# Chapter 1: Weary Nights

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I step out of the royal chambers without disturbing her. In the washroom, I splash water on my face and gaze at my reflection. Dark circles rim my eyes, the toll of restless nights. My youthful vigor is gone. I’m no longer the confident Prince Levi who has ruled the world from these hallowed halls. I’m a man haunted by the same dream—each restless night leaving me distraught, unable to focus on my duties during the day. My youngest child, Amiel, is always there at night, haunting me, twisted into a half-man, half-robotic monstrosity.

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

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

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

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

“Father,” he murmurs, steady. “Is this a test?”

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

“You’re impressive.”

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

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

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

*Is it breaking him?*

"No, Father. I like our training." His voice is steady, but there’s an edge to it—something hard, older than his years. "But… we’re living in peace now, aren’t we? I don’t know the suffering you described. Shouldn’t we know it, though? To be strong? I want to understand pain and use it." His gaze sharpens, his fingers tap lightly on the bed frame, "What’s the point if I can’t train to kill?"

*He wants to cause suffering. He wants death.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Father.”

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

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

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

In that moment, a surge of conflicting thoughts and feelings rises within me. He’s not wrong to think that one day he may assume a role in leading the people. But the temple… he cannot stand there. He’s wrong to assume that I will not be able to fulfil my duties. I will not die. I look into his eyes, seeing a spark of eagerness, an aspiration that feels out of place, and I wonder if I’ve misread him or if there is a flicker of something more.

*I lie.*

“Perhaps… one day,” choosing my words with care in order to test him.

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

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

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

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

Somewhere in those shadows, I feel the spirit of Antiochus IV 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.

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

Sunlight filters in through the cloud that now blankets Mount Zion. I squint, adjusting to gentle light, and focus on her face. Her soft, delicate features catch the filtered sunlight—an oval face with smooth contours, expressive almond-shaped eyes framed by well-defined brows, and a straight, petite nose above full, naturally curved lip. Her warm complexion glows faintly in the light, and her long, dark hair flows gracefully over her shoulders.

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

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

“I checked your mentat records.”

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

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

“You’re checking my mentat records? Are you stalking me now?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Solomon’s words echo in my mind:

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

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

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

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

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

“Where have you been, Daddy? Busy again?”

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

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

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

“Roar? What’s that? Igor is so sweet and gentle; I’ve never heard him roar.”

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

“I could never stay away from Igor. I hope that never happens.”

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

Her grip tightens on me. “Thank you, Daddy.”

“I’m off to see your mother. You be a good girl okay.”

She tugs at me, her small hands clutching my arm as if desperate to say more. “Daddy, we’re in bad times,” she whispers, her voice trembling. “Last night, I felt a cold breeze, and it sent a shiver up my spine—like the one you talked about, ya know, if Igor roared. There’s something here in the palace. I can feel it. It’s hunting us, and... I think someone’s being eaten by it. I want it to go away, Daddy. It’s bad.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Chapter 2: Encroaching Darkness

When Prince Levi arrives at the harem’s gates, he finds his wives in the midst of 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, 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, her strength undeniable.

Beyond the tower, his other wives spar with swords and spears, their nanobot armor shimmering in the sunlight, reflecting both 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 composure falters. 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 the sudden, frantic flutter of her heart."

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

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

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

Levi’s gaze shifts to Sejal, studying her reaction intently. Her demeanor is calm, guarded like a poker player holding a royal flush, revealing nothing. A surge of longing rises in him—unexpected and overwhelming—a sudden, unshakable desire to be near her, filling his heart with an ache he hadn’t anticipated.

Breaking the silence, 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 thank you 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, the taut muscles beneath her skin. He can sense her restraint, 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 close, and I must see that your training has been more than ritual.”

Then, without warning, he leaps from the podium. The ground trembles beneath him as he lands, the force rippling through the courtyard like an unspoken challenge.

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, materializing as if a thousand unseen hands are forging it from molten metal in an instant. 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, in a single fluid motion, hurls him over her shoulder.

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.

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

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

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

She presses forward with a series of rapid thrusts and slashes, each motion fluid and relentless. The air hums with the force of her attacks, the glint of her weapon catching 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 dominate.

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

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

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

“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.”

Her voice, calm and rigid, 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 somewhere you still love me. I know I love you,” Maybe his love could heal the bitterness she was still holding onto.

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

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

“I’ll be waiting for you, my Lord.”

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

Prince Levi waves his hand, signaling for everyone to be dismissed. The crowd quietly disperses, each 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 live lavishly, with every comfort provided. A robotic cook hums in Sejal’s kitchen, preparing the finest synthetic meat available—crafted to satisfy without the need for animal lives. This was a standard they upheld: to live without promoting death whenever possible. Only the Levites consume the animals sacrificed in the temple; for everyone else, avoiding the suffering of any living creature had become their quiet commitment.

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

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

“Please join me my lord.”

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

….

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

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

Her gaze lingers on him, tracing the way his bare shoulders move with quiet strength. Even after nearly five centuries, his body remains lean and powerful—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 scrutinizing their every move, the idea of indulging in more sex under such silent observation feels far too unsettling.

Sitting beside her, he gazes at her golden blonde hair contrasting with her dusky skin. He reaches out, his fingers drifting through her hair, while she meets his gaze carefully. Together, they sip the scalding coffee, unaffected by its intensity; their perfected cellular structures are far more resilient than the fragile forms once marred by a world steeped in sin.

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

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

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

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

*She’s trying really hard to please me.*

She gives him a sly smile. “Well, 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 the company I have right here.”

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

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 tries to get closer, she would push away, but then she would try to draw him in, only to push him away. It was as if he was the rope in a continuous tug-of-war between two parts of her soul. He could not figure her out and the Lord continued to hide the thoughts of her inner nature from him, leaving him only to guess as to what she could be thinking.

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 a justification for what was done to her people.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sejal places a calming hand on his arm, her voice taking on a reassuring tone, masking her inner conviction. "My lord, sometimes dreams are a test—testing our loyalty, our hope. Amiel is still 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 there’s something else I noticed—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 realize 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. “What’s strange is that 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 for the briefest moment, 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. You know, 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 over the past four hundred years have shown such inclinations. I’m starting to wonder if he’s being influenced—by someone, or something. 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 left untouched. But I assure you, I have done nothing to steer him toward such thoughts.”

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

Sejal nods, her voice steady. “I swear, my lord.” 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 then carrying the plates to the sink. The sound of dishes rattles softly as she washes them.

Levi watches her for a moment longer, 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, pressing a gentle kiss to her head through her freshly scented hair, his hand resting lightly on her shoulder.

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Chapter 3: Aleister Crowley

*Amiel is now eleven.*

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

Children dance exuberantly in the streets, waving palm branches in a frenzy of excitement. Women raise their voices in psalms of thanksgiving, their melodies weaving through the joyous, clamor-like threads of golden light. The tightly packed citizens, spilling over into every corner of the city, 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 baptized them at the temple in a ceremony filled with divine significance.

At the time of this writing, the kingdom of Israel is now a population of two hundred million, with Jerusalem alone accommodating ten million during such 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 as they reach out as if hoping to touch the young prince.

He sits tall in the saddle, his posture poised and regal. His movements are deliberate—each turn of his head slow and calculated as he meets the 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, dazzling his audience. Hands shield eyes, but no one dares look away, their cheers reaching a fever pitch as Amiel pauses, raising a hand in acknowledgment.

In the distance, Levites stand watching, their faces 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.

His father thinks back to 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 baptized 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 preparing for the ceremony. Yet Amiel remains expressionless, devoid of any happiness or sorrow. His expression was that of someone working in the fields, trying to finish a day’s work and get home with the harvest.

Amiel’s attention was drawn to the faint sound of trickling water. A thin stream 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 up 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 symbolizes.

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 in 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 recognize that you are a new creation in him?”

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

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

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

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

But Amiel seems oblivious to his father’s words. His gaze is fixed upward toward the source of the darkness. 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 Crowly.”

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 fills the air, freshly prepared by their robotic chef.

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

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

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

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

His mother looks up from her plate, her tone gentle. “That’s called a solar eclipse. It happens when the moon moves 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 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, chasing it with 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 it’s an unsettling hum, like static smothering his thoughts. The world around him dulls, the vibrant colors of the room bleeding into a soft, muted haze. He blinks hard, trying to clear his vision, but the feeling clings to him, his eyelids heavy with drowsiness stretching for an hour. His mind splits, tangled between his own thoughts and the intrusive ones belonging to the pill. His voice strains to be heard, drowned out by the relentless shouting of the pill’s influence. It’s as if he is trapped on a caged raft, drifting through an endless sea of 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. Around her, Amiel feels a rare freedom, as though 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 very 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 as he steps forward, his back foot catches the hem of his garment. He stumbles, arms flailing, and crashes to the ground in a rustle of brush and dirt, landing awkwardly at the feet of Uriel and Deborah.

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

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

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

“Don’t shout at Igor,” Deborah chides gently. “He loves you; he just wanted to play.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amiel’s jaw tightens. “The people love me. I was giving them something to celebrate.”

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

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

“Yeah, Uriel, live a little,” Amiel says, smirking as he leans into Deborah’s support.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amiel’s jaw tightens, his hatred for Uriel’s patronizing tone simmering just beneath the surface. That 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. Though two years younger, Amiel matches his brother in height and stature, the intensity in his eyes daring Uriel to underestimate him.

“Just you wait, Uriel,” Amiel says, his voice low but seething with defiance. “I’ll be the greatest warrior this palace has ever seen—greater than any of our brothers. You’ll see. One day, I won’t just defeat you,” Amiel steps closer, the space between them evaporating as his breath brushes against Uriel’s face. His voice sharpens, each word a dagger. “I’ll humiliate you. So completely, you’ll never set foot in that sparring hall again.”

Deborah stands up placing herself between the two brothers using whatever strength she could exert from her small body to separate her brothers away 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 exerting more force to separate her brothers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Half-sister. I’ll be king then and it won’t matter what dad thinks.”

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

“I’m serious,” Amiel retorts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’d really make me your queen?” Amiel snaps out 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 a more queen like stature, straightening her posture, lifting her chin upwards.

Amiel is about to speak but she interrupts, “But… what if the people don’t like it? Or what if Father……..”

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

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

A flash of anger flashes across Amiel’s face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

….

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

Not his Aleister.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amiel’s anger dissipates instantly, replacing it with a look of shock and disbelief. He leans forward, narrowing his eyes at the glowing red orb of Aleister’s gaze whose red aura 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. The thing for change that I’ve been *dying* to talk about since I left the garden,” Amiel feeling a sense of satisfaction with his play of words.

“Yes, so it’s been on your mind. It’s a mystery for you I suppose.”

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

“The final orgasm?” he echoed, his voice almost a whisper, “There you go again, talking about orgasms again. You know I’m only eleven if you forget. I know it’s related to sexual 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 hypnotizing, “Everything, Amiel. Great warriors do not wait for power—they seize it. They dominate, they conquer, they take what is theirs by right.”

Aleister 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 itself bows before your light.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Show me your neck,” Aleister commands.

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

“Relax O lion, the sleeper doth awake,” Aleister’s voice deep and theatrical.

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

Aleister's eyes flicker, a mesmerizing dance of blue and yellow hues, as his servos 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 would 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 own 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 more, to 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 he’s unsure what to do with his hands. “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 for. Soon, I will be nothing more than a servant on the soil that once belonged to me.”

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

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

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

He motions to the guards. “The man who seeks to exploit you—Saul—is here. We summoned him before you arrived, as you know, I see almost everything that goes on 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, his tone 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 takes in a deep breath, “what if I don’t want to?” He then looks down for fear of retribution.

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

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

Saul 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 for him and ensure he has the seed he needs to restore his vineyard. Yet, know this: your opportunity to extend mercy and grace will pass to another, and so too will your reward in heaven."

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

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

Saul 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 granddaughters firstborn child after you.”

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

As the last of the petitioners leave the hall, Levi leans back in his throne, his brow furrowed in thought as 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 feint possibility of a growing rebellion. “Do you wish to take action against him, my lord?”

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

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

Levi’s lips curl into a faint, wry smile. “Good times breed bad times, don’t they?”

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

“A strange balance, but one I cannot escape.”

….

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Martha grins slyly as she folds the discarded gown. “Your wish ma’am. After I’m done cleaning up 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 not sure whether to thank you or scold you.”

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

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

Martha steps closer, her voice filled with genuine curiosity. “Do you miss the fireworks, ma’am?”

Dipti 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 in 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 just 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, sharing the sorrow of Martha. Now she becomes Queen Dipti her body posture now serious, “Is that so, maybe I’ll have the prince speak to him.”

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

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

Martha looks up, her expression curious. “What is it, ma’am?”

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

Martha smiles, her eyes glistening slightly. “Thank you, my Queen. That means more to me than you know. I’ve been carrying this burden for quite some time. I feel better knowing there is someone there now to carry it with me.”

Dipti places a gentle hand on Martha’s shoulder, her touch both firm and comforting. “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’m starting 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 halls of the palace.

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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 come to her as a friend, seeking discretion. Some matters, Dipti decides, require a woman’s touch.

Dipti double-taps her mentat, and in an instant, her mind accesses the vast neural networks that connects the lives of millions. 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 erupts in a smile, as if the moment belongs to her.

The warmth fades as she delves deeper. A farmer’s sorrow grips her—a despair so raw it 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 clearly 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 flavors so exquisite it stirs her hunger despite the weight of kheer sitting heavily in her stomach. For a moment, she feels suspended in the shared presence, tethered by threads of wonder and unease.

She leaves the sacred place of meeting, 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, how deeply they are bound. It’s as if in this moment, she sees the truth: they are no longer two separate beings but one creature, with two hearts beating in perfect step. All her longings, all her 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 begins her search 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 the task Gavriel has set before him. 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 new recruits. I’m going to show you how to materialize your bio sword using your mentat chip. This is your first test today. If you cannot achieve the desired result, you will be disqualified.”

The new recruit clenches his fists and shifts his weight. His feet are itching and all he can think about is taking off his shoes, discipline keeps him still, though his every nerve screams for relief. Dipti wishes she could itch it for him, but how awkward that would be, the queen of the world itching a new recruit’s foot but hey, Yeshua washed his disciples’ feet.

She uses this opportunity to examine Gavriel through the eyes of the recruit, watching his demeanor for signs of anything unusual. She looks into his eyes. They are as hard 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. This must be another day in the job, hard to tell what he could be thinking by just looking into his eyes. Should she breach his mentat now? Would he be preoccupied enough to not 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. 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—it’s 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 projecting themselves on a wall of smoke, vivid and fleeting.

His family rises before her, their laughter echoing like a symphony as they celebrate his bar mitzvah. The warmth of the scene burns brightly—until Tel Aviv explodes in a blinding flash. His loved ones are reduced to ash, their joy turned to dust. For a moment, the weight of 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 holds no relevance to her mission, it vanishes 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, 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 is 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 is unsettling. *Is this rage from his fight with Martha? Or something deeper, something darker?*

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

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

*Those are not Martha’s legs, they are legs of an athlete, well sculpted, her muscles ripple 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, all she has is 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 through her. An affair with a married woman could ignite one of the largest scandals the palace has ever seen.

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

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

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

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

# Chapter 6: 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 in his mind. How can he bring up his request? For years, she has been his greatest ally, the one who introduced him to the writings of Aleister Crowley and encouraged his relentless pursuit of knowledge. She has always supported his ambitions, no matter how lofty or obscure.

*But this?*

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

Aleister’s latest discovery weighs heavily on him. A mentat faker. Aleister uncovered a 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, 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 greater mentat network is locked down, its gates sealed tight by paranoia. Yet Aleister found a way to pry them open, exposing Amiel to the sprawling, chaotic depths of the greater mentat network. Now, he can’t stop thinking about the decrypted message. Its implications burn in his mind like fire, unrelenting.

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

“Mother, I need your help,” Amiel says, his 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 still full of food. For a moment, she seems frozen, trying to process the sheer magnitude of the number Amiel has just uttered. She swallows hard, the motion awkward and rushed, as though her body momentarily forgets how to function.

“What did you just say?” she finally manages, her voice a 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 feels out of place given the context. It lingers for a second too long, the kind that could mean anything—a mother’s trust, or the quiet dismissal of a child’s naivety. Amiel can’t tell which, and it sends a ripple of unease through him.

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

He watches as she moves to the kitchen, crouching to rummage through a pile of books stashed on the counter. After a few moments, she returns with a piece of paper and a pen. 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 inside the city, in Gehenna, a place that teems with the most undesirable people of Jerusalem. It is a labyrinth of desperation and danger, where whispers of betrayal carry farther than footsteps. One wrong move, and even a palace prince might disappear without a trace. Not only this, but a large wall that is well-guarded separates Gehenna from the rest of Jerusalem. It is considered one of the last remaining bastions of rebellion against his father and the new world order that has ushered in a tranquil peace for so many years.

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

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

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

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

*My son—the chosen one.*

“When we’re finally free, I want you to tell me everything you’ve done,” his mother says, her voice low and measured. “You are not alone—there are others waiting for you. But I must hold my tongue until the time is right. 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, it is she who 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*.

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

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

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

….

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.

“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 deep within Amiel, like embers catching fire. His chest tightens, and a faint shiver runs down his spine. The Age of Horus. He’s heard his mother whisper it 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 is pacing back and forth his hands fidgeting with themselves, “Teach me more about the Age of Horus,” Amiel says, his voice brimming with excitement. “What is my place in all this?”

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

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

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

“But Horus didn’t do it alone,” he says softly.

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

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

*The Age of Horus is coming.*

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

“Have you been in touch with our contact?”

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

Amiel’s excitement falters, replaced by confusion and anxiety. “But how? I can’t just leave the palace. I can’t skip sparring practice. I very well 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 as soon I found the mentat faker.”

Amiel blinks, stunned. “What?”

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

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

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

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

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

“With genomic data on every palace inhabitant,” Aleister replies, his tone unwavering, “I will tailor the virus to ensure non-lethal outcomes 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 there’s a cold edge to his logic.

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

Amiel’s fists 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 one 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 as if 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.”

From Aleister’s mechanical hand, a thin needle extends, 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 was able to develop 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.

“Very good, 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. Tomorrow morning, everyone will be sick—including you, though yours will be feigned.”

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

*The Age of Horus awaits.*

# Chapter 7: 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 had been dismantled after the Great War, when sickness was conquered, and vaccines abandoned, deemed unnecessary.

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

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

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

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

Cohen nods, already moving with a sense of purpose. “I’m on it, ma’am. Anyone caught leaving their rooms or wandering the palace grounds will be detained and 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 any of us want to admit.” He pauses, his eyes dark with thought. “Let’s just try to enjoy these final days as much as we can… before the final seven.”

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

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

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

Both Dipti and Benjamin turn to him.

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

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

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

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

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

….

“Amiel, it has begun. They’re sending people to check on us. You must get ready. Lay in bed—the vaccine I gave you should feign 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 begins to pick up dirty clothes and place them in drawers.

*A knock on the door.*

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

*Life moves pretty fast,*

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

*You could miss it.*

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

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

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

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

The nurse addresses Queen Dipti, “My Queen, his temperature is elevated, but his vitals seem stable. He’s asleep.”

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

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

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

“I’m fine, Mom. Just really tired.” Amiel mumbles.

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

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

*Don’t worry Lion the temperature will pass, its 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 really 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 holographic display and looks at Dipti waiting for further orders.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s spreading!” he shouts, adding a gasp for dramatic effect. “I feel like I’m dying!”

“Amiel!” Dipti begins to panic.

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

*A methamphetamine injection via nanobots curtesy of Aleister.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ma’am,” The nurse all of a sudden looks unwell, “I think I’m going to vomit.”

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

“You’re burning up. Come, I’ll take you to your room so you can rest.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Success.*

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

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

Pulling out a black T-shirt emblazoned with Megadeth in jagged, lightning-bolt letters, he slips it over his head, the fabric cool against his skin. He places a facemask over his head until it fits snugly over his nose and mouth partially covering his face. Before leaving, he lingers in front of his wardrobe's mirrored surface. His reflection grins back at him, an impish gleam in his eye as memories surface—videos of frenzied crowds swaying and screaming in unison to the apocalyptic hymns of the old-world band. They were more than music; they were declarations, twisted sermons set to riffs of obliteration.

The lyrics flood his mind, jagged and raw:

*Put mortal man in control,*

*Watch him become a god,*

*Watch people’s heads erode.*

“Prophets of doom,” he muses, 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, giving one last look in the mirror, then steps away from the armoire into the hallway closing the door quietly as he scans the hallway.

# 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 own 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 bars of light. 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, on the tension coiling in his chest. Any moment now, a robot could emerge from the far end, it’s cold, 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 reaches the intersection and pauses, pressing himself against the cool stone wall. The sunlight fades behind him, replaced by the dim, sterile light of the adjoining hallways. His eyes flicker to each corridor in turn, scanning, for 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 stretch into an eternity. The shadows flicker and shift across the polished marble floor, playing tricks on his restless mind. He studies each movement, searching for signs of danger, his ears straining to pick up the faintest sound. The hum of servos and the rhythmic clink of mechanical joints 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. I repeat—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 bursts into a sprint, his wiry legs driving him forward with startling speed. The hours of sparring have honed his movements, each stride sharp and purposeful. Arches and windows 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 begins to turn toward him.

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

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

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

Amiel slows as Aleister’s voice speaks in his mind. "Lion, you’re approaching the critical point. The sewer access lies just ahead, concealed in the lower 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, dark and unassuming; the right, 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 cooler, tinged with the faint metallic tang of machinery. The polished marble gives way to rough stone, the grandeur of the palace replaced by stark utilitarian design.

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 cool 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 certain.

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

“Enter the code: 7-4-3-2. Quickly.”

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

“What are you doing?” Aleister’s voice 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. You must hide… quickly.”

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

Two figures emerge into view, their voices 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 practiced wariness.

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

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

Amiel shirks away and hides his face behind the tapestry. He looks down, realizing that his feet are still visible below the hem of the tapestry. He slowly sits in the alcove and pulls his feet inside.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amiel keeps imagining the day when he would have the power of life and death over Uriel—this would be his reward, his light at the end of 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 both 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 something—anything—to grab onto, but the walls of the tunnel are too smooth, too unyielding. His body jerks violently with every twist and turn of the chute, the sharp edges of pipes and protrusions nearly grazing him as he descends.

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

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

One haunting thought claws its way into his mind:

*I’m going to die.*

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

Amiel’s thoughts spiral. 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 anymore. He manages one last desperate kick, breaking through to the surface for a gasp of air, but it was too late. His strength is gone. The inevitable claims him, and he lets himself sink, holding his breath for as long as he can.

With his eyes open, he sees 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.

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

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

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

An alligator.

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

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

Amiel clings tightly to the creature as the faint light flickers at the end of the tunnel, growing brighter with each second. The 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 he is being pulled from.

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

Amiel grimaces, frustration boiling over. “Shut up, Aleister! I can still shut you off. I don’t need your lecturing right now,” he snaps.

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

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

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

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

“Kill him, Amiel.”

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

“With that stone over there.”

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

*The Age of Horus requires the strong to act.*

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

“Now,” Aleister urges. “Strike.”

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

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

But the alligator moves.

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

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

# Chapter 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 walls 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, the pavement 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 it’s essential you avoid direct light—your hologram won’t hold 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 streets 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 is 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 its 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 up, his robotic arm amplifying his strength. Amiel’s legs dangle in the air. His heartbeat pounds, but instinct takes over, sparring drills flashing through his mind. Years of 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. In the corner of his eye he sees a metal rod lying on a shelf. He grabs it, swings down onto the man’s back, crashing down hard onto his spine. His attacker is stunned as pain shoots through his back. He stumbles into a cluttered workbench. Tools and scraps clatter to the floor as the old man curses.

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

Amiel catches a glint of metal—a crude blade. Instinct takes over. The metal rod hits the man’s hand before it can reach its target. The old man yells, releasing his grip on the blade. 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 in his mind, 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 held 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 true prize. Killing this man would cheapen the thrill of when he finally has first blood. There must be another way to remove this man’s knowledge of his identity. Amiel steps back and looks around. He sees a mentat located in a syringe laying on a shelf.

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

“I understand, lion. You’re saving yourself like a virgin on her wedding night. Honorable. Yes, I can do a memory wipe…but only at the time of insertion, when his neural synapses first connect. So you have to be spot on with the insertion or you can end up killing this man anyways.”

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

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

Amiel takes a steadying breath, ignoring the man’s taunts. His eyes land on a coil of thin, sturdy wiring hanging from the wall. Perfect. He steps quickly to grab it, ignoring the old man’s attempts to 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 as the man’s body shudders slightly, his eyes rolling back. The hum of the room’s outdated equipment blends with the faint buzz of Aleister’s work.

After a few moments, the convulsions stop. The man slumps against the wall, his breathing shallow but steady. Aleister speaks again, his tone satisfied. “His memories of tonight are gone. I’ve also registered his mentat in our neural network. If he 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 how. You lured me into this place, thinking you had the upper hand. But I turned the tables, didn’t I?”

The man trembles, his eyes darting around the room as if searching for an escape.

Amiel steps closer, his tone growing sharper. “Change your life, and I’ll never come back. Or…” He leans in slightly, his holographic form casting a menacing shadow over the bound figure. “Should I give you another go?”

A cruel smile tugs at Amiel’s lips, hidden beneath the projected face of the hologram.

“No, no!” the man sputters, desperation lacing his voice. “I’ll change, I swear! I’ll never try to rob anyone ever again!”

“Good.” Amiel glances at the cluttered workbench and snatches a pair of pliers. With a sharp flick of his wrist, he tosses them onto the ground near the old man’s feet. “Here. Use these to cut yourself free.”

The man scrambles to grab the pliers, clutching them tightly like a lifeline. His hands shake as he fumbles with the tool.

Amiel turns to leave. At the door, he pauses, glancing back over his shoulder. His voice, calm yet menacing, rings out in the stillness. “Remember, we’re watching you.”

The door creaks shut behind him, leaving the old man alone in the dim room, his breath coming in shallow, panicked gasps as Amiel disappears into the shadows of Gehenna.

Outside, the air feels colder, sharper, as Amiel steps back into the chaos of the streets. His new hologram projects a confident, commanding figure—every movement of his slim frame now cloaked in the veneer of an imposing adult. Despite the damp chill biting at his skin beneath the shirt, he feels emboldened, more assured of his place in this fractured city.

Aleister’s voice breaks the silence. “You handled that well, Lion. A cunning approach—though your flair for dramatics is… intriguing, you’re a man after my own heart.”

Amiel glances at the towering wall in the distance, separating Gehenna from the opulent streets of Jerusalem. The boundary feels less daunting now, less of a barrier and more of a challenge. The encounter with the old man has given him confidence, a readiness to press on into the unknown with a sense he would be capable of handling anything this cruel place could throw at him; or at least he thought so.

“I think this hologram upgrade will allow us to remain cloaked even under the brightest light. I was counting on this upgrade. The bar is bound to have bright lights.”

“Where’s the contact?” Amiel asks, his voice low but steady.

“Close,” Aleister replies. “The bar is two blocks ahead.”

Amiel’s gaze sharpens as he moves forward, the dim light glinting off the edges of shadowy figures watching from alleyways. His grip tightens instinctively, though there’s no weapon in his hand. He doesn’t need one. The lion in him stirs, hungry and ready.

Gehenna whispers promise to him in every shadow and scream. For the first time, Amiel feels alive, not as a prince, but as a predator.

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Amiel reaches the intersection, pausing at the corner to take in the building that houses the bar. The structure is squat and windowless, its walls made of dull, dented metal plates, streaked with rust and grime. Faded graffiti sprawls across the wall’s surface, layers of crude tags and cryptic symbols in a form of Hebrew Amiel doesn’t understand.

Amiel’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 level of 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, 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 entrance of the bar. A few figures linger near the entrance, their faces obscured by hoods and masks. He pushes a reinforced metal door, scarred with scratches and dents, but it doesn’t budge.

A slit through the door opens, wary eyes peak through them, “Put your hand on the scanner,” the voice deep and uninviting.

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

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

“Don’t worry lion, everyone that lives in Gehenna is registered, you are not. Use my name.”

Amiel’s hand fits into the groove, the cold metal pressing against his palm. A red light flickers to life, scanning back and forth in rhythmic sweeps. After a tense pause, the scanner beeps, and the slit in the door widens slightly. A pair of wary eyes glare through.

“There’s no record of you,” the man behind the door growls. “That means you’re from Jerusalem. State your name and purpose.”

Amiel hesitates for a fraction of a second, then hears the familiar metallic cadence of Aleister’s voice reverberate in his mind.

"Tell him you’re here to sin. Make it convincing, little lion."

Amiel’s 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 that now grows louder. “Ah, a high roller looking to buy forbidden tech, huh? Fine. Drinks are on the house.”

He waves Amiel through, a grin tugging at his lips. “Welcome to The Iron Jackal. Try not to lose yourself too quickly,” he adds with a chuckle dripping in condescension.

"Good work, lion. Keep up the act," Aleister murmurs in Amiel’s mind as he steps inside.

An overwhelming pungent mix of burnt synth-leaf, spiced liquor, and sweat hits Amiel’s senses as he walks in. Erratic lighting pulses with the heavy beat of music, slicing the darkened room with bursts of neon and shadow. Patrons grind and sway against one another, their movements synchronized with the music’s hypnotic rhythm.

He weaves carefully through the crowd, each step deliberate, avoiding unnecessary contact. His hologram projects the image of a rugged, older man, but the illusion is fragile. A brush of flesh against his wiry frame could shatter it.

The music 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, 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 itself. The rhythm seizes him, his movements fluid, 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 down 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 far more intoxicating. For a fleeting moment, he feels unshackled, alive, as though he could do anything.

Amiel shakes his head lightly, trying to steady himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he notices movement—a slender figure in a shadowy booth tucked away in the far corner. The man raises a hand in a subtle gesture, beckoning him over.

*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 an air of casual authority, gesturing to the empty seat across from him.

Amiel hesitates for a beat before sliding into the booth, his movements cautious. His hologram mirrors his actions seamlessly, though he can’t shake the feeling that the man’s piercing gaze might see right through it.

“Can I get you a drink?” the man asks, his voice smooth and measured, as though he’s done this a hundred times before.

Amiel shakes his head, his hologram echoing the motion. “No, I’m good. I’m here for business. Are you Arnon?”

The man leans forward slightly, his lips curling into a faint smile. “I am,” he says, his voice dropping to a near whisper, “if you brought the Luxom.”

“I brought the Luxom. Show me the product,” Amiel nervously leans forward anticipating the culmination of his daring escape from the palace.

The man pulls out a hard ceramic case, its polished surface reflecting the dim light. With a deliberate motion, he opens it. A soft click can still be heard over the pulsating rhythm of techno music in the background, followed by the faint creak of hinges. Inside, nestled in a bed of dark velvet, lies the mentat faker.

Amiel leans in, his breath hitching as he studies the small, unassuming device. It looks like an ordinary pill casing—smooth, slightly translucent, with faint etchings that seem to ripple like veins under the light. Deceptively simple, yet brimming with possibility. A wave of anticipation courses through him. This is it. The device he had risked everything for. A tool that could mimic another’s mentat flawlessly, granting him the power to become someone else.

The man’s steady gaze doesn’t waver. Without a word, he snaps the case shut, the spell it cast over Amiel breaking in an instant.

“Luxom first,” the man says, his voice clipped, businesslike.

“Eight hundred thousand Luxom,” Aleister murmurs faintly in Amiel’s mind, his tone distant, almost distracted. The voice that once guided him like an anchor now feels remote, untethered.

Amiel straightens in his chair, forcing himself to sound composed. “We agreed on eight hundred thousand Luxom, correct?”

The man smirks as he lights a cigarette. The flame flickers briefly before he exhales a curl of smoke directly into Amiel’s face. “That was the old deal,” he says smoothly, his voice carrying the weight of indifference. “But you’re late. Price went up. One million Luxom.”

Amiel’s stomach drops. Panic begins to claw at him as sweat forms along his brow.

One million. That’s everything he has. All of it. How’s he supposed to get back? 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. If the man senses even a hint of it, he’d press for more.

Amiel waits, heart pounding, for Aleister’s voice to come through with guidance, a clever word, a strategy. But there’s only silence.

His thoughts grow frantic. Aleister? Where are you? His mind reaches out like a desperate prayer, seeking 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 own artistry.

Amiel swallows hard. He has to speak, to say something, but his mind feels blank. How does one bargain with someone like this? All he can manage is a faint, unconvincing, “Too much.”

The man chuckles, flicking ash into a tray. “I’ve got other buyers who’d pay even more,” he says, his tone dripping with mock courtesy. “Consider the million a favor.”

Amiel clenches his jaw, feeling the prickling heat of sweat at his temples. He can’t lose this—not after everything he’s risked to get here. But he has to tread carefully. If he pushes too hard, the man might walk away, and the faker would slip through his fingers.

His mind whirls, searching for the right response. Thankfully, the hologram masking his face conceals the turmoil beneath. With a deliberate effort, he leans back in his chair, feigning an ease he doesn’t feel.

“Nine hundred thousand,” he says, his voice steady. “I’m not paying a credit more.”

Arnon’s smirk remains, but his eyes harden slightly. He taps the ash from his cigarette onto the tray, then places it between his lips again, studying Amiel in silence. The smoke curls around his face like a mocking veil, obscuring his expression just enough to unsettle.

“That’s bold,” Arnon says finally, his tone light but underscored with menace. “Nine hundred thousand isn’t bad. Not bad at all. But let’s be real—you’re desperate. I can smell it on you. You came all the way from Jerusalem, somehow got your hands on a fancy hologram. I don’t know how you pulled it off, but you did. The lengths people go to fulfill their desires…” His voice trails off, punctuated by a dark chuckle.

*Aleister! He knows I’m using a hologram!*

Amiel’s heart skips a beat, but he forces himself to remain still. No flinching, no giveaways. Instead, he tilts his head, a faint, mocking smile curving his lips. “Desperation? From me?” His tone is measured, deflective. He shakes his head and falls silent, buying precious seconds.

*Aleister! I can’t do this without you!*

Arnon flicks his cigarette into the ashtray, snuffing it out with a deliberate motion. The sight makes Amiel feel as though he’s the one being crushed, suffocated under Arnon’s scrutiny. The man tilts his head slightly, his sharp gaze locking onto Amiel.

“Why don’t you deactivate your hologram?” Arnon’s voice is smooth, almost coaxing, but there’s steel beneath it. “Let me see who I’m dealing with. You’ve got guts coming all this way. Deal with me man to man.”

Amiel shakes his head quickly, his voice firm. “That wasn’t part of the deal.”

Arnon spreads his hands in a show of false diplomacy, his lips curving into a wolfish grin. “Show me who you are, and I’ll make it nine fifty. Call it goodwill. I don’t like dealing with shades.”

*Shades*. The word strikes Amiel as odd, but he pieces it together—people who hide behind holograms.

He feels his resolve wavering. Did he come all this way for nothing? He can’t reveal his identity—not with what’s at stake. But if it’s his only option… He swallows hard. The faker means everything. He doesn’t fully understand why, but it’s part of Aleister’s grand plan. He’s learned to trust Aleister more than his own instincts.

Maybe Arnon doesn’t know who he really is. Maybe revealing his identity could build trust.

Arnon leans back, glancing past Amiel with a pointed look. “So, what’s it going to be? I’m running out of time. I’ve got another client waiting on me.” He nods toward someone behind Amiel, their arms crossed, tapping their foot impatiently.

Amiel glances over his shoulder, tension mounting. The moment of decision looms, and his hand moves instinctively toward the control to deactivate the hologram.

*“STOP, LION!”*

Aleister’s voice tears through his thoughts like a crack of thunder. The command halts Amiel mid-motion, his hand freezing as the weight of Aleister’s authority anchors him in place.

“This man is Mossad. He has a mentat. Everything that’s happening right now is live streaming to the palace.”

*“Where were you?”*

“I’ll explain later, but they’re about to apprehend you…the guy behind you, also Mossad.”

Amiel’s mind began to race. Mossad operatives were often chosen from the cream of the crop of palace guards plus they had access to their bio-weapons. There’s no way he’s going to fight his way out of this one. Keeping his face—and the hologram—calm, he let his gaze flicker toward the figure behind him. The "client" Arnon had gestured to was imposing: broad shoulders, military posture, and an unnervingly still presence. Definitely not just another buyer.

“They’re trying to make you reveal your identity to verify if you’re a threat. Once the transaction is done, they’ll make their move regardless. Run.”

Running seems impossible; the room is packed, and there’s one exit. He decides he’s not going to bolt, instead he’ll make the transaction, take the faker, and get out of there somehow.

I didn’t come here for nothing. Help me get the faker.

Make your move. I’ll be there Lion.

“I want to see the faker one more time,” he says, his tone almost casual. “How do I know it’s legit? You could be selling me a fake faker.”

Arnon scoffs, shaking his head. “A fake faker? Funny.” He flips the case open again, revealing the device inside.

Arnon once again flips open the case with the mentat faker inside.

“Turn it on,” Amiel presses. “I want to see it working.”

With an exasperated sigh, Arnon activates the faker. It comes to life, a red light in its core begins to blink.

Amiel stall while I mimic his mentat. Just a minute.

“It’s a deal, then. One million Luxom. Let’s toast,” Amiel says, his sudden shift catching Arnon off guard.

Arnon sets the faker down, his anticipation palpable. He forgets to turn it off.

“Great! I knew you would appreciate my generosity. Now pay, I’m tired of wasting time with you.” Arnon slightly lurches forward with anticipation. Amiel can’t help but feel like at any moment Arnon would lunge at him.

Amiel pulls out of his pocket a sleek credit chip and dangles it in the air 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. With his left, he snatches the faker and the credit chip simultaneously. Darkness swallows the room as the power cuts. Chaos erupts. Voices shout in frustration as the music stops, and in the confusion, Amiel disappears into the crowd.

“Wait! The power will be back any moment!” the bar owner bellows, his voice straining to rise above the cacophony of grumbling voices. But the crowd, fueled by alcohol and impatience, isn’t having it. Their protests grow louder, drunken logic urging him to open the door and let them spill out into the night.

Reluctantly, the owner relents, shouting over the chaos, “Fine! Just don’t break anything on the way out!” With a metallic groan, the gate slides open.

The crowd surges forward, an unrelenting flood bursting free from a dam. Amiel moves with them, letting the chaotic momentum carry him. He’s jostled left and right, bumping into swaying bodies and sloshing drinks. The air reeks of stale beer and sweat, the din of laughter and shouting nearly deafening.

He keeps his head low, his hologram flickering faintly in the dim emergency lights. The Mossad agents, trapped behind him, shove through the crowd, their sharp, purposeful movements standing out against the drunken chaos. Their eyes dart wildly, scanning faces, hunting for him.

Amiel uses the moment to his advantage, allowing himself to be swept deeper into the tide of revelers. Every shove and stumble carries him closer to the exit, farther from their grasp. He risks a glance back and spots one of the agents elbowing past a belligerent patron, their frustration palpable. The other agent, taller and broader, is scanning the crowd with hawk-like intensity, his gaze slicing through the drunken haze.

Keep going, Aleister’s voice whispers in his mind, calm but urgent. Lose yourself in the current.

Amiel ducks lower, his body folding into the chaos as he pushes forward. He can feel the heat of pursuit, the weight of the faker in his hand like a burning brand, 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. One more push, he tells himself, gritting his teeth as a burly man stumbles into him, nearly knocking him off balance.

Behind him, a sharp voice cuts through the noise: “Stop him!” One of the agents has spotted him, their hand outstretched like a predator lunging for its prey.

But it’s too late. Amiel bursts free of the bar 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 bowl of pudding rests precariously on the quilted blanket, the spoon dangling lazily between his fingers. "Ugh," he groans, swirling the spoon idly. "I can’t taste anything anymore. Corona’s back. Let’s call this the Beta Phi Epsilon variant." His voice, still hoarse from earlier bouts of vomiting, rasps with irritation.

Across the room, Queen Dipti sits poised on a silk-upholstered chair, her sari shimmering under the soft glow of the lamplight. The intricate gold embroidery catches fire with every subtle shift of her posture. She raises a perfectly arched eyebrow at him. "Another Greek-inspired name?" she says, pouring tea from a silver teapot into a porcelain cup. "We’ve had enough of those. Let’s give it a Jewish twist."

Levi’s lips curl into a smirk, his mismatched blue and green eyes glinting with mischief. "The Sah-tahn variant," he declares with conviction, "That *harami[[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 goes on any longer, I’ll commission the scientists to reinvent PlayStation. Otherwise, I might actually lose my mind."

"You’re already halfway there, my dear," Dipti teases, rising gracefully to her feet, her posture straight as a plank. She sets a steaming cup of tea on the bedside table within reach of Levi. Placing her hand gently on his forehead, she frowns slightly.

"It seems the fever has passed," she murmurs. "What a strange illness—so intense, yet gone in less than twelve hours. Flus used to last a day at least."

Levi nods, his brow furrowing. "Not that I’m complaining. Half the palace is sick, and yet you, somehow, manage to avoid it. How is that even possible?"

Dipti smiles, a hint of playfulness in her voice. "It’s good, nah? Or would you rather I join you in misery?"

“Misery loves company,” Levi quips with a sly grin.

“Oh really?” Dipti arches an eyebrow, her tone dripping with mock skepticism.

"Definitely not," Levi says with a laugh, shaking his head. "I need you healthy. Otherwise, who’d take care of me? Without you, I’d have nothing but my own sighs for company."

As he speaks, his thoughts drift elsewhere. A report flickers through his mind, vivid and urgent: an imposing man tricks the Mossad into handing over a mentat faker—a weapon of terrifying potential in the hands of a diabolical mind. Levi’s mental image sharpens, replaying footage of the perpetrator: a figure from Jerusalem with access to an outlawed hologram linked to Gehenna. He scrutinizes the scene in his mind’s eye, searching for any clue, any inconsistency.

The figure pours a drink into their hologram. Odd. Some of the liquid spills onto the floor, suggesting they are shorter than expected. Stranger still, they manage to cut the lights—a feat requiring significant technical expertise. Someone powerful must be aiding them.

Levi’s head throbs. "Ugh, I can’t deal with this right now," he mutters, shoving the perplexing report aside to the back of his mind.

He sighs deeply, sinking into the plush pillows. "My mind’s a mess. I’m stuck here with tasteless pudding and nothing to occupy me but this disturbing report from the Mossad.”

“Disturbing report?” Dipti leans forward, her brows knitting in concern.

“Wait, you didn’t see it?” The weight of the report reflected in his weary tone.

“I’m focused on you.” Her voice is steady, but her eyes widen in shock.

“Leave it,” Levi says with a dismissive wave of his hand, his voice softening. “We’ll talk later. For now, Dipti, tell me a story. Entertain me."

Dipti tilts her head, her eyes softening as she regards him. "A story?" she muses, her mind desperately trying to keep her focus off the disturbing news. "I’ll try, but you really dropped a bomb on me here."

"Please," Levi begs, his hands folded.

Dipti adjusts her sari and begins, her voice soft and rhythmic.

"Once, in a land where the sun never sets, there lived a prince who sought a treasure so rare it could only be claimed by a pure heart. But the prince’s heart was not pure. Desperate, he made a pact with an evil wizard who gave him the illusion of virtue in exchange for the throne. Blinded by ambition, the prince accepted."

Levi smirks. "Classic mistake. Go on."

"The prince passed the trials of truth, reflection, and despair—shielded by the wizard’s spell from the guardian spirits of those trials. Finally, he reached the treasure: a golden chalice, said to hold the wisdom of kings. But the chalice trembled in his grasp, rejecting his deceit. The spirits cursed him: he must carry the chalice back to his kingdom, but its power would only reveal his betrayal. When the prince returned, his people celebrated. But on his coronation day, the chalice’s glow turned sickly green, spreading blight and sickness across the land. The people turned on the prince, and the wizard, seizing his moment, took the throne, imprisoning the king and enslaving the prince."

Levi frowns, "Bleak bedtime story."

Dipti leans closer. "But it’s not over. The chalice still holds the wisdom of kings—and with it, a chance for redemption… you see, the king still deeply loved his son, despite his betrayal. A royal servant still loyal to the king sneaks into the evil wizard’s royal chamber and steals the chalice and brings it to the king trapped within his cell. The king takes a shard of glass lying in his cell and slits his wrist pouring all his blood into the chalice. His blood is then filled with the wisdom of kings. As his strength seeps from his body the king beckons his servant to deliver the chalice to his son and orders his servant to tell his son to drink his blood so that he might be filled with the wisdom of kings and deliver his kingdom from the evil clutches of the wizard.”

“Suppose I would do the same for one of my sons if they fell into the same trap,” Levi comments wistfully.

"Would you, though?" Dipti’s voice is gentle but probing, her gaze unwavering. "Would you sacrifice everything, even your life, for the chance that one of your sons might redeem himself?"

Levi 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 takes a sip of Prince Levi’s tea, “Only time will tell.”

….

After breaking free from the crowd, Amiel sprints, his breath ragged, each inhale burning his lungs. His pulse drums in his ears, drowning out the muffled shouts of the party-goers he pushes past. He risks a glance over his shoulder. The two Mossad agents are still in pursuit, their determined faces illuminated by the flickering neon lights of the city.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spots an alley—a narrow slit between two towering buildings. The dumpsters pressed against the walls seem like sentinels guarding its entrance. Shadows pool in the tight space, thick and oppressive, the kind of darkness that swallows everything whole. It beckons him, promising refuge, its cold embrace oddly comforting.

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

With a sharp turn, Amiel darts toward the alley, but his momentum betrays him. His feet skid on loose gravel, and he stumbles, nearly crashing to the ground. Desperately, he shifts his weight, his palm scraping against the rough asphalt as he claws for balance. The sting burns into his skin, but he barely registers it. His adrenaline-fueled legs propel him forward, driving him 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 him 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 deeper into the shadows, slowing his pace to silence his steps. Somewhere behind him, the muffled echo of the agents’ boots grows louder, their voices bouncing off the narrow walls.

Amiel ducks behind a rusting dumpster, the pungent odor of rotting waste stinging his nostrils. He forces his breathing to slow, cupping a hand over his mouth to muffle the sound of his gasps. His scraped palm throbs, warm blood trickling between his fingers, but he dares not move to check the wound. His eyes dart around the confined space, searching for a way out—a fire escape, a loose grate, anything.

The alley stretches deeper into the urban maze, its far end obscured by a veil of darkness. The oppressive silence is broken only by the approaching footfalls of the Mossad agents. Amiel's thoughts race. He knows their efficiency, their relentlessness. Hiding will only delay the inevitable. The soft thud of their steps draws closer. He has to act.

*I have to outthink them, 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, though, to access the system with his mentat and use it to pull him 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, bobbing and weaving unpredictably. His strikes connect with only a few, leaving the swarm mostly intact and relentless.

Amiel sees his opening. Like a coiled spring, he launches himself 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 mechanical hum of the drones. The machines batter them, snagging at their clothes, 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, their hands raising 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. The dart pierces the drone instead, sending it 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 of the nanobots disintegrate into powdery smoke upon impact, while others successfully deflect the poisonous projectiles, their collisions erupting 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 lies 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 under his breath, “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 ledge of the rooftop 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 just a little farther. His fingertips graze the ledge, but before he can secure a firm grip, the drone jerks violently.

The grappling hook strikes true, latching onto the drone. The rope tightens abruptly, the weight of the agents straining 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 glass windows of the towering structure 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 landing on 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 as he rolls across the debris-littered floor, the mentat faker cupped in his hand. 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 precariously on the window frame, its once-sleek form mangled and sparking. The tension in the rope snaps with a metallic groan, sending the wreckage plummeting to the chaos 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 flickering before deactivating entirely.

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

Ignoring the frustration, he wraps the strip of fabric tightly around his hand, the dark cotton soaking through almost immediately. The pressure helps, dulling the worst of the sting, but the pain doesn’t fade. He rips another strip from the ruined shirt, his fingers trembling as he fashions a makeshift bandage for 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 make it back without raising the alarm, how would he explain his present condition. His father’s wrath was one thing, but the Mossad agents—he knew they would find him now. He might as well surrender himself when they inevitably found his position.

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

The drone groans under its own weight, its battered frame shifting precariously within the building’s skeletal structure. Tangled cables stretch taut, creaking ominously as they hold it back from its inevitable fall. With an earsplitting snap, the cables give way, and the drone plummets from the shattered window into the chaos below, disappearing into the cacophony of sirens and distant shouts.

Amiel’s chest tightens. He knows the Mossad agents won’t be far behind, but he still has hope he can 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 uneven, 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? It is you, oh dark one, you who 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 that reverberates in his chest. An energy, foreign and oppressive, pulses in the room, as if the space itself 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 a longing both intoxicating and alien, 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, Aleister’s voice cuts through his inner turmoil, smooth and insidious. “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 flash of clarity strikes Amiel—Deborah. 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 decision that feels both monumental and irreversible. The atmosphere hums with electric energy, the air heavy with expectation. 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. He gives in to the pleasure, Deborah also a distant thought as 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 down 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, 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, causing a deep darkness to the descend upon the room.

*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. The stern visage of his grandfather stares back at him, the dark eyes painted with such realism 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 being 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 within us, whether we like it or not. I’m certain you’re on his radar now—and by extension, so are your acquaintances. You’re practically the loudest voice in the neural network calling for his ouster.”

Saul straightens his posture, combing over the glaring bald spot that seems to reflect 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 device. It was our elders who 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 I won’t be controlled by some machine 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. All the things you’ve been hiding, the things you can’t admit 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 own 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. In his left hand, a pill is held in place by his thumb while the 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 own 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—just 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. “You see, Samuel, I’ve got a contact in the palace. Someone who can get us the latest version of mentats—ones that let the user *shape weapons from their body.*” He pauses, letting the words hang in the air, savoring the gravity of what he’s just said.

Samuel’s motions like he’s going to 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’s a lot of people itching for war. Many in the north—Syria especially—they’re 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 it’s undercut by a faint edge of respect. "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 just 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 more feral. "That’s where we come in. We’ll sell them one of these chips—just one—for an exorbitant amount of money. 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 start to fall, when the nations begin gearing up for war again..." He clenches a fist in the air and then slaps it into his palm, the sound sharp and final. "We’ll start opening arms factories. Everywhere. The world’s gonna burn, and we’ll be the ones selling the matches.”

He reaches out suddenly, grabbing Samuel’s knee and squeezing hard, his grip firm and unyielding. "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 the side of his face. He looks at the pill in Saul’s hand, its unassuming size a stark contrast to 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 before 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, that he’s prepared for any resistance. Again, he looks down at the pill.

Samuel’s stomach churns as a chilling realization dawn 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 to 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 in his hand. He takes the pill and 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 up your tongue,” Samuel knows he’s been had, but he doesn’t care. He doesn’t want to be part of Saul stupid plan anyways. He doesn’t care how rich he’ll get. He doesn’t want to sell his soul. He lifts up his tongue and there 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 a storm of 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 here. 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 of his hand. “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, the click of the connection echoing through the room. He taps the ends of the jumper cables together. A dark blue spark bursts to life, crackling in the dimness and casting fleeting, jagged light across Samuel’s wide-eyed face.

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*—you know, the slow-cooked kind that really 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 spark grows brighter, the cables inching closer as Samuel struggles in vain. The darkness above him flickers with ominous light, his terror reflected in Saul’s calm, calculating eyes.

# Chapter 12: The Dark Priestesses

The Mossad agents, clad in sleek, tactical suits, stand silhouetted in the doorway like spectral hunters. Their glowing red nanobots hum ominously, the 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 larger 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, the kind 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 take a step forward, raising his free hand in a desperate attempt to deescalate, 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 had ever dared to confront him. The reputation of Mossad preceded them, instilling dread in the hearts of those they pursued. His targets might hurl verbal abuse or spit their defiance, but in the end, 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’ eyes, dark and unwavering, meet his. There is no fear in their gaze, only a quiet resolve that cuts deeper 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 blow 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 completely black as if being 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 that is 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 who shouts with a shrill scream, then charges 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 with ruthless precision, 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, his weapon a blur of 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 easily 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 back into Arnon’s body and the priestess slumps to the ground.

At the same 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. Their katana-like blades, though elegant and deadly, 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 with it. 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 they ever were 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 just 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 itself 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, one he will carry like a missionary spreading a dark gospel—the power to save life and to take it.

Now, Amiel knows: he will soon play god creating such mystical wonders in the future.

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’d thought might hold longer, had crumbled far too quickly. Lives snuffed out in an instant.

Still, she cannot afford to dwell on the loss—not now. 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 the need for light. She’s a child of the darkness—here, the light would only betray her.

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

Carefully, she 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 in his hands. 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 down from the hallway above. 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. The middle stairwell is illuminated by eerie red dots, 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 covered in dust, abandoned, but the narrow space beneath the desk offers a perfect hiding spot.

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

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 noise of the door 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 loud exit and its accompanying sound brought 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 he can. 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.

The door creaks as she pushes it open, 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 step into the night.

The girl moves swiftly, her hand never releasing his. She glances around, her eyes scanning every corner, every 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, the letters barely legible.

“This is it,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. She hesitates for a moment, her 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 somewhere 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 the sound of 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 in jagged strips from the damp-stained walls, revealing patches of mold and the 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 find out 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. There’s a weapon in the armory—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, doesn’t want to 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, stronger than any belief he’s ever had in a god. Aleister’s promises become his anchor, his hope, the assurance of a destiny far greater than he had ever dared imagine.

*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 oppressive stillness of the room 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 the remains of a once-grand chandelier lie in a heap of shattered crystal and rusted metal. A series of robots, little more than broken mannequins now, line the path to what used to be the front entrance. Some are missing limbs; others have wires spilling from open panels, their eyes dark and lifeless.

Amiel steps closer to the shattered window beside the doorframe, 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 war 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 voice, sharp and mechanical, interrupts the storm of thoughts and emotions brewing in his mind. At first, it’s like Aleister has found a way to communicate with him outside of 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, but 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 word *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, 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 fragment of memory, 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 crawling under his skin. “People actually pay to have sex with a robot?”

“Not in any place outside of Gehenna,” Aleister responds, a faint note of amusement in his tone. “But here, sexbots are a prized commodity. They’ve been perfected through years of research and experimentation. The AI driving them has gathered countless volumes of knowledge on human desires, anatomy, and psychology. The result?” He pauses for effect. “Sexbots are said to be more pleasurable than human companions.”

Amiel glances at the torso again, its blank, unblinking eyes staring through him. The idea feels both repulsive and strangely intriguing, a testament to the extremes of human creativity and depravity. He shakes his head, trying to focus his thoughts.

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

Aleister chuckles, a dark, metallic sound. “Perhaps it’s the lack of emotional messiness, or the guarantee of satisfaction. Or perhaps,” he adds, his tone darkening, “it’s because in Gehenna, human connections have been reduced to nothing more than transactions.”

“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 with a quiet intensity. 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 her broad nose is partially obscured by the fabric's shade.

“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.”

Without ceremony, she tosses it at him, and he catches it instinctively. He looks at her, a strange mix of awe and curiosity stirring within him. 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. “My parents were banished by your father 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, 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 stronger, 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 own 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 there’s a little bit of bad mixed with the good.”

The girl studies him, her eyes narrowing slightly as if weighing the sincerity of his words. For a moment, 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 actually 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 with it 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, he guides me now from the palace.”

“The Dark Lord will reveal himself to you when the time is 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 shadows of the brothel close in 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: when the time is right, you will rise from these waters. 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 the weight of them 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, play his role perfectly, if you’re 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, his voice, his mannerisms—all of it must become his own. The thought is daunting, but beneath the fear, a spark of determination flickers. 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 contained within his tunic activating the hologram. With a deep breath, he watches the device comes 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 too high, then too low, the cadence off by a fraction. But with each adjustment, he grows more confident, more precise.

“This is Agent Arnon,” he says, his voice now a near-perfect match—cool, 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, with a firm belief your 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 weight of the task settles over him. He turns and measures Arnon’s reflection in a cracked mirror across the room. Through Arnon he hides his unease, his determination, everything. 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 cool 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, cool 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 located behind it. Moments later, a 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 both 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, right?”

“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 she doesn’t pull 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—I mean, 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—easy to forget 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 a 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 the smooth hum of Marvin Gaye. “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 entrance of the brothel 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, body slack, lips parted. His tongue moves absently, 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. “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 storm of dust and debris kicked up by the thrusters. The Mossad agent moves with unhurried precision, 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 steps into the room, the shifting dust settling around him. He stands still for a moment, listening. 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 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 safe 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 takes a step 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, 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. For a moment, it’s as if 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 he 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 in the air. 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 heavy 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, a wave of 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 just 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—just strengthen our bodies to fight it. Some things never change. In the end, the most powerful weapon against illness is still our own God-given immune system. 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 for a moment 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 just 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’m going to check on Martha—I heard she’s got it really 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—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 that now surrounds 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 are a sharp contrast to 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 single word or glance exchanged.

Dipti pauses, taking in the sight. The only sound now is the rhythmic clicking and whirring of these machines, their actions so precise, 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—the palace, once so full of life, now feels like a hollow shell.

She shakes off the unease and moves toward Martha’s room. Her friend and lady-in-waiting has been struck particularly hard by the illness. The healer has done what they can, Martha's condition has stabilized, but the 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 ruler of the world 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 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—bodybuilder, model, 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 yourself 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 on 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. Having to suggest to someone’s subconscious to enter consciousness isn’t easy. She knows the door isn’t locked but just barging in and disrupting someone’s sleep is rude. Not only this it has a negative impact on the ability for them to function during the day, it’s better to gently suggest for them to 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’m going to start working out again in my quarters. I think talking to Martha will give me the motivation I need.”

Again, and Dipti feels the watchful eyes of the robot still fixed on her. Even though she had commanded the bot to continue its duties it still 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 phase the bot, “What do you want? This better be good.”

It’s face lights up, its synthetic skin growing brighter than usual, “Madam, if you don’t mind me asking, can we have a selfie together. 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 100 years. After the great war, almost all the bots were destroyed due to the earthquake that followed.

“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 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 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, with a loud mechanical shout, proclaims, “Allhail Prince Levi and Queen Dipti!”

Dipti’s smile falters. Something about the way it says it—too rigid, too 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 just 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. “I’m not sure what’s gotten into him.”

Dipti catches the note of unfinished thoughts in Martha’s voice but chooses not to press. Instead, she nods, a silent acknowledgment of what isn’t said.

“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 an artificial warmth.

Dipti’s gaze softens. “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, cradling the infant like a priceless artifact. As it hands the baby to Dipti, its hesitation is almost tangible—fingers lingering, servos tensing, 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, actually. 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 warmth of the room 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 at all.”

Dipti looks up sharply.

Martha swallows. “What if she grows up in a world without all the comforts we’ve known for the past 400 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. A flush of 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 in its depths. “It was the Lord’s will all these years to not allow me my own children.” 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, just for a moment.

“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 to 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 small 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—one 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 mostly 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 simply 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 down 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 that I will lead the most powerful army on the face of the earth.”

He exhales a slow curl of smoke. His voice lowers, but the weight of it 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 tightening in a grimace as Gavriel’s final *amen* fades into the air. 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 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 like a weight she should be carrying, as if she owes him belief, trust, 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, and 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 dim, chaotic main lobby of the brothel, 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—oil, perhaps, 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 just 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 in a placating gesture.

"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 more than sufficient to handle you," Samson retorts coolly.

Zoneved’s smirk deepens. "Doesn’t the Bible warn against putting too much faith in your own strength rather than in your god?" she taunts, her voice laced with venom.

Samson’s jaw tightens. 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’s about to take place.

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 speakers overhead crackle to life.

A distorted, hollow voice drifts down from unseen speakers—punk 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 I can 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. They are grotesque, clad in dark, fetishistic armor, their bodies adorned with crude tattoos. Some still wear remnants of their former purpose—lingerie, torn fishnets, garters wrapped around exposed servos. They are twisted, an unholy fusion of allure and menace.

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, amidst the 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 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, cool and mechanical.

"I found the device tracking the mentat faker. It's been temporarily disabled until you return and I gain access to the faker to permanently deactivate it."

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 corners of the room 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.

In the center of the room, a squat wooden desk stands like a silent judge, a chair without a cushion tucked beneath its embrace. Dipti strides forward, pulls the chair out, and positions it directly in front of the captive.

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 etched into 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, his calm demeanor suggesting 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 in a desperate attempt 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 the subtle rise and fall of her chest, 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 girl’s friend. 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 if we believe you still pose a serious threat, I will have to. You see, you attacked one of our soldiers. That’s not something we can just ignore." She leans forward slightly, watching for any reaction. "As long as you cooperate, we’re going to 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, his voice 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, yanks down the priestess’s hood.

The fabric falls away, revealing a tangled mess of dark, matted hair. Strands cling to her damp forehead, her face 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 seem to swallow the light around them.

Something about them isn’t human.

Dipti suddenly remembers the old horror movies before the restoration—the grainy films where demon-possessed girls sat on the edge of their beds, staring, smiling, whispering things only they could hear.

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.

Like she knows exactly 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 she 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.

Her voice, when she speaks again, is sharper, harder, 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, jerky, like a marionette on tangled strings. Her head tilts back abruptly, dragging the hood with it, revealing a pale, gaunt face streaked with dirt and sweat. The movements aren’t subtle—they are fast, disjointed, 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 again, 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, through the 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 just don’t know it yet. We cannot escape him; we cannot escape death.”

….

# Burning Blades

Gavriel steps into the training hall, the sharp echo of his polished black boots cutting through the silence. He adjusts the high collar of his white linen uniform, strokes his beard, while his eyes search for his trainees that are flanked by sparring robots that stand as lifelike mannequins armed to the teeth.

Amiel and his older half-brother Uriel, stand at attention, they glance out of the corner of their eyes scanning for Gavriel. The sharp echo of his footsteps draws closer, and they straighten even more, bracing for his arrival.

Sunlight streams through the glass wall behind them, casting a bright glare as it reflects off the young trainee's battle armor. The armor resembles Gavriel’s dress uniform but features lightweight segmented plates perfect for protecting against bio weapon blows.

Gavriel stops and squares off in front of Amiel, his gaze meeting the trainee’s eyes which are locked face forward at attention.

“Activate your nanobot armor, Amiel,” he orders. Gavriel watches as the shimmering swarm of particles envelops Amiel, shifting and tightening with each breath.

Gavriel observes Amiel’s face lighting up with a wild delight. He is impressed by Amiel's unwavering focus. His intensity during these sessions is remarkable—almost unsettling. To Gavriel, it is a display of mastery; to Amiel, it is far more—a vital step toward his secret ambitions. The passion surges through him, and the nanobots echo his drive, orbiting like a swarm of agitated killer bees, sharp and purposeful, waiting for their moment to strike.

In a flash, molecules burst from Gavriel’s body, scattering like a dust cloud swept off the Sahara. Under his mentat’s watchful guidance, the particles bond instantaneously to form a staff in his hand. Gavriel shifts his stance, the movement fluid and precise, before swinging low, the staff slicing through the air as he aims for Amiel’s legs.

Amiel reacts instantly, his body a blur of motion as he leaps over the staff’s sweeping arc. He lands lightly, his fingers splayed outward for balance, as though walking a tightrope.

His sharp eyes lock onto Gavriel.

Gavriel doesn’t pause. He pivots smoothly, running backward with practiced agility, his feet barely touching the ground. In a single, fluid motion, he twists mid-air, the spin lending force to his dart shocker contained under his embroidered cuffs as it launches a volley of darts. The projectiles whistle faintly through the air.

But the trainee’s nanobots, ever vigilant, absorb their momentum turning into powdery dust before they ever reach their target.

“Very good, Amiel. You can deactivate your nanobots now.”

The nanobots come to rest, their microscopic forms settling along his skin.

Gavriel pauses. “You probably think that you’re indestructible when nanobots are activated. You’re wrong. Take cover, conserve your nanobots.”

Gavriel double taps his mentat with his two index fingers. One of the robots comes to life and sprints towards the exit. A few minutes pass and it enters the training hall carrying something heavy and big. It stops before Gavriel and lays the gun at Gavriel’s feet. Gavriel hefts the weighty, well-oiled machine gun, its sleek metallic surface gleaming under the light. The machine gun has a hefty magazine, packed with bullets, locked securely in place, feeding ammunition smoothly into the gun's loader. Gavriel then points at the robot then motions for it to stand at the far end of the training hall where it has become cavernous surrounded by three stone walls to absorb projectiles. It dashes off in a sprint, its mechanical feet briskly tapping on the wooden floor until it reaches its destination. It stands beside ruined robots and their pieces and parts after being demolished by weapons and other forms of munitions.

“Bot 36 activate your nanobots!” He commands.

A swarm of nano bots now surround its synthetic body.

“Now watch this boys! I’ll show you a thing of beauty!” His finger flips the safety off and pulls down the trigger releasing torrent of destruction.

Thunderous drumming of the machine gun fills the hall, each bullet blazing through the air in a relentless assault. Bot 36 stands at the far end, its synthetic frame surrounded by the shimmering shield of nanobots. The swarm works frantically, small particles zipping here and there like bees in the midst of a hornet invasion. They deflect some of the oncoming bullets with dazzling flashes that clatter harmlessly against hard stone or turn into faint wisps of vaporized particles.

Gavriel’s finger stays steady on the trigger as the rounds pour out in rapid succession. The recoil of the gun vibrates his shoulder, his body tightening to control the spread of his shots. He shouts in delight as each bullet strikes the swirling swarm of nanobots.

Then it happens.

The magazine runs dry, its barrel glowing red. The machine gun jolts violently with its final shot, ejecting the last shell with a sharp *cling*. The last bullet slices through the air like a predator seeking its mark. The nanobots, now depleted in number, falter at the worst possible moment. They move to block the last incoming bullet but barely miss it, and the bullet pierces through, slamming directly into the robot’s chest. A sharp metallic crack reverberates through the room as the impact sends sparks flying. The robot falls on its back, a smoking hole now mars its frame exposing loose wires that spark a fire engulfing the entire bot in flames.

Gavriel smirks as the other robots activate, their extinguishers dousing the flames with mechanical efficiency.

Gavriel lowers the gun, its smoking barrel still radiating heat as the echoes of gunfire fade from the cavernous end of the hall. He turns to the boys, “And that’s all it takes. One bullet, when your defenses are down. You’ll be like that robot, a massive gaping hole in your chest, your entrails flowing out.”

He turns back to the boys, handing the machine gun over to a waiting robot, who takes it and whisks it away to the armory outside the hall. “Always plan for when the swarm fails—because it will. Any questions?”

The boys are silent in awe of the demonstration. He motions his hands for them to come forward.

“Now, both of you will square off against each other. What’s our main rule for sparring?”

Their voices crack as they shout in unison, “Love one another!” Gavriel’s lips twitch in a faint smile, but his tone remains stern. “And what does love do?” Gavriel continues.

“Love builds up and doesn’t harm.”

“Exactly. Love builds up and looks out for our brothers, to strengthen them, not tear them down. That’s why we’ve been free of injury all these years. Let’s keep it that way today,” satisfied, Gavriel steps away to allow them to spar. Some other pressing matter distracts his mind and he leaves them alone.

*They face each other. Their weapons materialize in their hands.*

Uriel and Amiel take their stances, every move deliberate. Amiel double-taps his mentat, leaving Uriel briefly perplexed but steady.

Amiel plants his feet in a wide, grounded stance, lowering his center of gravity. His sword angles downward in front, gripped firmly with both hands. He stands like an anchor—unmovable, resolute, as if prepared to withstand any strike. His gaze is fierce, almost feral, focused on Uriel with a burning intensity that feels strangely unfamiliar, almost unnatural. Uriel shifts uncomfortably, the glint in Amiel’s eyes making his skin prickle. They have sparred countless times since childhood, but he has never seen this look in his brother’s eyes before. It is a look filled with a fire that seems almost… ungodly. It is as if for a moment, the light in Amiel’s eyes has turned black.

For the first time in his life, Uriel feels threatened—a primal instinct buried within humanity for centuries. He hesitates, instincts screaming at him to be cautious. But he dismisses the feeling, pushing the thoughts of caution out of his mind. Maybe it is only nerves, a fleeting fancy. After all, he has never known suffering or truly understood the threat danger carries. Confident again, he steps forward, sliding into his stance.

Uriel adopts a light, agile stance, positioning one foot forward and the other angled back for balance. His sword hovers at chest level, gripped firmly in one hand, while his other hand floats near the blade, fingers splayed as if channelling an unseen force. Built for agility, his stance lets him weave and dodge, waiting for the perfect moment to spot and exploit any weakness. Though he can unleash a powerful soul-infused strike, he holds back—this is training with his brother, not a ruthless fight. Still, he has proven himself against hundreds of training bots in a single month, but sparring with Amiel is different.

Uriel begins a slow, measured dance around Amiel, who stands like a stone pillar, firm and unreadable. Separated by two years, both boys are strong and agile, their muscles twitch and flex each strand of muscle visible, the effects of the fruit from the river. There is no sign malnourishment. They are perfect specimens of boys who live in a perfect world. Uriel is taller and more skilled than Amiel because he is older, but Amiel is undaunted despite his disadvantage, his muscles flex with a quiet readiness, holding tension that shows he is prepared for anything.

With a steady breath, Uriel advances, raising his blade in a quick, sweeping arc aimed for Amiel’s shoulder—a controlled strike, yet one with enough force to stagger if it connects. This is the moment Amiel has been waiting for, training in secret. In a flash, Amiel’s stance shifts. His back foot surges forward, his body twisting as his sword comes down from above, intercepting Uriel’s strike with a force that sends a shock up both their arms. The clang of steel rings through the air, vibrating between them, and for a split second, Uriel can feel the raw power in Amiel’s movement. This isn’t the brother he has sparred with countless times before.

Uriel staggers back, momentarily thrown off balance by the unexpected force of Amiel’s counter. But before he can fully recover, Amiel surges forward, abandoning the defensive stance he usually relies upon. This is a new Amiel, aggressive and relentless. Uriel’s heart races as the familiar sparring pattern crumbles, replaced by this newfound ferocity in his brother.

As Amiel presses forward, that unsettling sense of danger screams in his mind. He can no longer ignore it. The dark gleam in Amiel’s eyes returns. Each swing of Amiel's blade is calculated but ruthless, leaving Uriel barely enough time to deflect or dodge. Uriel is in a panic, something he has never experienced before.

“That’s enough for today, Amiel. I’m done.”

Gavriel is gone as planned, it only emboldens Amiel’s assault. He appears possessed by something dark and unknown, pushed by an unstoppable force. Uriel successfully parries Amiel and kicks him away. He finally gets a breather to stabilize himself and come to terms with what is happening. His breather doesn’t last long.

A dart shocker is hidden underneath the cuff of Amiel’s armor. The device senses the momentum in Amiel’s hand as he flings his left hand forth. A dart shoots, exiting one of the round slots of the dart shocker, whistling through the air. Uriel is caught off guard once again.

The dart pierces his skin. The sting shocks him, his mind racing. His nanobots lie dormant on his skin.

“Where did you get that?” Uriel cries in shock.

“I’ve been busy while you were lazy,” Amiel responds smugly.

Where is his mind? Uriel curses himself for ignoring the warning, the flicker of danger that brushed his thoughts moments before. His chest tightens as panic sets in. Is the dart poisoned? Panic floods his mind as he yanks the dart out and hurls it away, blood trickling from the wound.

The sight of his own blood horrifies him. It’s the first time he has ever seen human blood. Animal sacrifices have never prepared him for this. A wave of nausea rises. He feels faint, but there’s no time to dwell.

Another dart hurtles toward Uriel, but his nanobots react instinctively, intercepting it mid-air. Amiel wastes no time, summoning twin daggers into his hands as he charges forward. Mid-sprint, he hurls the bio-dagger in his left hand with deadly precision. Uriel counters with his sword, deflecting it, but the move costs him—he's momentarily distracted.

Seizing the opportunity, Amiel launches his second dagger. Uriel narrowly evades the projectile, but the effort leaves him off-balance. Capitalizing on the opening, Amiel materializes his sword mid-strike. The blade arcs down in a vicious slash, catching Uriel’s right arm as he tries to block. A deep gash opens, and blood spurts out, the metallic tang of it sharp in the air, sickening Uriel.

As his wounded arm falters, Uriel’s sword dissolves, retreating into his body. But almost instantly, it reforms in his left hand, just in time to parry Amiel's follow-up stab. Strike after strike follows from Amiel. Uriel is now fighting with his left hand. He struggles to keep up with Amiel strikes. Pain and exhaustion begin to take their toll. He’s losing blood. He’s always fought offensively, commanding the flow of combat. Now, forced onto the defensive, he’s completely out of his element.

The world around him starts to blur. His reactions slow, his vision spins. The truth hits him like a hammer—the dart is poisoned. That’s how Amiel managed to slice his arm.

Uriel stumbles, his head spinning, his strength fading fast. His legs give way, and he collapses to his knees, helpless as Amiel looms over him. His entire body is burning as a result of the poison. He can no longer fight.

“Amiel have mercy. I’m your brother,” Uriel pleads. His words fall on deaf ears.

Amiel begins channelling his soul within the blade for one last strike. His sword glows with an indescribable aura as his soul burns within the sword creating enough heat to melt the strongest metal.

Amiel’s nostrils flare, his chest rising and falling as he prepares to take the biggest step of his life.

"It’s incredible, isn’t it? Holding this kind of power—deciding whether someone lives or dies. There’s nothing like it," he says, his voice thick with excitement, his breath quick and uneven.

Amiel holds his sword close to Uriel’s face, he winces as feels the heat come from the sword burning his skin, “Every man is star; I’m a supernova,” he declares, his voice steady, repeating words he has rehearsed countless times in his mind, “A supernova grows and absorbs dying stars and gets stronger, this is your sacrifice, Uriel.”

Amiel raises his glowing blade, a cold detachment fills his eyes. Uriel strength fades, yet he clings to the only source of hope he has left. He whispers with all that remains within him, "Lord Yeshua, my life is in your hands."

Amiel’s blade slashes forward, Uriel’s vision is hazy, yet the flash of light cuts through the darkness like a beacon. The clang of Amiel’s broken blade echoes, and he struggles to comprehend what has happened. The detached half falls to the ground with a thud. His unknown defender then trips Amiel, sword pointed at Amiel’s chest, halting his advance. Slowly, Uriel’s vision sharpens. A cloaking cape drifts to the ground, its ultra-light weight material as light as a feather, capable of fracturing light waves to the hide the figure in its grasp. Uriel can now make out his deliver’s bearded face.

“Gavriel…” he breathes, relief mingling with shock, as he slips in and out of consciousness.

As Uriel is carried away, Gavriel glances down at him, a look of quiet intensity in his eyes. “Sorry I couldn’t intervene sooner. Your father knew what Amiel was planning today and ordered me to cloak myself, hidden until the last moment if necessary. He wanted to test Amiel.” Gavriel then turns back to Amiel, disappointment evident in his gaze. “He failed.”

Amiel’s breathing remains excited, his grip tight around the broken shaft of his sword. When Gavriel looks down and meets his eyes, Amiel looks away, unable to face the displeasure of his longtime mentor and trainer.

“We’ve been following you, watching you closely,” Gavriel says, his voice firm but saddened. “Your father is worried about you, Amiel. He knows everything, the mentat faker, breaking into the armory. He threw the bait and you took it hook line and sinker. I thought he was mad to do it, but now… now I understand.” Gavriel shakes his head. “What has gotten into you? This breaks the law of love, Amiel. Killing your brother doesn’t make you great. A true warrior knows when to take life — and when to spare it. You ambushed Uriel, ignored his plea for mercy. The Evil One… he’s been whispering to you, hasn’t he?”

A flicker of something, doubt, guilt, perhaps anger, flashes in Amiel’s eyes, only to be smothered by pride. He struggles to get up, refusing to meet Gavriel’s gaze fully, his silence a mixture of shame and defiance.

Gavriel shakes his head, his gaze flicking briefly to the royal guards who have come, then back to Amiel, “There’s still time to turn back, Amiel. What has the Evil One been whispering to you? Does he promise you the world? Invincibility? A place among the greatest warriors who ever lived? Tempting, isn’t it?” Gavriel pauses, his voice dropping, almost as if speaking to himself. “They are lies—empty, hollow promises. He may seem to offer you the world, but he’s taking something far more precious—your soul. Once you walk his path, you may find there’s no way back.” Gavriel’s eyes become sad as if he’s no longer angry with Amiel, but then he snaps out of it and his eyes become intense, searing, as if he’s trying hard to be angry.

Amiel’s silence stretches, his mind struggling to process Gavriel’s words. He doesn’t know what to say. The diversion didn’t work. He feels like a fool. Finally, he mumbles something, barely audible.

“Speak up, Amiel!” Gavriel’s deep, commanding voice pierces the haze clouding Amiel’s mind, jolting him from his inner turmoil.

Amiel’s voice cracks as he replies, “It is me. It is my desire. I wanted to know suffering… to see if I could bear it, and to watch it inflicted on someone else. To have power over them. To feel my superiority in battle, to strike fear into the heart of someone who always defeated me in sparring. That… that is why.”

Gavriel’s face softens, though sorrow fills his eyes.

“Amiel, power isn’t in causing suffering but in choosing when to show mercy. You think causing suffering in others is strength? True strength lies in overcoming the desire to inflict it, not in giving in. In the old world, there were those who were sadistic—who took pleasure in causing others pain. They were horrible, wicked people. You don’t want to become like them.”

Two members of the royal guard now stand behind Amiel. Gavriel’s voice hardens slightly, though his sorrow lingers.

“Take him to a cell until I know what to do with him. Further orders will follow. Amiel, you’ll have ample time to think about your actions in your cell.”

One guard steps forward, producing a pair of handcuffs. He takes hold of Amiel’s left wrist, locking it in place, then secures the other. Amiel begins to struggle, his face twisting with rage and indignation.

“Once he knows, he’ll make sure you pay! My father’s ruler of the world! He won’t allow this!” Amiel shouts. “When he finds out, he’ll punish you all. He knows I want to be a great warrior; he’ll understand!”

Gavriel sighs deeply, pressing a hand to his temple. With his other hand, he waves dismissively.

“Take him away. I can’t listen to this anymore.”

Amiel continues to kick and struggle as the royal guards lead him away, his defiance echoing down the corridor. Gavriel watches him disappear, the familiar weight of regret settling over him. So much of his life has been spent striving to prevent moments like this. He sees what happens when power and pride overtake wisdom and mercy—when warriors forget the very principles that bind them in brotherhood and honor.

He had once believed Amiel was different—that his heart could be guided, his ambition tempered. But the young warrior has come dangerously close to the edge, and Gavriel can no longer ignore the signs. His father had been right to be suspicious. Nothing escapes that man’s perception—it’s as if he can see through your skin and into your soul. The thought sends a ripple of anxiety through Gavriel. Almost unconsciously, he checks his pockets for the pill.

Gavriel’s sword dissipates, returning slowly to his body. Memories of the Great War flood his mind—the lives he had taken, the faces that haunted his dreams. A deep, unspoken longing fills him: the hope that history will not spiral back into that ruthless cycle of war and vengeance. Moments ago, as he had swung his blade and disarmed Prince Amiel, a dark fear had crept into his heart. What if, one day, he was forced again to take human life?

He glances down at the broken fragment of Amiel’s sword. He kneels, picks it up, and turns it over in his hand. The shattered blade seems to symbolize something much greater than mere steel. It represents the ongoing struggle that transcends this world—a battle not fought with flesh and metal but with spirit and resolve, against the powers and principalities of darkness. Against these powers, weapons are useless.

Prince Levi had warned him that, though peace had come for now, the shadows would one day rise again. And when that day came, Gavriel doubts if he’ll stand as one of the last guardians of truth and justice.

# Justice

Prince Levi strides through the sunlit corridors of the palace, his thoughts consumed by the ever-complicated Sejal. His path winds through the harem, a sanctuary of color and laughter. Women recline on plush cushions; their conversations interwoven with the soft, haunting melodies of a robotic harpist.

A sleek robotic attendant glides toward him, balancing a tray of delicate hors d’oeuvres. Its mechanical voice humming, “Can I assist you, my lord?”

“I’m looking for Priscilla. It’s urgent.”

“I’ve notified her mentat to summon her,” the robot replies, inclining its head with programmed courtesy.

Levi nodded absently, his gaze sweeping over the room. The women’s beauty and elegance seemed to reflect the diverse nations they hailed from. The Indian women, in particular, drew his attention—graceful and poised, their attire and presence a testament to centuries of diplomacy and admiration. But his eyes linger on the emptiness left by the absence of Chinese women, their nation lost in the ashes of the great war.

Before long, Priscilla appears, her commanding presence parting the crowd like a ship through water. Her long strides devour the distance, the tight bun of her crimson red hair bouncing slightly with each step. She is a vision of strength and elegance, the slit of her bright red dress revealing muscular legs that move with purpose, the fabric clinging to her powerful curves.

Priscilla was the daughter of one of the most influential families in Jerusalem, a lineage steeped in power and prestige. It was a great honor for her family when she became the wife of the most powerful man in the world. Rising through the ranks of the prince’s wives, she had earned her place as one of his most trusted confidants.

“Prince Levi,” she greets, her voice steady, her smile warm yet respectful.

Levi looked up—despite his impressive six-foot height, Priscilla still towered over him by at least six inches.

“Priscilla,” he begins, his tone firm. “You’re exactly the person I need right now.”

Priscilla raises a curious eyebrow, her tone measured. “What can I do for you, my prince?”

Levi leans in slightly, his voice dropping low enough to avoid attracting attention. “I need your help with something... delicate. It’s about Sejal.”

Her expression sharpens; her intrigue barely veiled. “Sejal? What about her?”

“She’s been different lately,” Levi admitted, his brow furrowed. “I suspect she’s hiding something, and I need you to find out what it is—discreetly.”

Priscilla folds her hands thoughtfully, her sharp eyes already calculating. “The women of the harem are observant, my prince. If there’s something amiss, we’ll uncover it.”

Levi nods, but his urgency to confront Amiel pulls at him. Noticing Priscilla’s expectant demeanor, he adds diplomatically, “I have pressing matters to deal with concerning Amiel, but you’re welcome to walk with me.”

For a moment, disappointment flickers across her face—evidently, she had hoped for a more private moment. But she quickly composes herself, offering a gracious smile. “Of course, my prince. Let’s walk.”

Outside the entrance of the harem Priscilla is able to speak freely now as they walk.

“Amiel, Sajel’s son?”

I tell her about my dream, “And now there’s some emergency regarding him. I hardly slept and now this. I don’t think my day can get any worse.”

A loud spine curdling scream in the direction of the garden sends a shiver up Prince Levi’s spine.

“Deborah!”

Prince Levi and Priscilla break into a sprint, his heart pounding as Deborah's scream echoes through the palace gardens. Priscilla follows close behind, her long strides easily keeping pace. As they near the towering Tabor Oak, the scene before them brings Levi to an abrupt halt.

The lamb lay still on the ground, its pristine white coat marred by deep crimson. Standing over it, Igor, the once-gentle lion, growling low and guttural, his mane streaked with blood. His golden eyes, once filled with calm, now blaze with primal fury. The air seems to crackle with tension, the serene garden transforms into a place of horror.

Deborah stood frozen, her small hands clasp over her mouth, tears streaming down her cheeks. The child who had so recently embraced the lion as a companion now faces it as a potential prey.

Levi steps forward cautiously, his voice steady but firm. “Deborah, come to me. Now.”

The girl hesitates, her eyes darting between her father and the lion. Igor’s growl deepens, his massive frame tensing as if preparing to strike. A sword instinctively materializes out from his hand.

“Deborah!” he calls again, sharper this time. “Move!”

Priscilla steps to his side; her voice low. “We must act quickly. That lion is no longer the creature she knew.”

Levi’s mind races. He had trained for battles, negotiated with rulers, and faced enemies of every kind—but nothing had prepared him for this moment. *This* *is this what Deborah feared. This is the evil she spoke of.*

Deborah finally breaks free from her paralysis and stumbles toward him. The movement catches Igor’s attention, and with a deafening roar, the lion lunges.

Priscilla grabs Deborah shielding her with her body while Levi acts on instinct. He steps in front of Priscilla, his blade meets Igor’s claws mid-air, the impact reverberating through his arm. The lion recoils, momentarily stunned.

“Get her out of here!” Levi barks to Priscilla, who doesn’t hesitate. She scoops Deborah into her arms and begins to retreat, her long strides carrying her toward the palace.

Levi squares off with the lion, his heart heavy.

But now, something had changed. Igor’s corruption could mean only one thing: sin had crept into this sanctuary, a place meant to be free from the evil that still plagued the world. Could this have anything to do with the urgent call about Amiel?

Igor had reverted to the primal instincts of his ancestors, a fierce predator driven by the law of survival. Now, that same majestic presence that was once the sigil of the tribe of Judah was now a threat. Levi holds his ground as Igor circles him. The beast’s golden mane bristles with tension, and his amber eyes glow with primal rage. The muscles underneath his fur twitch with aggravation, his back legs ready to thrust himself forward with one killing swipe ending Prince Levi’s life.

Levi’s hand twitches as he holds his blade, its shimmering surface flickering with the faint warmth of his soul’s energy. He didn’t want to use it—not against Igor. But the lion’s guttural growl and tense muscles leave no doubt: this will end in blood.

“Igor,” Levi says softly, his voice wavering. “Come on boy, remember who you are. Remember what you’ve meant to this place—to me.”

For a moment, Igor hesitates hearing the gentleness in Prince Levi’s voice. The fire in his eyes flicker, and Levi thinks he saw a glimmer of recognition. But the corruption within the lion roars back to life, drowning any trace of the creature he once knew.

With a deafening roar, Igor lunges. Levi sidesteps, his blade flashing to deflect a swipe of razor-sharp claws. Sparks fly as the weapon met the hardened strength of the lion’s corrupted form. Each clash sent a shudder through Levi—not just from the force, but from the heartbreak of fighting a creature he had loved for centuries.

The garden, once a sanctuary, became a battlefield. Igor attacks with the ferocity of the wild, his movements swift and brutal. Levi counters with precision, his strikes calculated to avoid killing blows. He aimed to subdue, to bring Igor back if even a spark of the old lion remained. Cuts appeared on Igor’s body as Levi dodges and weaves leaving behind slashes in his wake.

A swipe catches Levi off guard, claws raking his shoulder and drawing blood. He staggers, his breath hitching from the sharp pain. But there was no time to falter. Gritting his teeth, he raises his blade, pouring every ounce of his energy into it. The weapon glowed red-hot, the heat radiating from his very soul, fueled by his resolve.

“Forgive me, Igor,” Levi whispers, his voice heavy with sorrow.

Igor charges, a blur of feral strength, his claws poised for a fatal strike. Levi swings his blade with precision born of desperation. The strike connects, cleaving through the corruption that had bound Igor’s heart.

The lion roared in agony, his mighty frame collapsing to the ground. The fury fades from Igor’s eyes, replaced by a soft golden hue—gentle, familiar. For a fleeting moment, Levi sees the old Igor: the companion, the guardian, the friend.

Igor lets out a soft rumble, almost a purr, before his eyes close for the final time. Levi drops to his knees, tears streaming down his face. The garden falls silent, save for the gentle rustle of leaves in the breeze.

“Sin has reached even here,” Levi murmurs, his voice breaking. “And I was blind to it.”

The blade in his hand dissolves, retreating back into his body, its heat now a fading memory. Levi knew this wasn’t just about Igor. This fight was a warning—a harbinger of what was to come.

Blood seeps from the deep gash in his shoulder, soaking his tunic. Weakness spreads through his limbs like poison. He tries to stand, but his strength fails him. Was this the end? Could this be the moment his life was meant to close, despite all the promises?

His thoughts drift to the prophecy spoken so long ago, back in that dim mental institution after a demon nearly tore his arm from his socket:

*"She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne."*

Levi clings to this prophecy, believing it with every fiber of his being. For centuries, Christians had called it the Rapture—the snatching away of believers before the coming of Yeshua. He wasn’t alone in this hope; the first part of the prophecy had already come to pass. But now he awaits the second.

Kneeling there, blood pooling beneath him, Levi prays silently. He wasn’t ready to give up—not yet. The prophecy wasn’t finished, and he clung to his faith that the Lord’s word was true. But how much longer could he hold on?

The world began to swirl around him, the edges of his vision darkening. Weakness overtook him, and he felt himself slipping, teetering on the edge of unconsciousness. Just as the darkness threatened to claim him, she appeared—like an angel sent to deliver him.

Priscilla.

Her strong, yet unmistakably feminine arms wrapped around him, lifting him with surprising ease. The warmth of her presence radiated strength, steadying his faltering spirit. Around them, others rushed in, working swiftly to tend to his wounds.

Tears streamed down her face as she cradled him close. “You’re not leaving us yet, my love,” Priscilla said firmly, her voice trembling with a mix of determination and panic.

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

In a delirium caused by loss of blood, he entered a dream like state that reminds him of their wedding night, when she had jokingly swept him off his feet and carried him across the threshold of the most opulent chamber in the royal harem.

The chamber of the royal harem was filled with craftsmanship and sacred artistry. Golden sunlight poured through tall, intricately carved windows, illuminating marble floors inlaid with gems that shimmered like stars. The walls were adorned with vivid murals depicting scenes from the Torah—Moses parting the Red Sea, David standing triumphant over Goliath, and the fiery chariot of Elijah ascending to the heavens. A grand bed draped in silks and adorned with rich embroidery stood at the center, its posts carved with motifs of olive branches and cherubim. A fountain at the far end, surrounded by rose petals, mirrored the serene flow of the Jordan River, while the faint scent of frankincense and myrrh lingered in the air, creating an atmosphere of sacred splendor.

He could still see the shy hesitation in her eyes as she began to undress, her back turned to him, self-conscious about her physique. She worried that her strength, her broad shoulders, and her powerful frame might overshadow her femininity. But to Levi, she was a vision—a woman whose beauty rivaled that of a Valkyrie, embodying both fierce grace and unyielding power. In her, he saw not just a warrior, but a partner whose strength complemented his own in every way.

Levi approached her from behind and kissed her shoulder and quoted one of his favourite verses to her:

“I praise him because you are fearfully and wonderfully made, his works are wonderful, I know that full well. You have nothing to be ashamed of, now come to bed.” She turned around and leaned down to kiss him.”

Levi swept her up into his arms, a feat that at any other time might have left him nursing a herniated disc. Priscilla let out a shout of ecstatic laughter, while he, in stark contrast, grunted and wobbled, his legs trembling under the effort. Staggering toward the bed, he nearly dropped her more than once, each misstep drawing a delighted giggle from her and a strained groan from him. By the time they reached the bed, he was teetering like a laborer about to collapse under the weight of a quarry stone. Yet, with a final surge of determination, he steadied himself and gently laid her onto the bed, his tenderness eclipsing the comedic struggle that had brought them there.

Soon after, he returns to her arms, his consciousness flickering like a flame fighting the wind. His spirit, undeterred by the weakness of his flesh, summons its last reserves of strength deciding to carry her once more, this time with his words. “Take heart, my sweet Priscilla,” he murmurs, his voice soft yet firm. “This is not the end.” His heavy eyelids finally close as nano-bots and blood transfusion bags work tirelessly to preserve the life slipping from him.

….

I’ve often heard it said: *If God allowed even one unrepentant sinner into heaven, heaven would turn into hell.* As I slowly open my eyes, the truth of that statement has never been clearer.

Deborah clings to Yaffa’s dress, trembling as if to shut out the world. Gavriel paces in agitation, his shoulders sagging under a weight I can’t yet grasp. Priscilla sits beside Dipti, her bloodshot eyes a testament to relentless weeping. Yet Dipti remains composed—a steady center amidst the storm, her hand resting on Priscilla’s in quiet reassurance.

The room comes into focus. The soft glow of nanotech walls adjusts as I stir, tracking my vitals. The medical pod beside me hums with holographic updates on Uriel’s condition. Even the robots, silent and precise, seem to mirror the tension in the room.

Igor’s gentle face flashes before me, frozen in the moment of his final breath. My chest tightens, and I force the image away, but the weight lingers, pressing down on my heart. A tear escapes my eye. I can’t bring myself to tell Deborah about Igor—or maybe she already knows. Either way, the world I know is spiraling into chaos, hellbound on a freight train.

Dipti’s gaze meets mine, searching. There’s an unspoken understanding between us. I look away and turn to my left, where Uriel lies pale and motionless.

A blood transfusion tube runs from his arm. His eyes snap open, wide with shock, and his bandaged right arm twitches. I don’t need to ask what happened—I already know.

“Amiel,” I mumble under my breath.

Gavriel sees that I’m awake. He stands to my left, his footsteps hesitant. Our eyes meet, and he doesn’t have to say anything. Dipti moves to my side and grabs my hand.

“Your sons and daughters are waiting outside,” she says gently, patting my hand.

“I know. I can see them.” I glance toward the door, their anxious faces etched in my mind. “They’re distraught.” I tell them to wait. I don’t want them to see me like this. I glance at my wound, covered in tight bandages. The nanobots have done an incredible job, but I feel my condition would be disheartening for those who rely on me most. If they see me like this, I fear they might panic—or lose hope.

“It’s begun, Dipti,” I say, squeezing her hand. “The rebellion—it’s begun.”

I glance at Uriel, my mentat accessing his thoughts. Images flicker—Amiel as a boy, the two of them training under the sun, laughter echoing through the yard. Those moments once felt unbreakable, yet now they’re ghosts, eclipsed by Amiel’s relentless hunger for power. Uriel’s heart tightens; the cracks were always there, he realizes now. The quiet resentments, the ambition lurking behind Amiel’s smiles—he had been blind to it all. A fairytale, shattered in the face of this betrayal.

I know what I must do. Righteous anger fills my heart. I will punish Amiel to the fullest extent of the law, but first I must gather all the evidence against him and put him on trial for the world to witness. They must see that my judgment is not reserved for outsiders alone but extends to my own blood. Justice does not waver before the bonds of family. No one escapes the consequences of sin—not even those closest to me.

Ever since my dreams began, I knew I needed to test Amiel. My agents, now rebranded as SpecNet Operatives, carried out my will in silence. Former Mossad legends, they infiltrated every mentat connection and channel.

I designed a test for Amiel—a whisper of temptation crafted to reveal his true nature. The operative planted a ping in his network, hinting at an opportunity to buy a mentat faker—a rare and illegal device capable of mimicking mentat signals of any individual of choice. A tool that could rewrite the truth itself and be used to access places and do things as someone else.

The opportunity was irresistible. Amiel moved quickly, unaware that every step of his journey was being tracked. He met the operative in a hidden enclave outside the city—a haven for rebels and others who dream of dismantling my authority. There, under the cover of shadows, he bought the faker.

The price? An impossible sum—one million shekels. Enough to purchase a home along the Dead Sea's shores. Where could he have found such wealth? Certainly not from the modest allowance I grant him. Someone else must be involved.

I suspect he’s using mentat blockers. It’s the only explanation for how he’s managed to evade my mental grasp. Without access to his thoughts, I couldn’t intervene before his attack on Uriel. Perhaps that was his plan all along: to operate beyond my reach, shielded by cunning and chemicals.

Still, I allowed him to proceed. I needed to see the depths of his ambition. The mentat faker was just the first step, but his actions suggest a web of alliances and motives far larger than I anticipated. Perhaps his mother gave him this sum? Could she be part of this conspiracy? No, her thoughts remain open to me. I would have seen it.

Amiel is more dangerous than I imagined—a clever and conniving boy. But I will uncover the truth. I’ll test his blood for traces of mentat blockers. If he’s tampered with his very physiology to outwit me, that will confirm how far he’s willing to go.

Amiel must have used the mentat faker during his sparring sessions with Gavriel, bringing himself close enough to sync with Gavriel’s mentat signals. But this is still conjecture. The faker requires close proximity for five to ten minutes to complete the syncing process—a difficult task during a dynamic sparring match.

Tracking data revealed the faker was in Gavriel’s quarters for over an hour before being discarded in a waste container nearby. What was it doing there? Another mystery. Late at night, Amiel retrieved the device from the container. Using Gavriel’s mentat signals, he then accessed the armory in the dead of night.

How Amiel bypassed the heavy security remains unclear. I suspect he used a cloaking device, slipping past the guards during a moment of distraction or rest. The gate logs confirm it opened without any visible presence—a clear indication of cloaking technology at work.

Once inside the armory, he secured a dart shocker, a vital weapon in our warriors’ arsenal. The shocker allows users to fire deadly projectiles while maintaining agility and proficiency with their bio-weapons. Amiel used it on Uriel, striking him with a poisoned dart. The toxin is highly lethal; had Gavriel not intervened, Uriel would have perished—either from the poison or Amiel’s blade.

I could have stopped the fight the moment Uriel was poisoned, but I didn’t. I needed to know if Amiel truly had the will to kill his brother in the most gruesome way possible.

I glanced at Gavriel. He was stroking his beard—a habit he’d held for as long as I could remember. Despite the years, he still resembled the young man I had fought beside during the Battle of Jerusalem. His thoughts flowed into my mind, unguarded. I saw him, cloaked and hidden, watching Amiel and Uriel fight. He had waited until the last possible moment to intervene. Relief coursed through him, but so did a palpable shock as he looked at me in my current state.

Our eyes meet. “I can’t believe it,” he said, his voice trembling. “Seeing you like this—it’s too much for me.” His gaze darted to the wound on my shoulder, then to Deborah, who stirred at the sound of his voice.

She lifted her tear-streaked face from her mother’s lap, her red, swollen eyes locking onto Gavriel before she rushed to my side. Her small hands clutched at me as she buried her face in my chest, her sobs shaking her fragile frame.

I winced sharply as her weight pressed against the wound from Igor. Though the nanobots had expertly sealed the surface with regenerated skin cells from my body, the internal damage was still raw. Pain flared with each movement, a relentless reminder of how close I had come to death. Her tears soaked through my shirt, warm and persistent, as though trying to cleanse the horrors she had witnessed.

The physical pain was nothing compared to the ache in my soul. Deborah's innocence—the precious light I had fought so hard to protect—was gone. The old world, with all its cruelty and sin, had unveiled itself to her in ways I had tried so desperately to shield her from.

I had always known I couldn’t keep her safe forever. But knowing didn’t make it any easier. I held her trembling body, feeling the weight of my failure press down on me. I had hoped, foolishly, that I could delay this moment, that I could keep her untouched by the scars of this broken world for just a little longer. But now, no matter how tightly I held her, I couldn’t undo what had been done.

Her voice cracked as she choked out, “Why, Daddy? Why did Igor have to go? He won’t wake up. You… you killed him, didn’t you?”

Her words cut deeper than any blade. I opened my mouth to explain, to tell her the truth: *It was either him or me.* But the words stuck in my throat. Would it even matter? Could anything I said soothe the waves of pain coursing through her body and heart?

Instead, I let her see the memories, her own mentat showing her what had happened—how I had tried to stop Igor, how I fought to keep him alive. But we had never fully domesticated him before bringing him here. In the end, he reverted to his old nature, something I had never anticipated, never planned for.

“I tried,” the words breaking as they left me. “I tried so hard, Deborah. I’m so sorry. I didn’t want this to happen.”

Her sobs quieted, but the weight of her grief, and mine, hung heavy in the air. There was no undoing the damage, no way to turn back time. All that remained was the fragile hope that, one day, we might find a way to heal.

In the midst of my sorrow, my mind wandered to the temple. I longed to rise from this bed, to leave these burdens behind, and to sit in His presence. There were so many questions, so many things I needed to share with Him—things I couldn’t make sense of alone. The weight of recent events felt insurmountable, one pressing matter piling upon another, leaving me no time to breathe, let alone find clarity.

My thoughts drift from the temple to the river and its fruit. The image of its glistening waters, flowing from the holy sanctuary into the Dead Sea, brought a flicker of hope. Soon, I would draw strength from its life-giving leaves and fruit. They would restore what the nanobots couldn’t reach, knitting together the unseen wounds in my body and soul. I clung to the promise of renewal, to the belief that I would be whole again.

But a shadow of doubt crept into my thoughts, a gnawing worry I couldn’t shake. What if this *is* the rebellion? What if these strange events are the first signs of the upheaval we’ve long feared? And if it truly is, what will become of the river and its fruit?

A chill ran through me as the possibility took root. If the rebellion overtakes us, will the river dry up? Will the fruit that grants us restoration vanish? Without them, their miraculous effects would cease, and the inevitable decay of the world would reclaim me. I would begin to feel the aches and frailty of my once-ailing body again.

The thought was unbearable. I had come so far, fought so hard, only to face the prospect of losing it all—the strength I had regained, the life I had rebuilt. I closed my eyes, my grip tightening around Deborah as if holding her could anchor me against the storm in my mind. I know the end has to come, but that doesn’t comfort me. I’ve been happy with the life that I’ve lived till now. Memories of my old life return to me. My aching knees, the sleepless nights, the quarrels, the arguments with my enemies, prison, my withering eyes as they poured over the Scriptures searching for answers as to the reasons behind the purpose of my difficult trials, the rejection, my heart sick from hopes deferred and on, on…. The burning anger, the righteous indignation, I just want to jump out of my body.

I closed my eyes and whisper a prayer, my voice breaking under the weight of it: “Let the river flow. Let the fruit remain. Not just for me, but for all of us. Please… let this not be the end.

Uriel’s voice breaks through my ponderings. He’s in my mind.

“Father, I’m filled with something I’ve never experienced before. It’s something that burns within me. I don’t know how to explain it. My jaw clenches every time I think of a Amiel. My stomach burns, my hands clench, my palms become sweaty. I’m filled with us overpowering rage. I want to find Amiel and…and….”

I see an image of Uriel’s burning sword flash through the darkness and Amiel’s head severing from his muscular yet developing body. I see Uriel over his body gloating.

“I want justice. I want to avenge the wrong done to me by Amiel. I will kill him father I swear. The Lord is my witness, I….” I interrupt Amiel, I understand his anger. I’ve been there a thousand times, that dark place where only the hand of the Almighty can pull me out.

“Vengeance is mine, I will repayeth says the lord,” I quote to him. “You give Amiel to me. I will do your vengeance. He will be punished in front of all of Israel.”

I sense tears flowing down his eyes and intense pain in his body caused by the deep cut in his arm and the poison coursing through his body having been blocked by the antidote.

# The Prince of Darkness

Amiel hit the cold, hard floor of the cell with a thud, the echo of his impact fading into the silence. Anger burns in his chest as he attempts to scramble to his feet, hands clenched into fists. How dare they treat him this way? He is a prince, destined for greatness, and yet here he is, locked in a cell like a common criminal.

He struggles to get up. He’s completely exhausted having formed so many weapons in his anger and rage he’s surprised that he’s even alive. He crawls to his cell bars and pulls himself up. He bangs his fists against the heavy iron bars, his voice rising in furious protest.

“I’ll have your heads on a platter, you’ll see.”

One guard speaks with him patiently and respectfully.

“Prince Amiel please note that your personal bible has been placed by your bed. Please take this time to reflect and examine yourself. We hope this experience will end in your repentance.”

Amiel's fists fell silent, his defiant shouts echoing away as he heard the guard's calm words. A bitter scoff escapes his lips, “*Repentance?”* Then he thinks, as if he, of all people, needs to reflect or change. Yet something in the guard’s respectful tone gnaws at him, a quiet discomfort settling beneath his anger.

Turning, he spots the small, leather-bound Bible resting on the edge of the simple bed in his cell. It looks untouched, pristine—the very same one he had been given on the day of his baptism on his eleventh birthday by his father, though it had rarely seen his hands since. Most of his siblings lived like saints falling in line with lordship of the God written within. He had also initially, but the past year or so had begun to resent the God who sat in the temple with his father. Even his father claimed to be God in human flesh. He was so patient it made him sick. “Do this son or do that, don’t do that, love Yeshua he died on the cross for you, for your sins…..he exists, he’s real, look at his glory in the temple, my face when I leave his presence and on and on…..he clenched his hands in a fist and slammed them on his bed. His flesh cried out as if he could take a knife and just jam it in his father’s face.

A thought pulses through Amiel, sharp and intoxicating*. I will be greater than him, than their God.* The words echoed within him, feeding the fire that seemed to consume his very bones. The idea of power—real, unyielding power—was like a balm to every wound, every slight, every ignored cry for independence. They wanted him to bow, to repent, to submit, yet in his heart, all he craved was dominance, freedom from this relentless weight of expectation.

Amiel’s anger flickered, tempered by a spark of hope. He remembers his mother’s words, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder as she’d looked at him with a rare warmth, a belief that he could indeed be the warrior she envisioned. She alone saw him, understood his restless spirit. *One day,* she had said, *you will take your father’s place, but only if you forge yourself into someone worthy.*

The image was there in his mind—himself in the temple, cloaked in the reverence and respect his father commanded. But his path to it would not be through quiet piety or meek submission. It would be through strength, a strength that could only come from relentless dedication, from pushing his body and mind until he was unmatched. The title of warrior was not a gift to be given, but a prize to be earned.

He would appeal to his father once more, try to make him see his true nature, his potential. *Let him see me as I am,* Amiel thought, *not as a hollow image of him.* If he could make his father recognize his vision, perhaps then he could finally step into his own, free from the heavy chains of expectation. He still wanted to please his father, still loved him. It was true that his father had been nothing but good to him.

But a gnawing fear surfaces in his mind. How would his father react to his attack on Uriel? Amiel was certain he would not accept it easily. Nothing like it had ever happened in the royal palace for centuries.

He recalled the court histories he had studied, delving into every decision his father made to understand the workings of his rule. He wanted to be prepared for when his time would come. In Egypt, he remembered, a murder had shaken the court. Upon the testimony of three witnesses his father’s response had been severe—he sentenced the man to death, invoking the Old Testament as his justification: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." That unyielding judgment hung in Amiel's mind, a reminder of the consequences he now faced.

*Would he apply that same law to his own son?* Amiel wonders. Or could his father look beyond the act, seeing not just the offense but the purpose, the vision, beneath it?

The thought twists in his mind. Would his father punish him as he had punished others, perhaps slashing and poisoning him like Uriel, or would he devise some other form of public retribution? Amiel feels as if he were already on trial, though his judgment had yet to be passed.

He remembers how his father often didn’t need witnesses to make a decision; he could cut through lies with unsettling clarity. God sees all things, even what’s done in secret, his father would say, catching the accused of guard. He saw the money you stole, his father would declare, knowing the truth without a single witness. Amiel knew what he must do. He must evoke the Bible as his own defense quoting some passage of Scripture to keep himself from feeling his father’s wrath. He knew the Bible quite well. He and his siblings were brought up on its principles from the time they could read which was very early on.

Amiel makes his way to his bed carefully trying to keep his balance. He stumbles and falls on the firm mattress. Composing himself he sits up, takes a deep breath while picking up the bible then opens it skimming for words he could use. He comes to the ten commandments. He would look his father in the eye and say, "Father, the Bible says, 'Thou shalt not murder.' But I didn’t hurt Uriel without reason. I did what I thought had to be done, to protect us all. A true warrior must kill. Killing and murder are different. My motive was not malice.” It’s true, I hated Uriel, he always was able to defeat me in our sparring sessions. My father would see through the lie. Maybe there was another route.

He closes the Bible and falls back onto his bed. His voice echoes off the stone walls of his cell as he murmurs, *“Let that man do whatever he wishes. No matter what he says, my path is set in stone.”*

”*. Sejal’s chest swelled with pride. I’ve been given the glorious honor of bearing our savior—the one who will break the chains of my husband’s god.*

*But beneath her pride, fear quickened her heart. How did he come to know of this destiny? Was it revealed by the god I pretend to serve? Can he truly see so deeply into our souls? She clenched her hands, determined. I must convince my husband that his dream is just that—a dream. Fictitious, symbolic, full of harmless metaphors. Yes, the lake of fire is merely a metaphor. She steadied herself. I need time to prepare. Amiel will become God and rise above, but the time is not yet. Amiel is unready. He must learn, grow strong, master the art of combat if he’s to defeat the saints.*

*Her mind raced with a single, unbreakable resolve. I must ease my husband’s doubts about our son. If he knows… if he truly understands, Amiel may face a fate from which there is no return.*

Somehow this seemed foreign to Amiel. He had tried talking to the God of his father, but he never got a response, if he never got a response how was he going to be praised. He had prayed fervently to be able to beat Uriel in sparring practice, but his prayers continued to fall on deaf ears as day by day he had to face the humiliating defeat at the hands of his older brother. So, he stopped speaking to the invisible creator that eluded him.

Amiel thinks of his favorite quote from Aleister Crowley, *“Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law, what I will is that this confession of faith and water brings me one more step closer to my goals, confesses Amiel to the god of his desires.”*

The baptism was merely an expectation, a tradition that bound him as tightly as the white ornate robes he wore. Without it, he knew, the people's praise would vanish like smoke on the wind. But deep down, he wondered: what if he refused? What if he became the first son of Prince Levi in four centuries to reject baptism?

The thought is absurd, it lingered in his mind like a wistful fantasy. His imagination went wild with the kind of scandal that would ripple through the kingdom. He could see his father’s sad and disappointed eyes mourning over his refusal. It fills him with glee for once he could disappoint their expectations in him. But the pleasure of disappointing his father paled in contrast to this fleeting adoration, it was worth it despite more the cold, distant ceremony awaiting him.

With a heavy heart, he resolves to meet their expectations. If he was ever to follow in his father’s footsteps and judge the people from the temple, he would have to secure their devotion. This baptism was nothing more than a bothersome formality—a small price to pay for the sake of his greater ambitions. It was as if he could hear Rejecting the baptism would be aiming too low, he would rather aim high, higher than any other prince before him that walked this ancient procession.

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)