

Wind slipped through the marble colonnade like a worrisome messenger, stirring the torchlights into ribbons of gold. Twelve-year-old **David Buffet**—already whispered *Hero* by the palace pages—stepped barefoot across the cool stone. Behind him trailed a circle of elders in midnight robes, feet light but hearts heavy: because tonight they would bind the first dual bender in a generation to Pharaoh’s Sacred Council.

In the atrium’s center a shallow pool mirrored the night sky; lilies floated like frozen constellations. David paused at its rim, tail swaying, brown-gray eyes wide with thrill. Beneath the surface, bioluminescent algae pulsed in minute spirals, echoing the double helix of light and dark power coiled inside his bones.

A gong sounded—low, deliberate. The eldest elder, **Arch-Jules Emeka**, lifted a slender obsidian blade.

“David Abraham Buffet,” he intoned, voice drifting across water, “you stand where your ancients knelt. Do you accept the charge to wield light for creation and keep darkness in stillness?”

David swallowed. “I accept.”

“You understand the price?”

He nodded, though no scroll could explain what came next.

Emeka gestured, and two acolytes approached. One bore a silver basin of crystalline sand; the other held a coiled band of raw copper glowing faintly—conductive to light, resistant to dark. They placed both at David’s feet.

“Step forward,” Emeka said.

David waded into the pool. Cool water crept to his calves, then knees, tugging heat from his skin. The lilies parted as if guided by unseen breath. Directly beneath the surface his fingertips began to shimmer—light bending eager to answer his rising pulse. He exhaled, recalling Joseph’s mantra: *steady your heart*.

Emeka raised the obsidian knife. Torchlight kissed its edge. “Tail.”

David lifted the slender appendage. It quivered—not from fear, but anticipation, as though it sensed destiny tightening like a bowstring. With a steady slice, Emeka trimmed exactly one inch. Pain flickered, quick and precise. A single drop of blood struck the pool and blossomed crimson among pale lily pads.

“Your birth-tail shortens,” the elder declared, “so that your reach toward heaven lengthens.”

An acolyte caught the severed inch in the copper band and slid the band over David’s wrist. It shrank until snug, sealing wound to metal, pulse to prophecy.

The sand-bearer named Elsa knelt and poured the crystalline grains into David's cupped palms. "Light and dark must rest," she whispered. "Close your fists."

He obeyed. Instantly the grains vibrated, absorbing photons that leaked from his skin, turning pearlescent. Yet with each flare of light, a counter-whisper stirred in his mind—he was dark bending, sensing thought-streams of the gathered council. Secrets rustled: fear of famine, envy of his power, a single word iced with dread—*Paradox*.

David's brow tightened. The twin forces tangled in his chest, tugging like children fighting over a toy. A hot tremor licked up his spine; water hissed around his ankles. The elders shifted, uneasy. Emeka tapped the gong once—sharp, containing.

"Stillness," the arch-seer murmured.

David inhaled slow, intentional. Light receded into his bones; dark fell silent. The crystalline sand settled, now opalescent—half daybreak, half midnight. He opened his fists. The grains spilled into the pool and vanished.

Emeka nodded, reverent. "So begins the covenant. You will serve your eight years in the Core, train both gifts, demonstrate the first, and keep the second gift unseen. Until the season of burnt orange."

David stepped from the water, taller somehow, copper band glinting over the fresh tail wound. Thrill warmed his limbs, yet beneath it a dim pressure pulsed—an unopened door locked somewhere behind his heart.

The elders formed an honor arch with their staffs. As David passed beneath, a thought not his own brushed his consciousness, cold and certain:

When the door opens, hero, the world will rewrite itself in blood and fire.

He did not flinch. Instead he let a single mote of light spin above his palm—tiny, perfect, hopeful—before tucking it into the dark folds of his cloak and walking out to greet the stars.