished surface. It’s a beautiful instrument—its black lacquer gleaming under the shop’s soft lighting. He pulls out the bench and sits down, feeling the moment's weight settle over him.

He flexes his fingers, briefly letting them hover above the keys before pressing down. A single note rings out, pure and resonant. Then another. Slowly, a melody takes shape—hesitant at first, then gaining confidence.

The shopkeeper adjusts his spectacles while he continues tuning his guitar, nodding along as Amiel plays. “You’ve got a good touch,” he remarks. “Not just anyone can make a piano sing like that.”

Amiel doesn’t answer. He keeps playing, letting the music wash over him. For a moment, he forgets everything—the chase, the deception, the danger waiting just outside the shop’s door. Here, at the piano, nothing else exists.

After Amiel finishes playing, the shop owner stands up, his rounded belly coming into view, and begins clapping.

“Wonderful. Very wonderful. I've never known many laborers to have such a keen interest in piano. You, my sir, have a wonderful gift.”

Amiel panics, realizing that playing the piano might be out of character for the hologram covering his body.

Amiel forces a casual smile, trying to mask his rising panic. He shouldn’t have played. It was reckless, impulsive. The hologram disguising him is that of a common laborer who wouldn’t have had the time or privilege to learn piano with such finesse.

He glances at the shopkeeper, who is still watching him with interest, clearly intrigued.

“Well,” Amiel says, trying to keep his voice steady, “I had a… friend who played. Guess I picked up a thing or two watching him.”

The shopkeeper nods, still smiling. “A natural talent, then. That’s even rarer.” He sets the guitar aside. “It’s true what the Prince says—art belongs to everyone. But I must admit, I’ve never seen a man in your trade play like that.”

Amiel swallows. His mind races for a way to steer the conversation away from himself.

“Oh, I’m sure there are plenty,” he says quickly. “Music’s for everyone, right?” He gestures toward the half-built instruments behind the shopkeeper. “You make these yourself?”

The shopkeeper glances back, momentarily distracted. “Oh yes, all handcrafted. Each one is unique.”

Amiel nods, seizing the moment. “Impressive work. It must take years to master.”

“Indeed,” the man chuckles. “As does playing like you do.”

Amiel stiffens but forces himself to laugh lightly. “Guess we all have our gifts.”

He needs to leave now. But if he rushes out too suddenly, it might raise suspicion. He casually shifts his weight, glancing toward the door.

The shopkeeper eyes him thoughtfully. “Say… if you’re ever looking for work outside of laboring, I could use a set of hands in the shop. Someone with an ear like yours? You’d pick up instrument-making fast.”

Amiel forces a polite smile. “I’ll, uh… keep that in mind.”

He turns toward the exit, forcing himself to walk steadily. But every muscle in his body screams to get out of there before the shopkeeper asks more questions.

“You know, Amiel, they're looking for you out there. And I think you're rowing in the wrong direction. I saw a patrol walking down the road near here. I'm sure they might pick you up if you leave now.”

Slowly, Amiel turns back to face him, keeping his expression neutral. “Is that so?”

The man nods, sits back down, and picks up his guitar again. He plucks a few strings idly, as if they’re discussing nothing more than the weather. “Mm-hmm. About four of them. Looked like they were checking faces.”

A bead of sweat forms at the back of Amiel’s neck. He forces himself to stay relaxed, but every instinct screams to run.

The shopkeeper adjusts the tuning peg and strums again. “You seem like a bright young man. And a talented one. But you’re not a very good liar.”

“So, what will you do, hand me over to them?”

“No, I don’t think so. Your mother is waiting for you. If you want to return without getting caught, I suggest you come with me.”

Amiel’s spine stiffens. His mother?

His first instinct is to deny it, to pretend he doesn’t know what the man is talking about. But something in the shopkeeper’s gaze tells him it would be useless.

His fingers twitch at his sides. Is this a trap?

The man doesn’t press. He sets his guitar aside and stands, stretching as if they’ve been conversing casually. “Come on,” he says, moving toward the back room. “No time to waste.”

Amiel hesitates. Every fiber of his being tells him not to trust strangers. But… his mother.

He clenches his jaw and follows.

The man closes the door behind them.

“My name is Sweeney. You know, the Dark Lord is also a great musician. When you finally meet him, I'm sure he could teach you a thing or two about playing the piano.”

“Am I the only one who hasn't met the Dark Lord yet?” Amiel is reminded of his conversation with Zonaved.

“The Dark Lord doesn't reveal Himself to anyone. He reveals Himself to those ready to fulfill His purpose and plan. You're almost ready, but you must overcome more temptations to be prepared for him.”

“Aleister, can I trust this guy?”

“You must be able to. How else could he have seen through your hologram? I shared your appearance with your mother.”

Sweeney observes Amiel, his gaze steady and unreadable. The dim light in the back-room casts long shadows over the half-finished instruments.

Amiel clenches his fists. His mother. He still doesn’t know what to make of that. How could she have given him away so quickly? Or had she?

His voice comes out lower than he intended. “How do you know my mother?”

Sweeney’s smile doesn’t waver. “We all know your mother now. She has sacrificed herself for you.” He spreads his hands, as if presenting a great truth. “We all have sacrificed something for you.”

Amiel narrows his eyes. “And what exactly have you sacrificed?”

Sweeney chuckles. “This pathetic little shop, for one. They’ll come for me, I know.” His fingers trail over a dusty violin, the gesture almost wistful. “It’s okay, I want more than this. I want power, Amiel. I want my own country.” His voice hardens. “Remember me when you come into your own. Grant me that which my heart desires.”

Amiel scoffs. “How am I supposed to give you your own country? I can barely make it home.”

Sweeney’s smile widens, his glasses reflecting the dim light. “Oh, you will, boy. You will.”

“Fine, you’ll have your country and more. Now tell me how you’ll help me get into the palace.”

“Someone else is coming. He’s going to buy your mentat. Our entire future rests on you reaching the palace. You’re going to make us rich, Amiel, filthy rich. We have to make a little sacrifice before you can enter the palace. It's your first temptation.

A bell jingles outside; someone else has entered the shop. Amiel’s stomach sinks.

“Well, speak of the devil, that could be him now.”

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Something else replaces the warmth in Dipti. Her expression hardens. Her eyes become like two censors full of burning flame that might shoot out and consume Zonaved.

“Please do not confuse my kindness with weakness. I am zealous to protect my kingdom just as much as my husband. And if you for once think that you're going to hinder justice and prevent me and my husband from maintaining order in our kingdom, you are sorely mistaken.”

Suddenly, Zonaved's anger and rage slowly morph into fear. She wonders now what will become of her. Suppose Dipti turns into her enemy. Will she now become her torturer? Her stomach suddenly sinks. She wonders how much she is willing to suffer to hide the identity of Amiel. Is it worth all the pain she could potentially face? She begins to wonder if the cause she is suffering for is worth it, if fighting against these people is the right path.

The Dark Lord means everything to her. He has promised her so much. Power. Fame. Glory. To renege now would only mean losing all those things that she valued so much. Perhaps she should bide her time and see how willing these people are to cooperate to obtain the information they require.

I have other duties to attend to, Queen Dipti says with disappointment, her anger melting away to disappointment. I'll be back soon, and I'll see if you've changed your mind. Remember, I can reward you graciously if you cooperate, but if you fight against us, then hell hath no fury like a mother for her nation.

Dipti stands up, adjusts her sari, and turns around sharply. Zonaved wants to stop her. For some reason, she likes the warmth of her presence, but the hardness in her heart prevents her from doing so. She's still fighting, clawing onto the Zonaved, who is only a zonaved, a thrall for her lover.

She must not let this feeling gain hold of her. If the Dark Lord were to find out that she was torn between two different worlds, then the Dark Lord might also tear her in two.

Zonaved closes her eyes and steadies her breath. The warmth of Dipti’s presence lingers, unsettling, dangerous. She cannot allow it to weaken her resolve.

In her mind, she repeats the mantra she has whispered to herself since the day she gave herself to the Dark Lord:

*"I am the vessel, not the wavering hand.  
I am the blade, not the trembling heart.  
I am the will, not the weakness.  
The Dark Lord chose me, and I choose Him.  
I am His, and He is all."*

She grips onto the words like a lifeline, forcing herself to remember why she is here, why she cannot falter. Doubt is death. The Dark Lord’s promises are her only future. Nothing else matters.

Zonavad jumps when Dipti slams the door shut as she's leaving. She's left nothing but the cold, rigid walls around her in the dim light barely illuminating the room. She lays her head on the desk, folded in between her arms. What's waiting for her, she can't imagine. These people are friendly so far. They're not going to torture her. She doesn't know what they're capable of. Zonaved jolts upright, her breath catching in her throat. The sudden force of the door bursting open sends a jolt of fear through her, shattering whatever fragile composure she had left.

Gavriel strides in, his presence filling the room with an oppressive weight. He is not like Dipti—there is no warmth, no lingering trace of kindness in his eyes. Only cold, calculating authority.

He shuts the door behind him with deliberate finality, the heavy clang reverberating through the sterile metallic walls. Zonaved forces herself to meet his gaze, though every instinct screams at her to shrink away.

The man steps forward with slow, deliberate precision, his boots striking the cold tile like a judge’s gavel. His uniform is immaculate, the insignia on his chest catching the dim light—the Star of David, a sword cleaving through its center. He doesn’t need to speak; his presence alone makes the room feel smaller, the air colder.

His eyes bore into her, sharp and unwavering, peeling her apart layer by layer—a predator assessing prey.

If only Dipti would come back.

Gavriel fashions a hammer much in the same way the soldiers who slaughtered her sisters made their swords, and he slams it on the metallic desk placed before her.

"That other whore," he says, his voice casual, almost conversational. "The one like you. She’s dead—slit her wrists with her nails before we could get anything useful out of her." He tilts his head, studying her reaction. "It’s alright, though. Maybe you’ll be smarter." A slow smirk creeps onto his face. "Or will you follow in her path?"

Zonaved’s breath stills as her gaze locks onto the hammer. She wonders how he plans to use it.

The door swings open again. Two more soldiers step inside, their expressions unreadable, their movements efficient.

"We got a quiet one," one of them mutters. He flexes his fingers, rolling his shoulders.

The other nods. "Let’s loosen her tongue."

Zonaved swallows. The walls seem to close in, the metallic sheen of the hammer gleaming beneath the overhead light. She grips the edge of the chair, steadying herself.

The soldiers seize her wrists, their grips unyielding as they force her hands onto the cold metal surface. She clenches her fists, her nails digging into her palms.

A sharp slap cracks through the room, snapping her head to the side. Her cheek stings, heat blooming beneath her skin.

"Lay your hands flat," one of them orders.

She refuses.

The second soldier moves swiftly—a brutal, measured punch to her right cheek. Pain explodes through her skull, and for a terrifying moment, she wonders if her jaw has been broken. A low, involuntary whimper escapes her lips.

"Flat."

Her fingers tremble as she slowly unfurls them, pressing her palms against the desk. She submits.

Gavriel exhales through his nose, as if pleased. Then, without warning, he raises the hammer.

“I’m going to ask you one time. Who were you protecting? Tell me everything you know.”

Zonaved shakes her head.

The hammer comes down hard on her index finger, and she screams out. Her bones crunching underneath its weight and force.

Zonaved’s scream rips through the room, raw and instinctive. The pain is searing, a white-hot agony that shoots up her arm and burrows into her skull. Her crushed finger twitches uselessly against the metal table, the bones shattered beneath Gavriel’s merciless strike.

She gasps, blinking back the stars that burst behind her eyes. Her breathing is ragged and erratic, and she struggles to regain her composure.

Gavriel doesn’t flinch. He watches her, his expression impassive, as if observing an experiment.

“I’ll ask again,” he says, voice devoid of emotion. “Who were you protecting?”

Zonaved clenches her jaw. Sweat beads along her forehead. The Dark Lord's promise lingers in her mind, a whisper against the overwhelming pain.

She spits blood onto the table. “I won’t tell you anything.”

Gavriel sighs, almost disappointed. He lifts the hammer again.

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Saul picks up the fiddle, cradling it awkwardly under his chin. He drags the bow across the strings, producing a screeching, uneven wail that sets teeth on edge. Wincing, he adjusts his grip and tries again, but the notes come out in a jumbled mess, completely off-key.

Sweeney, watching with mild amusement, sighs and shakes his head. "Well," he says dryly, "at least the Dark Lord won't be recruiting you for his orchestra anytime soon."

Saul sets it down.

“The Dark Lord has much grander plans for me. I’ll conduct the orchestra on his behalf.”

Saul lifts his chin, his long, narrow face taut with concentration as he assumes the role of conductor. With a deliberate motion, he smooths his thinning hair, ensuring the bald spot is hidden. Then, his hands spring to life, slicing the air in sweeping arcs, commanding an invisible orchestra with dramatic precision.

Sweeney smirks, folding his arms as he watches the performance. "Oh? And what grand masterpiece are you conducting, maestro?"

Saul’s posture stiffens, fingers twitching in elegant, deliberate motions. “A symphony of money,” he declares. His eyes burn with imagined grandeur. “Can’t you hear the sheckles falling into our hands?”

He pauses, smoothing his hair once more, then resumes with renewed intensity. His hands rise and fall in calculated rhythms, his fingers shaping unseen melodies only he can hear—the music of power, of victory, surges in his mind—a crescendo building toward destiny.

Sweeney chuckles. “Shame no one else can hear it.”

Saul pauses mid-motion, casting Sweeney a sidelong glance. A slow, knowing smile creeps onto his face. “Not yet,” he says, his voice smooth with certainty. He raises his hands again, conducting an unseen tide. “But soon, they’ll all be dancing to my tune.” His fingers flick through the air, tracing the rhythm of unseen wealth, the silent chime of power slipping into his grasp.

“Amiel is our main instrument through which the Dark Lord will bring us glory.” He glances at Amiel, his long, narrow face with high cheekbones and a prominent chin casting a shadow over the anxious boy. “But today he must face the fire of temptation, he must make a sacrifice.” Saul's deep-set, small, and piercing eyes fixate on Amiel, scrutinizing him as if attempting to weigh his very soul. His gaze lingers, unblinking, probing for something beneath the boy’s placid exterior.

"Soon, the palace lockdown will end. When that happens, they'll check your room—and you won't be there."

Amiel swallows, his throat dry.

“The palace staff have already been notified—the lockdown is moments away from being lifted,” Saul says, his voice edged with urgency. “The moment that happens, you must be Linda.”

His gaze sharpens. “You are entering the most secure place in the kingdom. The palace’s nanobots will analyze your DNA. Facial recognition will scan you. Your skin cells will be sampled. There is no room for error.”

Saul steps closer, lowering his voice. “The only way inside is as Linda, the unassuming housekeeper who comes and goes without question. Once past the gates, you must move quickly. Get to your room before they notice you’re missing. Because make no mistake—they will check on you immediately. We must find a way to delay that,” his voice trails off as if pondering another solution to a problem.

The door creaks open, and a young woman steps inside. She is Amiel’s height, slender yet poised. Her long auburn hair falls to her shoulders. Though her features aren’t strikingly beautiful, her youthful figure draws attention. Every movement is deliberate, as if she has rehearsed this moment before crossing the threshold.

Amiel listens in silence, his expression unreadable as Saul’s words settle over him like a heavy fog. His gaze flickers toward Linda, who stands motionless, her face betraying neither fear nor hesitation.

Saul steps forward, his piercing eyes still locked onto Amiel. “You don’t yet understand what your mentat is truly capable of,” he continues, his voice carrying a quiet certainty. “But today, you will.”

Saul gestures toward Linda. “Your mentat can absorb and mimic another body—DNA, bone structure, everything—provided it consumes the right components. Even *you* can use a host’s healthy cells to repair your own.”

He nods toward Amiel’s bandaged wounds, which throb quietly with every movement.

“You didn’t know that,” Saul says, voice low and edged with disdain, “because your daddy enforces the Sixth Commandment.”

He steps closer and pats Amiel’s cheek.

“But today… you’ll see it done.”

“The music of this orchestra has never sounded sweeter,” Sweeney sits back and relaxes, his mind contemplating. “The bassoon is a fitting instrument for what is about to take place today,” Sweeney muses aloud. A slow smile tugs at the corner of his lips. “I think I’ll play it while Amiel prepares himself.”

With that, he rises, his movements slow and deliberate. The door creaks as he steps through, the brightly lit music shop casting its glow upon him. His footsteps fade, echoing like a distant funeral march.

Amiel watches him go, then turns his gaze back to Saul. His lips press into a thin line, his brow furrowing ever so slightly.

*I have to kill this woman with my nanobots, but she is helpless, weak, like the alligator that saved me. What glory is there in killing her?* Uriel is his target, his first blood, his commitment remains firm, but this seems like the only route into the palace. There’s no other way.

The idea of killing Linda settles onto Amiel’s shoulders, pressing against his chest like an iron hand. He casts a glance at Linda, still unmoving, still silent. Is she afraid? Does she care? Her calmness makes him feel uneasy. Does she have family? Children?

Before he can dwell on it, the door swings open.

Sweeney waddles back into the room, his fat belly bouncing with each step. His face is alight with something almost childlike, a jovial energy that feels disturbingly out of place. He cradles the bassoon, its polished wood gleaming in the dim light. “Well then,” he says, adjusting the instrument. “Let’s set the mood, shall we?”

He brings the bassoon to his lips, takes a breath, and begins to play.

Sensing Amiel’s anxiety, Saul tries to reassure him. “Don’t worry, Amiel. If anyone tampers with your mentat, all information about Linda will be automatically erased.”

Amiel doesn’t want to go through with this. But he’s come too far—he’s too close. The weight of so many eyes upon him only deepens the pressure. He hears Sweeney’s warning in his mind: This will be a temptation.

And it is.

He’s tempted to turn back, to surrender to his father, to face the consequences, and to abandon this path before it’s too late. He hasn’t crossed the line yet—not entirely. But this… this is murder.

“Don’t worry, Amiel,” Saul murmurs. “No one will ever know. Unlike Uriel, his death will be for the whole world to see.”

Aleister remains silent, listening and calculating and allowing Amiel to decide.

Amiel hesitates, but the moment is slipping away. His hands tremble. Okay, I’ll do it. But I won’t be able to watch. Please help me, Aleister. In your hands, I commit my spirit. Take my nanobots and make me do the unthinkable.

He locks eyes with Saul, fierce determination replacing doubt.

“I’m ready.”

Saul smiles. “Excellent.”

He reaches behind a painting of Yeshua on a white horse, a double-edged sword extended from his mouth, followed by his angels as he descends from heaven. A hidden switch clicks. The tiled floor groans, then splits apart, revealing a rising altar beneath.

The altar bears an inscription in Hebrew: Ha-luach za'am betoch ha-dam, u'basar yitpatel tachat mabato shel ha-nis'chav—The altar seethes within the blood, and flesh will wither beneath the gaze of the sacrificed.

Linda removes her clothes and climbs onto the altar. She meets Amiel’s eyes, and for a moment, he thinks she is questioning her decision. Is her sacrifice truly worth it? Does she waver? But no—there is no fear in her gaze, only quiet conviction. A calm sincerity radiates from her, steady and unwavering. She believes in this, and her certainty stirs something in him, bolstering his resolve.

Amiel’s face flushes at the sight of her bare body, and he quickly averts his gaze. Beneath her, the altar begins to hum, a deep, resonant vibration. The altar hums beneath Linda’s back, its cold surface pressing into her skin like the hands of a thousand unseen spirits. She does not tremble. Her breath remains steady, her hands folded over her chest in silent reverence.

Amiel stands beside her, silent. The nanobots stir, separating into a fine, dust-like swarm that hovers around him, shifting, waiting for the command.

Saul places a hand on Linda’s forehead, his voice reverent.

"You understand what you are offering?"

Linda tilts her head, her lips curving into a trembling smile. "I do. My life, for the Dark Lord. My body, for his will. My soul, for his dominion."

Sweeney chuckles, raising his bassoon—a deep, guttural note spills from the instrument, filling the chamber like a funeral hymn.

“Begin.”

At Saul’s word, Amiel exhales.

The nanobots obey.

They rise from his skin like a black mist, swirling before descending upon Linda. She gasps at the first touch—not from fear, but from the sheer alien sensation as the microscopic machines crawl over her like insects, burrowing into her pores, sliding beneath her skin, racing into her veins.

Then comes the pain.

Linda’s eyes snap open as fire erupts through her body, a searing, inhuman agony that no mortal tongue could ever describe. The nanobots are inside her now, dismantling her, fiber by fiber, nerve by nerve.

A blood-curdling scream.

Amiel turns away, unable to watch; he’s about to cry. His conscience condemns, and his thoughts scream, “What have I done?”

Not a single scream, but a ragged, endless shriek that tears from her throat, raw and animalistic. Her body convulses, her back arching violently against the altar as her muscles begin to unravel.

The nanobots move methodically, shredding her from the inside out.

Her skin flakes away in patches, dissolving into the air like burning paper. Her veins, stripped of flesh, shine for a brief, grotesque moment before they, too, unravel into microscopic dust.

She tries to move, but her limbs are no longer hers to command. Her fingers twitch, curl, then melt away as the swarm devours them.

Her stomach caves inward as her organs liquefy. Her lungs collapse.

It is only when the nanobots reach her throat, when her vocal cords dissolve into nothingness, that her cries finally cease. Her mouth still gapes open, frozen in the shape of her last, silent scream.

Her skull lingers the most extended—her wide, terror-stricken eyes watching as her own body disappears beneath her—until at last, the bone itself cracks, splintering into dust.

Then, the swarm retracts.

All that remains of Linda is a dark, sticky stain on the altar, pooled in the indent where her body once lay. A thin layer of red-gray dust clings to the cold surface, the only remnants of her flesh, her bones, her existence. The scent of burnt marrow and scorched iron lingers in the air.

The nanobots, now saturated with her essence, slither back into Amiel.  
His body shudders—then begins to shift. Refine. Morph.  
Wounds vanish, erased without a trace. No scars, no scabs.  
Just smooth, unblemished skin, like old paint sealed beneath a flawless new coat.

And when the process is complete, he stands in her place, her perfect likeness.

Sweeney exhales through his instrument, the tune full of loss and melancholy.

Saul smiles. “Now, go. Your mother awaits you in the palace. She’s very proud of what you did today. She saw how brave her little boy had become.”

Amiel—no, Linda—takes a shaky breath, feeling the foreign weight of this new form. The skin fits like a costume, but the soul within trembles. His mind is an echo chamber of screams, the memory of Linda’s agony etched into the very fabric of his being.

He steps forward, his movement eerily seamless, his transformation flawless. He mumbles, “Mother, what have I done?”

Saul nods approvingly. "Death is unsettling at first, Amiel, but the more you embrace it, the stronger you’ll become. In time, taking a life will feel as ordinary as combing your hair or eating breakfast. You won’t hesitate—you won’t even think about it."

Amiel bashfully picks up Linda’s bra. He slides his arms through the straps and positions the cups over his chest. Reaching behind his back, he struggles to fasten the sagging clasps. The bra confounds him until Saul silently steps in, fastening the clasp from behind. He pulls her dress over his head, the fabric clinging to him in a way that feels profoundly wrong. The sensation unsettles him—it feels like slipping into another’s skin, like wearing the freshly stripped fur of an animal. A wave of shame crashes over him, thick and suffocating. He refuses to meet Sweeney’s or Saul’s eyes, unwilling to see whatever judgment or indifference they might hold.

The guilt is unbearable. He wants to scrub his flesh raw, to rid himself of the filth that clings to him.

Amiel wants to slip away without a word, but Saul steps forward, fastening a brooch around his neck.

"Before you go through the checkpoint, I hid the Mentat Faker inside this brooch," Saul murmurs. "They won’t detect it. It’s completely airtight—no nanobot can penetrate it. They might scan you with X-rays, but the interior is shielded. Nothing will show up."

Amiel glances down at the brooch, its weight suddenly more noticeable. He nods, suppressing the urge to fidget.

Turning toward the shop’s entrance, he is met with the suffocating weight of death. The music shop, once a place of wonder, where the grand piano in the corner had once filled him with lighthearted joy, now feels claustrophobic. The air is thick, stagnant, pressing against him like an unseen force. The mournful wail of the bassoon lingers, its somber tune unfurling like a funeral march, sealing the moment in sorrow.

# Chapter 21: Amiel Levi’s Day Off

Queen Dipti slowly opens the door to the interrogation room. She carries a fruit tray, sets it on the table, rotates the chair to face Zonaved, and sits down.

Zonaved is no longer sitting at the table—she now huddles in the corner, cradling her hand. Agony wracks her body, her screams echoing off the walls as tears stream down her face. The bones in her hand have been shattered into tiny fragments, obliterated by the relentless force of Gavriel’s hammer. Each brutal strike had crushed her splayed hand against the table, leaving nothing intact.

Queen Dipti looks at her with pity.

"I was once like you—arrogant, stubborn. In my younger days, I was a terrible wife. I fought against Prince Levi constantly. I refused to believe in him, dismissed everything about him. I thought he was insane. And at every opportunity, I challenged him, argued with him, pushed back against everything he stood for."

"I have something for you," she says. "If you can manage, why don’t you stand and come here? Try some of this fruit."

Zonaved looks at her incredulously, disbelief flickering in her tear-streaked eyes.

"Are you delusional?" Zonaved spits, her voice raw with pain and fury. "Do you not see my hand? It’s in a thousand pieces, and you want to give me fruit?" She glares at Queen Dipti, rage burning through her agony. "The last thing I want right now is fruit. Bring that Gavriel here, and I’ll have my vengeance. Give me a weapon—I’ll kill him. I’ll kill him right now."

Queen Dipti smiles at her, calm and unshaken.

"This isn’t just any fruit," she says gently. "It was taken from the river that brings life to the Dead Sea. It grows here every year—nowhere else on the face of the earth. It’s special, sacred." She gestures to the tray. "This fruit brings healing. Try a piece... and then look at your hand."

Zonaved laughs bitterly, her voice dripping with mockery.

"Everyone in Gehenna has heard about that fruit. But no one believes in it. It’s just a fairytale. You people are *delusional*—clinging to myths and nonsense." She sneers, turning away. "I don’t believe in it. Take that fruit and throw it away."

Queen Dipti remains unfazed. Picking up the tray, she rises to her feet and steps toward Zonaved, who remains curled up in the cold metal corner of the room.

"Okay," Dipti says calmly. "I didn’t want to do this, but I have no choice. I’m going to have to feed you." She kneels slightly, her voice firm yet patient. "Open your mouth. Or..." She tilts her head, considering. "I might have to do this the hard way—call the guards in here, have them hold you down, and *feed* you that way." She raises an eyebrow. "Is that how you want this to go?"

Zonaved sighs, her strength nearly gone.

"Fine," she mutters through gritted teeth. "I’ll eat your goddamn fruit. But then you leave me alone. Just let me... *bear* this fucking pain." Her voice wavers, a mix of exhaustion and fury. "I don’t need your prattling, and this pain...it’s too much." She glares up at Dipti, her breath ragged. "Give me the damn fruit."

Queen Dipti smiles, unfazed by Zonaved’s hostility.

"Excellent!" she exclaims with a bright smile. Her tone becomes playful, "Now open your mouth. *Here comes the plane... zoom.*" She moves the fruit toward Zonaved’s lips, her amusement barely concealed.

Zonaved hesitates, then opens her mouth, a flicker of amusement crossing her face. Despite the searing pain, she finds herself bewildered by this woman—this queen—who, for some strange reason, continues to show her unwarranted kindness.

The fruit enters Zonaved’s mouth, and Dipti quickly yanks her hand away.

"You better not bite me," she says with a smirk.

Zonaved barely registers her words. The instant the fruit touches her tongue, an indescribable sensation sweeps over her. The sweetness is almost overwhelming—rich and pure—like liquid sunlight cascading over her taste buds. It lingers, spreading warmth through her body, dulling her pain, and filling her with something she can’t quite define.

Zonaved swallows, her expression hardening. She glares at Dipti.

"I don’t feel anything," she snaps. "Just like I said—the fruit you people worship is a myth. A story for fools. You’re all *delusional.*"

Dipti steps back and settles into the chair, her expression calm and unwavering.

"Why don’t we just wait?" she says gently. "God works in mysterious ways. He doesn’t follow *our* timeline—He follows *His.*" She leans forward slightly, eyes steady. "Now, just watch… and see."

As Dipti waits, her thoughts drift to the well-being of all Levi’s children. She mentally checks through their health—strong, well-nourished, and in excellent condition. Relief settles over her. Soon, the lockdown will lift in just twenty minutes, and she will personally inspect them alongside the healers to ensure they remain in peak health.

A twinge of guilt lingers—she had broken the lockdown, but only under special circumstances. She had kept her distance from Levi’s children, fearing she might spread the disease. Even now, she remains cautious, determined to protect them at all costs.

Zonaved's breath catches as a strange sensation washes over her. The agony that had consumed her hand, sharp, unbearable, begins to fade. She blinks in disbelief, her mind struggling to process what is happening.

The pain ebbs away, little by little, like a tide retreating from the shore. A warmth spreads through her fingers, soothing, almost unreal. She stares at her hand, flexing it slightly. The mystical fruit is working, carrying away whatever affliction had once tormented her.

Shock flickers in her eyes. *This isn’t possible…* and yet, it is.

Zonaved bites her lip, forcing down the astonishment rising within her. She wants to hide it—even to herself. So she clenches her hand, forcing a pained expression onto her face. She moans and groans, curling inward as if still suffering.

But Queen Dipti isn’t fooled.

With a knowing smirk, she leans forward. “You can stop acting now,” she says dryly. “I *know* the fruit has taken away your pain.” Her voice sharpens, cutting through Zonaved’s charade. “Don’t be such a callous little bitch. Show some thankfulness.”

Dipti’s bluntness catches Zonaved off guard. Her eyes flicker with a mix of embarrassment and reluctant acceptance. She hesitates, then mumbles under her breath, barely audible—

“…Thank you.”

Dipti leans forward, her tone firm but calm.

"Now that you realize I’m only here for your benefit—to help you—I want you to tell me the truth." Her eyes lock onto Zonaved’s, unwavering. "Who is the person you’re protecting? What do you know about them?"

Zonaved’s resolve wavers. For the first time, doubt creeps into the cracks of her mind. She has sworn herself to the Dark Lord, but fear coils around her heart. What if the *other* man comes back—the one with the hammer? The memory of the unbearable pain sends a shudder through her body.

She searches for the right words—anything that might make Dipti give her some space. But what if the Dark Lord finds out? What if he punishes her in ways far worse than the man with the hammer ever could?

She swallows hard, torn between fear and survival, caught in a battle she isn’t sure she can win.

Zonaved remains silent, her mind a battlefield of fear and uncertainty.

Queen Dipti exhales sharply, impatience flickering in her eyes. "Well," she says, rising to her feet, "if you’re not going to talk, I know someone who *can* make you talk." She shrugs, her tone indifferent. "He might come, he might not—I don’t know." She steps toward the door, glancing back one last time. "But this is the last time you’ll see *me.*"

Her voice softens, just slightly. "I’m not sure what will happen to you after this, Zonaved. But I hope that, in time, you’ll be cooperative. And maybe… one day, you’ll be like a daughter to me."

Without another word, she turns and walks away.

Before Dipti can step through the door, Zonaved's resolve shatters. A tremor runs through her body, and she collapses to her knees.

“Wait!” she gasps. “Don’t go.” Her voice is raw, desperate. “You have to promise me something.”

Dipti stops, folding her arms, unimpressed. “And what is that?”

Zonaved looks up at her, fear flashing in her eyes. “That you’ll protect me… from the Dark Lord.”

For a moment, there is silence. Then Queen Dipti turns slowly, steps back into the room, and settles into the chair. She crosses her legs, draping her arms over her knee, and leans forward slightly.

“You mean *Satan*?” she says, calm, almost amused. “Okay.”

Dipti’s gaze remains steady, unwavering. “Don’t worry,” she says, her voice firm yet gentle. “The One in me is greater than him. If you trust in Him, He will protect you.”

Zonaved shakes her head, her body still trembling. “No. I can’t. Not yet. I can’t follow your Messiah.” She swallows hard, then exhales sharply, as if resigning herself. “But if you promise to protect me… I’ll tell you what I know.”

Dipti leans in slightly, listening.

“The one I was protecting… he’s a boy. I don’t know his name. The Dark Lord just told me to protect him. Her eyes flicker with exhaustion. “Now… just leave me alone. Just give me some food—anything. I want a little space.”

Dipti's breath catches. *A boy with nanobots?*

Her mind races. *How would a small boy get hold of nanobots?* The implications churn in her head as she sifts through the possibilities.

Her thoughts turn to Prince Levi’s sons. *No… It’s not possible.*

Only three boys fit that description: Amiel, Uriel, and David.

Dipti's stomach tightens. *If any boy outside the palace has nanobots, this is more than just a security breach— a declaration of war.*

This means Prince Levi’s enemies have the technology necessary to challenge his rule. The implications are catastrophic. If they can give nanobots to a child, who knows what else they’ve developed?

She steadies herself, masking her concern. “Zonaved,” she says carefully, “do you know *where* this boy is?”

Zonaved’s voice is weak, but her words carry weight. “I don’t know… maybe Gehenna?”

Dipti exhales slowly, considering her next move. Suppose a child with nanobots is in Gehenna. Levi’s enemies are advancing far faster than expected. The underground city was already a breeding ground for rebellion—if they’ve cracked nanotechnology, then Prince Levi’s enemies must be farther along in their secret research than expected. The King of Syria must be behind this. War is inevitable.

Dipti rises abruptly, her mind racing. *The lockdown is in 20 minutes.* She has to move.

She needs to check on Levi’s sons—Amiel, Uriel, and David. Could one of them have snuck out? The idea seems impossible. Security is airtight; no one leaves without clearance.

But *if* it happened…

She clenches her jaw. I must be sure. Without another word to Zonaved, she strides toward the door, urgency propelling her steps.

Robots move through the hallways to their quarters, disinfecting the walls and meticulously cleaning the floors. Those who attempt to stop her are swiftly overridden by the queen’s mentat, compelling them to ignore her and continue their work.

She debates whom to check first. Amiel’s room is the farthest away, so she chooses Uriel. Overriding the lock on his door, she slowly pushes it open, careful not to make a sound.

Uriel lies on his side, his blanket rising and falling. A robot attendant stands silently beside his bed. He sleeps peacefully.

Dipti exhales in relief and gently shuts the door. *Now Amiel.* She turns toward his room, ready to check on him, when a light tap on her shoulder stops her.

She turns. It’s the same robot that had asked for a selfie.

“Can I help you?” She attempts to override the robot’s lockdown protocol, but it doesn’t respond. It has a different directive.

*This robot is going to be scrapped,* she tells herself. *I’ll check my boys and then put in a maintenance request.*

“I don’t have time for this. Go back to your duties.”

She turns to leave, but the robot’s grip tightens around her shoulder. Before she can react, it yanks her around—this time, a knife gleaming in its hand.

….

Amiel resists the urge to press his boobs. Their unnatural sway with each step—it feels *wrong*. Alien. Like a suit of flesh stitched over his own, suffocating and unfamiliar. Being trapped in a woman’s body unsettles him, like he’s intruding on someone else’s life, *wearing their skin as a disguise.*

He recalls reading about the Aztecs—how their priests skinned human sacrifices and adorned their bodies with the skins. A grotesque imitation of rebirth. But this? This isn’t some ritual. This isn’t a costume he can shed. It is not the imitation; he has been reborn as Linda.

This body is his now.

And that terrifies him.

Where his penis once was—he doesn’t let the thought linger. Something else is there now, something foreign, and that terrifies him.

He wants to check. To see. To understand.

But the palace gates rise ahead. Workers gather in clusters, chatting and laughing, relieved to return after two days of lockdown. Someone will notice if he touches himself in a way that seems off.

Later. Once I get to my room.

A voice slithers into his mind, smooth and taunting.

"You’ve become bigender, Lion. Not only can you enjoy women, but men as well. I’m envious. Never before in human history have two sexes coexisted in one body. Before the Great War, people pretended to be bigender. But you… You are the crown achievement of their vision."

"I’ll erase whatever remains of her," he mutters. "It’s evidence. It connects me to Linda’s death."

"Of course, Lion. But enjoy yourself while it lasts."

The palace gates stand open—a sign that the lockdown is finally over. A figure steps toward him, face bright with recognition. A woman, one of Linda’s coworkers. She beams, oblivious that the person she’s greeting isn’t Linda.

"Linda! Finally! Two days felt like forever," she says, nudging his shoulder playfully.

Amiel tenses. He has no idea who she is, yet she knows Linda. He forces a small smile. "Yeah… it did."

She sighs, rolling her eyes. "I was starting to think they’d never let us back in. You wouldn’t believe the rumors flying around. Some say the virus was just a cover-up for something bigger. Others think the whole palace was quarantined because of an assassination attempt." She gives him a sideways glance, as if gauging his reaction. "Crazy, right?

Amiel shoots the woman a sly look. "I engineered the virus and set it loose in the palace so we could have some days off. Pretty good idea, huh?"

The woman’s smile falters for a second before she laughs. "But why, Linda? I love working in the palace. Our job is wonderful. I enjoy it." She playfully slaps his shoulder. "Why would you do that?"

Amiel forces a chuckle, masking the unease creeping up his spine.

Amiel smirks. "Because I wanted to go to Gehenna for vacation."

The woman snorts. "Gehenna? Really? You’re ridiculous." She shakes her head, still laughing. "You could’ve just asked for time off, you know."

“I did, they said ‘Go to hell.’ So I went.”

“You’re such a jokester, Linda. Well, here we are, off to work!”

Amiel can’t shake the thought that he’s the reason for the lockdown—him and Aleister’s engineered virus. The weight of it settles in his gut. He didn’t think his actions would spiral into something this massive, never imagining the consequences reaching so far.

But it’s done. Behind him now.

Soon, he’ll be back in his room, under his blankets. He’ll sleep, wake up, and pretend this never happened.

But his mind drifts, and the thought strikes him—he has to return to sparring practice with Uriel. A weight settles in his chest, heavier than before. His fingers find the brooch around his neck. He rubs it like a good luck charm.

No. He can't bear this.

Sleep won’t erase it. Waking up won’t make it disappear.

*I’ll wake up and do what I set out to do.*

He exhales, steadying himself.

He can't pretend. He can't make this go away.

It’s Amiel’s turn to enter the palace. As he steps forward, a subtle tingling spreads across his body—nanobots swarming beneath his skin, scanning him, extracting the necessary data to confirm his identity. In his mind, a voice says he can enter and begin his work.

Amiel has only one work now; Linda will disappear, and Amiel will be reborn.

….

Everything slows.

The knife glints under the hallway lights, its blade thrusting toward her stomach.

Instinct takes over.

Dipti hasn’t trained in a long time, her muscle memory is still there, buried beneath layers of royal protocol and politics. Focus. She zeroes in on the point of attack.

A split second before impact, her skin hardens—metallic, unyielding.

The blade meets her abdomen. Instead of sinking into flesh, it scrapes against solid steel, screeching as it skids harmlessly to the side.

As the knife skids off her metallic skin, Dipti barely has time to process what to do next.

She needs a weapon—fast. Instinctively, she molds one into existence, expecting the familiar weight of a sword.

But her mind has been elsewhere these past few years: cricket. Her mind has been focused on the revived IPL matches being played again in the past few years. She wants to smash this robot's head with a cricket bat.

She glances down—not the sword she wants, instead a metallic cricket bat hangs heavily in her hand. It’ll have to do. The cricket bat is much heavier than a sword and densely packed with the material of her body. She struggles with its weight.

Dipti grips the cricket bat tightly as the robot moves in.

The knife flashes toward her shoulder, too fast.

She attempts to block, but she’s a fraction of a second too slow.

The blade slices through her sari, grazing the edge of her shoulder and leaving a sharp sting as warm blood seeps into the torn silk.

Dipti grits her teeth and swings.

The cricket bat slams into the robot’s midsection, sending it stumbling backward into the wall. The impact rattles through her arms, but she knows the truth—this isn’t a blazing Biosword. It won’t do much against reinforced metal.

She needs heat. Intense heat.

Her mind races. If she can channel enough energy into the bat, she might be able to sear through its outer shell. But does she have enough time before it attacks again?

The robot recovers instantly, its glowing eyes locking onto her. It lunges, the knife flashing toward her chest.

Dipti reacts without thinking.

Her hands move on instinct, her grip firm, her stance steady—as if she were defending the wicket from a fast-approaching ball.

The bat swings up. Bio-metal meets steel with a sharp crack, deflecting the blade just inches from her ribs.

She reaches out in her mind, desperation surging through her like a live wire.

Cohen, if you're there—Levi, anyone—I'm being attacked. Help me, please.

Silence.

Her heart pounds as she parries another strike. The robot is relentless, its movements calculated and precise. Did they hear me? Are they coming?

She can’t afford to wait for an answer. She has to survive.

Cohen responds in her mind. I’m on my way with security. Hold on.

….

Amiel is nearly at his room. Everyone mistakes him for part of the cleaning staff, so no one questions him. His destination is within reach, but a struggle echoes from a nearby hallway.

Something halts him.

He’s so close to safety—he can almost feel the warmth of his bed, the familiar presence of Aleister waiting for him.

But instead of continuing forward, he turns.

The commotion draws him in.

It’s the Queen.

She’s pinned to the ground, locked in a desperate struggle, her hands trembling as she fights to keep the knife from plunging into her skull—the one place her mentat cannot solidify. A direct hit could shatter the chip, damage her brain, or kill her.

Her eyes are wide with horror.

Amiel has to act.

He can't just stand there. He can’t let his second mother die— not because of him.

His heart pounds as he reaches out with his mind.

Aleister, please!

Amiel’s heart beats frantically, his mind floods with desperate thoughts. He frantically pleads. “Tell the robot to stop. Override its protocol. Do something!”

"I can no longer override its protocol," Aleister responds, his voice cold and emotionless. "Due to increased security, my access to the greater neural mentat network has been completely cut off."

Amiel's breath catches. No.

He had always relied on Aleister—the vast, unseen power that had guided him, protected him, made him more than just a boy. But now? Now, he is alone.

He can form a knife in his hand, hurl it with precision, and disable the robot by piercing its skull. But that would leave behind Linda’s biomatter. Questions would follow. How had she, a mere cleaning staff member, gained such an ability? They would search for her immediately, and she is supposed to be gone. The scrutiny will be relentless.

He needs Aleister. Not just to stop the robot, but to undo what he has become. Linda’s grotesque, lingering imprint still clings to him—a borrowed skin that feels wrong in every possible way. If he acts now, they will investigate all the evidence against him.

He scans the walls for anything useful. One aetherglow lamp hangs overhead. Further down the hall, large glass windows flood the corridor with sunlight, but the rays might not reach their location. If he destroys the aetherglow, the queen might not be able to see him.

The knife nears her skull, pressing into her skin. He has to act now.

He forms two knives, gripping one in his right hand. Flipping it to hold the blade, he hurls it at the aetherglow lamp. Glass explodes, shards raining down. Grasping the other knife firmly by the shaft in his left hand, he drives the blade into the robot’s skull, piercing its metal casing and shutting it down.

As the robot collapses, he catches his first knife mid-air in his right hand, retracting both knives into himself, and bolts down the hallway before the queen realizes what has happened.

# Epilogue

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 and strokes his beard while his eyes search for his trainees, who 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 biological 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, 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 ever-vigilant nanobots absorb their momentum, turning into powdery dust before reaching their target.

“Excellent, 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 oversized. 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 and 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 the ruins of robots and their pieces and parts, having been demolished by weapons and other munitions.

“Bot 36, activate your nanobots!” He commands.

A swarm of nanobots now surrounds its synthetic body.

“Now watch this, boys! I’ll show you a thing of beauty!” His finger flips the safety off and pulls the trigger, releasing a torrent of destruction.

Thunderous machine gun drumming 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, with small particles zipping here and there, much like bees during a hornet invasion. They deflect some oncoming bullets with dazzling flashes that clatter harmlessly against hard stone or become faint wisps of vaporized particles.

Gavriel’s finger stays steady on the trigger as the rounds pour out rapidly. The gun's recoil 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.

The magazine runs dry, its barrel glowing red. The machine gun jolts violently with its final shot, ejecting the last shell with a sharp *clang*—the previous bullet slices through the air like a predator seeking its mark. Now depleted in number, the nanobots 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 as the impact sends sparks flying. The robot falls on its back, and a smoking hole now mars its frame, exposing loose wires that spark a fire and 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 gunfire echoes 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 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 stand in silence, awestruck by the demonstration. He motions for them to come forward with his hands.

“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. 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, Uriel feels threatened—a primal instinct that has been 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. Perhaps it's just 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. The boys’ muscles flex and twitch, each fiber visible—a clear testament to the river’s fruit. There is no sign of malnourishment. They are perfect specimens of boys who live in an ideal world. Uriel is taller and more skilled than Amiel because he is older. Still, Amiel remains undaunted despite his disadvantage; his muscles flex with quiet readiness, and he holds himself in a state of tension that reveals 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 shocks 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 fully recovering, 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, which 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 accept 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 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 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's 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 entirely out of his element.

The world around him starts to blur. His reactions are slow, and 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 are disregarded.

Amiel begins channelling his soul within the blade for one last strike. His sword glows with an indescribable aura as his soul burns within it, creating enough heat to melt the strongest metal.

Amiel’s nostrils flare, his chest rising and falling as he prepares to take the most significant step of his life.

"It’s incredible. 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 he feels the heat from the sword burning his skin. “Every man is a star; I’m a supernova,” he declares, his voice steady, repeating words he has rehearsed countless times: “A supernova grows and absorbs dying stars and gets stronger. This is your sacrifice, Uriel.”

Amiel raises his glowing blade, and a cold detachment fills his eyes. Uriel's strength fades, yet he clings to the only source of hope he has left. He whispers with all that remains, "Lord Yeshua, my life is in your hands."

Amiel’s blade slashes forward, and 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-lightweight material as light as a feather, capable of fracturing light waves to 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 with a look of quiet intensity. “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 and ignored his plea for mercy. The Evil One… he’s been whispering to you, right?”

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 and 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's 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 had 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. Do you think causing suffering in others is a sign of strength? True strength lies in overcoming the desire to inflict it, not giving in. In the old world, some 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, 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. Much of his life has been spent striving to avoid such moments. He sees what happens when power and pride overtake wisdom and mercy—when warriors forget the principles that bind them in brotherhood and honor.

He had once believed Amiel was different—that his heart could be guided, his ambition tempered. 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 more significant than mere steel. It represents the ongoing struggle transcending 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.

# Bibliography

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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. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 1 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 2 The King of Israel lives and endures! [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 1 this will be expensive for you. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 1 Hindi, is an insult or to describe someone who is deceitful, cunning, or immoral. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 1 This one’s the CEO of the madhouse! [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 1 Blessed be God, soldier. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)