# Chapter 1: Weary Nights

His eyes are devilishly black, as cold as the tech through which he peers at me. He’s part man, part machine—cables and motors blend with human flesh, whirring and rotating with each blink, each 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.

Figures engulfed in liquid flame rise and fall within the inferno, reaching out as if pleading for escape, their cries twisting through the flames, desperate yet resigned. The unbearable smell hits me hard; in this new, heightened spiritual body, my sense of smell is far more acute. Sulfur sears the air as it gnaws through their flesh. I want to cover my nose, to turn my gaze away from their agony, but I can’t.

I look down at my own hand. It’s flesh, yet it’s something beyond. 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. He’s still my boy and when I look at him, I don’t see the monstrosity he has become. I see a child look up at me with a twinkle in his eye asking me a question with inquisitiveness. A father’s love for his son holds me back, but a man’s love for his God compels me forward.

The innocent eyes of a child are 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 devilish 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 as if it were my own child I’d cast into the lake of fire, helpless to stop myself from sealing his fate. I pull my ephod over my head, a sleeveless apron like garment tailored from a deep, royal blue fabric, bordered with golden threads that shimmer under any light. I step out of the royal chambers without disturbing the Queen. In the washroom, I splash water on my face and gaze at my reflection. Dark circles, long absent, have started creeping back again, a sign of the restless nights haunting me these past months. 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 distracted, 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.

Ruling the nations has brought me joy, yet I feel the end closing in swiftly. This dream is the greatest threat to my rule I have ever faced. I feel like King Nebuchadnezzar, whose dream foretold his doom. I’ve sought counsel from my closest advisers, but none can reveal its meaning. How can my own flesh and blood be the one prophesied so long ago? If he is the one, it will mean ruin for the entire kingdom.

He was trained with the skills and weapons meant to defeat the man of lawlessness, yet now he might turn those same skills against us. My son, oh my son. I pull out my Bible and turn to the passages I’ve dreaded for so long:

*"Out of one of them came a* ***little horn*** *that grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the Glorious Land. It grew up to the host of heaven and cast down some of the host and some of the stars to the ground, trampling them. He even exalted himself as high as the* ***Prince of the host****; and by him,* ***the daily sacrifices were taken away****, and the place of His sanctuary was cast down. Because of transgression, an army was given over to the horn to oppose the daily sacrifices; and he cast truth down to the ground and prospered. “Then I heard a holy one speak, and another ask, "How long will the vision be, concerning the daily sacrifices and the transgression of desolation, the giving of both the sanctuary and the host to be trampled underfoot?"*

I know now that the little horn is the man from my dreams, and I am the Prince of the host. He will end the daily sacrifices and trample my followers underfoot. Yet he will not leave me. I turn to another passage in Daniel:

“*Know therefore and understand,  
That from the going forth of the command  
To restore and build Jerusalem  
Until* ***Messiah the Prince****,  
There shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks;  
The street shall be built again, and the wall,  
Even in troublesome times.*

*“And after the sixty-two weeks****Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself****;  
And the people of the prince who is to come  
Shall destroy the city and the sanctuary.  
The end of it shall be with a flood,  
And till the end of the war desolations are determined*

*Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week;  
But in the middle of the week****He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering****.  
And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate,  
Even until the consummation, which is determined,  
Is poured out on the desolate.”*

The words “cut off” linger in my mind, but I cannot dwell on it now. I must speak with my son and decide once and for all if this dream pertains to him—or it will be the end of my sanity. I must know if his eyes are set on the temple. This will reveal all that is to come.

I turn to one last passage in the New Testament:

*Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped,* ***so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.***

I let out a long sigh and close my Bible, placing it back in the drawer beneath my bathroom mirror. One thing that hasn’t changed since I began my rule is that my most important Bible reading happens in the bathroom. I chuckle, hoping to ease my heavy heart.

I pass through the royal wash chambers; my reflection catches the lines of concern sharp in the dim 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 days of trouble indeed.

I reach his room, and the lights respond, 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.

“Hello, Father,” he murmurs, voice steady. “Why so late? Have you come to test me?”

I feel the tug of his words—a mixture of curiosity and something sharper. “You’ve passed with flying colors.”

“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.

“Have I been too hard on you, son?” I ask finally, each word uncertain. “Do you… resent me in any way?”

“No, Father. I enjoy our training.” He speaks with conviction, yet his tone holds knowledge beyond his years. “I know we live in a peace unlike any before, and I have never known suffering, as you’ve described it. It must be a terrible thing, to disobey His presence.”

I press gently, wanting reassurance. The dreams haunt me. “Yes, it is a horrible thing to disobey the living God. You see the might and glory that comes from His temple. I stand before it every day. He could destroy me in the blink of an eye, as He did the world 400 years ago. We must fear Him, son, but we must also love Him. He gives us life and breath and everything.”

“You have told us many times father,” he fidgets, and something in that small movement unsettles me. I wonder if I’ve worn him down with my stories of duty and devotion. Perhaps I’ve repeated myself too often, drilling the same words into his young mind, burdening him with a weight he’s not yet meant to carry.

“I have, 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 feint smile. I respond with a hug; his childish man hands reach around me and squeeze. Yes, I tell myself. Its 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 leave, 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, something 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?”

My heart skips a beat, though I hid it well. 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.

In that moment, a surge of conflicting thoughts and feelings rises within me. Amiel is right—I am aging, and it’s true that he may one day assume a role in leading the people. But the temple… it isn’t something to be claimed or earned, it is pure grace and we receive it. 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.

“Perhaps… one day,” I say slowly, choosing my words with care. “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. He relinquishes his grip on me and I watch him settle back, but the words linger in the room, wrapping around me like a shadow as I rise to leave.

For the first time, I sense what the future may hold, my visit with Amiel now having 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 recliner with a view of the temple and the majestic flame that covers all of Mount Zion. The early morning had not yet come so night still remains. 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. The view provides the relaxation I need and I eventually nod off into the sweet slumber of the weary.

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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 the soft, filtered light, and focus on her face.

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

“Yes, but this time I went to Amiel’s room to ease my disturbed mind hoping that this dream, is nothing more than a dream, but it did the opposite. The boy has much ambition now. I don’t know where it came from.”

“Why don’t you speak with his mother before court begins. There’s a disturbance to the North you must attend to, you’ll need to refresh your faculties.”

“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?”

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

"She does have her charms. A Syrian queen, from a land that’s always had a rebellious spirit. Remember, when their royal family refused to join the feast, they were struck with a plague. I’ve seen the scars she bears. She keeps them well-hidden—signs of a mercy that spared her but not her parents. They died that day, and 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.”

“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.”

"Then I strongly urge you to visit her quarters in the royal harem," she advises, her tone unwavering. "Our household must be kept in order, and any root of bitterness that takes hold must be cut away 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," she adds.

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 mind wandering as I pass the walls I once built. I ached for those days after our great victory, clinging to memories of better times to dull the sting of misery that now threatens to pull me under. How quickly the centuries have flown—over 400 years since the war of Gog and Magog scarred the earth.

In the aftermath that great war, the world lay in ruin, shattered and scarred, and I took it upon myself to rebuild. One of my first acts was to reinstate Benjamin Netanyahu as regent over Israel, restoring stability to a fractured nation. But the challenges only grew as I returned to my homeland. The Great Earthquake had left America in ruins, split into four vast, isolated regions. Each part needed to be stitched back together, so with delicate hands and a burdened heart I dedicated myself to the task.

Laborers were scarce, but with resilience and resolve, we brought life to where there was desolation. Fifteen years passed, and, against all odds, the task was completed. In those years, I also issued a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem, knowing that I would not stay in America forever. I longed to return to my eternal capital through which I would rule the world.

When I finally returned to Jerusalem, a grand parade filled the wide streets of the city. Survivors from every nation lined the broad avenues, eager to catch a glimpse of the prince—the one spoken of in the Torah—riding triumphantly on a great white steed toward the temple, whose glory now surpassed that of all temples before it. Jerusalem stood elevated, a city on a hill, with stone foundations and advanced technology as its backbone, and the King of Hosts as its cornerstone. Robots and drones kept the city running smoothly, replacing the old buildings that had been levelled by the great quake. No longer an ancient city, Jerusalem now shone with unmatched innovation and light.

As I approached the temple, sunlight gleamed off its towering structure, and a hushed reverence fell over the crowd. Its golden exterior glowed like a beacon, radiant. Its outer courts stretched wide, with massive gates carved with palm trees and cherubim standing tall at the eastern entrance. The white stone walls were smooth and solid.

I entered through the eastern gate, stepping into the outer court. Priests moved with careful precision around me, preparing their offerings, their hands steady and their expressions focused. The rich smell of incense filled the air, mingling with the voices of the Levites as they sang praises. Their songs echoed through the sacred space, resonating off the stone walls and filling the court with a powerful sense of peace and holiness.

Stepping toward the inner court, I climbed the steps to see the grand altar, its ledges layered to hold the sacrifices. That day marked the first offering—a spotless lamb, honoring the greatest sacrifice known to mankind. As I cut the lamb’s throat, the image of the cross flashed before my eyes, and its blood poured into the vase below. In future days, flames would rise high from this altar, offerings to the God of Israel from people coming from all corners, embracing the God of Abraham as their own.

As I approached the inner sanctuary, the air grew thick with the weight of God’s presence, each step bringing me closer to the Holy of Holies. Even after all these years of walking with the Lord, I felt unworthy to stand in this place, humbled before the heart of the temple where His radiance dwelled. This temple, set apart from the taint of the world, was not just a place of worship but the very axis of divine communion and peace. Its purity extended beyond these walls, drawing people from every nation, each pilgrim longing to glimpse the glory of the Lord of Hosts.

In those days, I had been entrusted with the sacred duty to judge among the nations, a justice that flowed with wisdom only he could give. Wars had ceased. His peace reigned unchallenged. The nations’ weapons lay reshaped, transformed into plows and pruning hooks, and the ground that once bore the weight of conflict now flourished with life. All human endeavors turned toward the land, sowing seeds not of strife but of abundance. Destruction had given way to creation, violence to plenty. This was the kingdom God had promised, a realm of unending peace that unfolded like a harvest under His gaze.

But now, those days live only in memory. I walk to the park beside the harem, where my young daughter, Deborah, sits on the grass under a towering Tabor Oak. Its height dwarfs the trees around it, its branches alive with the songs of rare birds we’ve gathered from across the world. Deborah stands, wrapping her small arms around the lion beside her, burying her face in its thick mane as it lets out a gentle breath. The lamb she had just been petting rises and moves over to the lion, beginning to groom this magnificent creature with quiet trust.

When she sees me, Deborah leaves the lion and runs to my side, giving me a hug as big as she can manage. The lion stands too, brushing its side against my leg as if greeting me. 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 bright smile.

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

“Yes, Deborah, these are difficult days indeed. 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. “As long as I’m here, that will never happen. 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 on me as if she wants to say more, “Daddy, we are in bad times. Last night, I felt a cold breeze and it sent a shiver up my spine, like the one you spoke of, ya know, if Igor roared. There’s something here in the palace. I sense it. It’s hunting us and I think someone is being eaten by it. I want it to go away, daddy. It’s bad.”

Once again fear creeps into my heart. Like the fear I felt after waking up from my dream. I fear for my children. The heart of a child is very receptive, more so than adults. They can smell evil. I sigh wishing there was something I could do to reassure her of the future that would continue like the world we currently live in, but I know that time is coming to an end. The time laid out by Daniel, the seven seventies, 490 years in total, the time had all but eclipsed. But I know I must be diligent and ready. I must save as many of those I love as possible including sweet little Deborah that clings to my leg, oh God help me she must survive.

I kneel down and look at her. Tears welling in my eyes. I hold them back.

“Deborah, you train hard, be ready like your mother. When the evil comes you will destroy it. You will rebuke it in the name of Yeshua. Though armies come to destroy us he will deliver you. You understand?”

She nods quietly. I have to peel away her grip as I stand up.

“The evil you spoke of, daddy has to deal with it now, so let go.”

She let go and I quickly walk away so as not to break down in tears in front of her.

When I arrive at my harem, most of my wives are navigating an obstacle course in the courtyard of the harem that would be nearly impossible for most men. The forty-foot tower dominated the course, with ropes tied to bars surrounding its top. Priscilla, the chief trainer—fit and elder among them—stood at the tower’s peak, barking orders to those below. Most of the women were struggling as they climbed, but not Sejal, Amiel’s mother. Her toned arms pulled her swiftly upward, her movements as graceful as they were powerful. Her legs, though not in use, were beautifully strong, her thighs curved with muscle. Other wives spar with swords and spears, their nano bot armor glistening in the sunlight.

Sejal was a marvel—a true jewel of her people. Yet I wonder if her loyalty shone as brightly as her physical prowess. I realize at that moment I’d come unannounced. My wives might be embarrassed to be seen in their training clothes. My mind was so disturbed that I hadn’t taken this into account, but there is no point going back now and it would be impossible to hide my intentions for my other wives. I had to meet Sejal despite the political implications this might mean among them all. This also meant that I might have to refrain from showing my affections towards those whom I would genuinely be interested in spending the day with.

They line up in formation after the training regime concludes. Their beautiful skin glistens with sweat in the sun. The climate is not hot. It is never hot, nor is it ever cold, every day was always beautiful.

I appear from the shadows and take my place beside Priscilla. Priscilla’s face becomes flush with embarrassment realizing she hadn’t had time to clean and prepare for my unexpected visit. I think the others share her sentiment, smiles lining their faces, but more restrained since they have not been dismissed yet from training. I watch carefully Sejal’s reaction. Her’s is reserved like a poker player with a royal flush but hasn’t let on to the power of their hand. I’m suddenly struck with a desire to be with her, it fills my heart unexpectedly.

Breaking the silence, I nod to the women and speak with a voice both gentle and commanding through my mentat, which is also synced with theirs. “I’m sorry to come unannounced. I felt compelled to thank you this morning for your dedication. You honor me with your strength. I want to encourage you to continue your training. Although we do not suffer, we do live in a world where there is the grave potential for suffering. The devil still prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Until the Lord comes, these will always be troubled times.”

The words rang true, but even I knew they were not my real reason for being here. I have no desire to fill their minds with anxiety about my dreams. The last thing I need is seven hundred concerned women, all hoping to offer me some reassurance, to ease whatever burden they sense I carry.

As they pondered my brief message, I watched their reactions, each one a reflection of her unique character. Some nod with solemn resolve, embodying the strength I praised. Others looked to one another with faint smiles, as though they share a private understanding about my unexpected appearance.

But Sejal’s expression held no warmth. Her face, composed and unyielding, betraying only calm attentiveness, yet something in her gaze sent a chill through me. There was a hardness, a locked-away story behind her eyes, like a mask crafted solely for moments like this.

With my mind I direct my mentat to speak only with her.

“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, “Yes, my lord I look forward to it, it has been sometime since we have been together. It will be my pleasure to fill my mind with more memories of you.”

I direct everyone else to be dismissed, and they quietly disperse to attend to the day’s duties. I speak with and greet as many of my wives as possible. Being a husband to nearly a thousand women was no small task.

Eventually, I make my way to Sejal’s quarters. Her door wasn’t locked, so I enter. Each of my 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 we upheld: to live without promoting death whenever possible. Only the Levites consume the animals sacrificed in the temple; for the rest of us, avoiding the suffering of any living creature had become our quiet commitment.

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

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

“Please join me my lord.”

I happily oblige.

# Chapter 2

As Gavriel entered the training hall, the sharp echo of his boots on the hardwood floor shatter the silence, drawing the attention of Amiel and his older half-brother, Uriel. Though born of different mothers, the two brothers shared a fierce loyalty, bound by blood and duty. They straighten as they noticed Gavriel’s approach.

Amiel, the youngest, approached these sessions with a fervor that even Uriel couldn’t match. To him, combat was more than skill—it was the path to his deepest ambitions. This burning drive surged through him, resonating with the nanobots in his armor. When he trained, they mirrored the intensity of his spirit, shifting with the same relentless energy that coursed through his soul. Each movement he made seemed to stir the armor to life, the nanobots pulsing and flowing in sync with his determination, as though they too shared his unyielding desire.

Since the Great War’s end centuries ago, warfare had transformed. While other nations abandoned the ways of weaponry, Prince Levi had continued their development in secret, aware that his foe would one day rise again. His scientists had pioneered a method of fusing soul and machine, breathing life into armor that blurred the line between the physical and spiritual realms. With the restoration of the temple, heaven and earth seemed to be merging, granting warriors glimpses into the supernatural. The soul was no longer speculative—it was a living force, a tool, and a weapon.

Gavriel surveyed the two warriors before him, his gaze lingering on the soft glint of their armor. Each suit shimmered with a silvery network of nanobots, thrumming in sync with the warriors’ breaths. Amiel’s armor, especially, responded to his spirit with uncanny precision. It could shield against the deadliest projectiles, sensing true danger and reacting in an instant, neutralizing the projectile mid-air. But Gavriel knew that this level of soul-binding was not without cost: the more often the armor blocked high-velocity attacks, the more it drained the spirit within. To constantly ward off projectiles weighed heavily on a warrior’s soul, eroding his strength with each impact deflected.

Therefore; both of the young warriors trained to conserve their soul’s power, relying on their physical strength in melee. When the need arose to call upon their soul’s full strength, they could do so with a fresh spirit, fortified through hours spent in prayer and deep reflection. This discipline ensured that their soul would be ready—its power undiminished by the rigors of lesser threats.

Gavriel squared off, facing Amiel directly. In an instant, a staff materialized in his hand, forming as if from thin air. With a sudden shift in stance, he swung it low, aiming at Amiel’s legs. Amiel reacted instantly, leaping over the staff’s arc.

As he landed, Gavriel sprang back, firing several darts from a device on his wrist. But each dart vanished as the nanobots hovering around Amiel’s body neutralized them, their programmed instincts responding to each threat.

“Very good, Amiel. I see you’ve been paying attention—impressive. Now, both of you will square off against each other. What’s our main rule for sparring?”

They both shouted in unison, trying to deepen their voices despite puberty working against them, “Love one another!”

“And what does love do?” Gavriel continued.

“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.”

Amiel and Uriel stepped forward, facing each other. Metallic swords appeared in their hands. These swords had become unique during Prince Levi's time. They were made of a synthetic alloy that was stronger than the toughest Damascus steel. If the user wanted, they could channel energy from their soul into the sword, producing immense heat that could melt even the strongest metal. Both bowed and begin to enter their unique fighting stances.

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

For the first time in his life, Uriel felt the sensation of danger prickling his nerves—a primal instinct buried within humanity for centuries. He hesitated, instincts screaming at him to be cautious. But he dismissed the feeling, pushing the thoughts of danger out of his mind. Maybe it was only nerves, a fleeting fancy. After all, he’d never known suffering or truly understood the threat danger carried. Confident again, he stepped forward, sliding into his stance.

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

Uriel began a slow, measured dance around Amiel, who stood like a stone pillar, steady and unreadable. Separated by two years, both boys were strong and agile, untouched by the malnourishment or ailments common in the previous world. They were nearly identical in height, and Amiel’s muscles flexed with a quiet readiness, holding tension that showed he was prepared for anything. This wasn’t their first spar; they knew each other’s strengths and flaws. Uriel usually won with his agility and experience.

But today felt different. Amiel had been practicing in secret, refining a new stance beyond Uriel’s watchful eyes, and now he was ready to put it to the test. He would wait, patient as stone, letting Uriel make the first move. The plan was simple: absorb Uriel’s momentum, then counter in one fluid motion. As Uriel’s strike came in, Amiel would shift his weight smoothly, his back leg sliding forward while his sword arced high above his head.

In his mind, he envisioned the movement, each shift of his muscles precise, every angle calculated. He could almost feel the clash of their blades and hear the metallic ring that would follow. A surge of anticipation rose within him, and he tightened his grip, his knuckles white around the hilt. This wasn’t just training. To Amiel, it was a test of his new power, of the control he’d painstakingly built over countless hours alone.

With a steady breath, Uriel advanced, 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 connected. This was the moment Amiel had been waiting for. In a flash, Amiel’s stance shifted. His back foot surged forward, his body twisting as his sword came down from above, intercepting Uriel’s strike with a force that sent a shock up both their arms. The clang of steel rang through the air, vibrating between them, and for a split second, Uriel could feel the raw power in Amiel’s movement. This wasn’t the brother he’d sparred with countless times before.

Uriel staggered back, momentarily thrown off balance by the unexpected force of Amiel’s counter. But before he could fully recover, Amiel surged forward, abandoning the defensive stance he usually relied upon. This was a new Amiel, aggressive and relentless. Uriel’s heart raced as the familiar sparring pattern crumbled, replaced by this newfound ferocity in his brother.

As Amiel pressed forward, that unsettling sense of danger crept back. He could no longer ignore it. The dark gleam in Amiel’s eyes had returned. Each swing of Amiel's blade was calculated but ruthless, leaving Uriel barely enough time to deflect or dodge. Uriel was in a panic something he had never experienced before. He decided that it was time to end the sparring session and call it quits for today.

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

Gavriel was distracted at the moment. He was attentive at times but sometimes his duties were divided as he was also head of the royal guard. Amiel’s expression didn’t change. He appeared possessed by something dark and unknown pushed by an unstoppable force. Amiel’s intensity increased. He had obtained a dart shocker, hidden underneath the cuff of his training jacket. The device sensed the momentum in Amiel’s hand. A dart shot fourth whistling through the air. Uriel was caught off guard once again.