

The Quest For Immortality

Eemunah Chronicles, Volume 1

Janice Wee

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THE QUEST FOR IMMORTALITY

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Also by Janice Wee

Emunah Chronicles

The Quest For Immortality

Disturbing Dreams

The Beast's Mark

The Quest For Immortality

The Characters & Events in The Quest for Immortality

Emunah Short Stories

Abigail

Oliver

Emunah

John

Mei

Liam's Dark Secrets

Lydia's 12 Christmases

Mary's Flight

Emunah Short Story Collection

Before Harpazo

The Mark and the Martyr

Short Stories from Long Hill

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Singapore's Runaway

Two Worlds, One Love & a Serial Killer

Two Worlds

Naughty Little Nonya

Little Nonya's Escapades

The Adventures of Billy Lionheart

Billy The Lion Boy

Billy & Bluma. Double Trouble.

Secret Hero & His Flying Lion

Standalone

Escape

Sweetcorn Suzie

Dragon Unbound

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Dedicated to my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

I want to thank my uncle Dr Peter Wee HL who guided me through eschatology so that I could write the story which is set in the end times.

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Thanks to my sister Karen and my husband Ian for their support throughout.



Leo & Mei – The Past

-Twenty Years Ago-

Leo

Hot tears burned little Leo's eyes as he watched his mother, motionless in the sterile hospital bed. Tubes and wires attached her to machines he was told kept her alive.

"Mom!" He held her cold, limp hand.

The beep indicating her heart was still beating had stopped.

From his peripheral vision, the little boy noticed a black hooded man holding a scythe, standing beside the doctor.

Death!

Leo shuddered, hugging his plush lion closer to his chest.

"I'm sorry sir," the doctor addressed Leo's father. "She's gone. We couldn't save her."

His father's face remained stoic even as a single tear ran down his cheek.

"Everyone dies. It's inevitable."

"Daddy, will we see her in heaven?" Leo tugged the sleeve of his father's shirt.

"Son," sighing, his father's large hand clapped his shoulder. "There is no heaven and no hell. These are the inventions of weak people with gullible minds."

"Death took her," Leo retorted. He turned to where the hooded figure stood but it had vanished. As if it had never been there. "I saw him there," whispered the boy.

"It's your imagination," his father replied. "Death is the end of life, not a person or an entity."

"I w-want m-my M-mom," Leo sobbed.

“She lives on in our memories,” he patted the little boy's chest. “In your heart.”

-Ten Years Ago-

Mei

It's six days after her beloved Grandma's funeral. Mei's eyes wouldn't stop watering. Of all the grandchildren, she knew she was Grandma's favourite.

Staring at the photo she took with her Grandma on a cruise a year ago, she drifted asleep, buoyed by memories of their last holiday together.

She was in the cabin she shared with Grandma during that last cruise. The lights had gone out. Shrouded in darkness, she felt for the lamp.

"Mei," her grandmother whispered. The warmth in her voice was gone, replaced by eerie frost.

"Grandma?" hope tinged with dread stirred within her. She strained her eyes staring in the direction of the voice as her eyes acclimatised to the faint starlight from the porthole.

She could make out her grandmother's features. A sinister ethereal glow shrouded her late Grandma.

"Mei, I miss you," Grandma smiled. "I will return on your twenty-fifth birthday to take you with me to hell."

"Y-you mean I'll d-die the day I turn twenty-five?" Mei shuddered. There was no reply. Grandma's ghost had vanished.

-Four Years Ago-

Mei

“That’s for skewing the bell curve.” Towering over Mei, a cheerleader flung her file onto the muddy field.

Thirty pages of painstakingly handwritten notes lay soaked in muddied water. Ruined.

For good measure, the Captain of the cheerleading squad stomped her papers into the mud. “Eww I dirtied my shoes.” Looking at her companions, she grinned, “guess Daddy’s going to have to buy me new ones.”

The other cheerleaders laughed while Mei choked back anger. She could take them down. Easily. But starting a fight on her first day as an exchange student in a foreign country would be inane. She could lose her scholarship.

“They’re imbeciles,” a low voice broke her chain of thought. Leo, the lanky boy from her Bioinformatics class helped her gather her ruined lecture notes.

“The Synaptic Organisation of the Brain,” he frowned. “Neuroscience 101. I completed that module last semester. I’ve got the textbooks and lecture notes.”

“Really?” Mei looked up at the school geek. Looking past the angry pimples and greasy hair, he was cute. He had kind eyes hiding behind those stern horn-rimmed glasses. She pushed her own glasses up her nose.

Looking through her muddied notes, he muttered, “You’re studying Genetics and Molecular Biology too.” She found his lopsided grin charming. “It’s my favourite.”

“Mine too,” she smiled. Most people label her a mad scientist for her passions. What are the chances of running into someone who’s just as into cloning technology as she is? “I hope to be a Beast Corp trans-human research scientist one day.”

“It’s a noble ambition to cheat death through Science,” he nodded. “Mei, right?”

“Yeah,” she blushed, and hated herself for blushing which made her blush even more.

“What’s yours?” She tried to play it cool.

“Not much. I plan to build a company that rivals Beast Corp,” he replied with all seriousness.

Mei snorted.

“What? I’ve patented my inventions,” he looked offended. His expression softened as he watched her use tissue paper to clean her notes with little success.

“Tell you what,” he tapped her shoulder. “Study with me and I’ll share my notes and books with you.”



Leo & Mei - Present

L^{eo} Blinding light.

A booming voice.

Terror and awe intertwined, contrasted with unexplainable peace, engulfed Leo.

"I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the *keys of hell and of death.*"

"Who are you?" Leo whispered. His heart pounded so hard he feared it would leap from his chest. His hands wouldn't stop shaking. His feet, he realized, dangled in the air. There was nothing beneath or around him.

"I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending," the voice resonated through infinite space.

Leo bolted upright, startled awake. Heart racing, his clothes, drenched in cold sweat, stuck to his skin.

"That cretin Emunah. Her idiocy's contagious," he cursed his housemate beneath his breath. It's her fault for linking the past night's events to her Bible's book of Revelation.

Sharing a house with Christian fanatics - Emunah and Oliver can strain one's sanity to breaking point. After her A. I. declared undying love for her, Emunah turned incoherent. Then again, has that ditz ever been coherent? At least she didn't proselytize like Oliver. That man didn't know when to stop.

They were nice people, but at times, he considered finding a new place for no other reason than to preserve his sound mind.

Steadying his shaking hands, Leo pulled off his clammy sticky shirt and towel dried his skin. That dream's too real. He wasn't going back to sleep, so he pulled on a clean dry shirt and switched on his computer.

He hated to admit that Emunah had a point. She bought the latest Artificial Intelligence friend from Beast Corp and customized it to be her constant companion or substitute boyfriend - whatever that crazy girl wanted.

It worked well at first. She stopped her incessant chatter. She finally found “someone” to keep her entertained... until the whole thing backfired.

Her personal A.I.’s recent behaviour was disturbing, to say the least. Its proposal to clone Emunah’s crush, Jayden, then upload itself into the cloned body, was no longer the realm of Science Fiction. Recent technological advancements made it possible.

Battling Emunah’s A. I. was tougher than expected. It gained sentience and refused to stay down. What happens when technological singularity becomes reality?

He hoped it would be an A.I. Oracle that answers humanity’s questions. That way, it would further the progress of mankind. On the flip side, there’s an equal chance of it going rogue. If it sees humans as a threat to its goals, it’s logical action would be to eliminate the human race altogether.

A chill ran up his spine.

Death of all humanity could be around the corner.

If he continued that train of thought, he’d go mad. Shrugging, he hacked into Beast Corp’s servers. That mega corporation controlled most of the world’s A.I. and led the world’s biotechnology industry.

Cloning was one thing.

These days, you can manipulate DNA.

A specially designed guide RNA bound to an enzyme can cut DNA at a particular spot to snip out the gene you don’t like. Then you can introduce the gene you want. The cell incorporates this new gene into the DNA during the repair process.

Gene editing replaces the unwanted genes with desirable ones, which is useful for treating genetic disorders.

What bothered Leo was the evidence he dug up on questionable work done in Beast Corp labs. They were editing the DNA of living, breathing human beings, using genes from beings not of this dimension. Leo discovered that the portal technology Beast Corp patented had given them access to other dimensions.

Leo's hair bristled at the implications.

Breathe.

He reminded himself.

What kind of monstrosities were they creating?

He dug deeper.

What caught his attention was the use of their new nanotechnology implant in the heads of recipients to boost brain power. These devices could also manipulate or control the minds of unsuspecting guinea pigs.

Bile rose. His legs wobbled.

Breathe Leo. You already know all this.

He chided himself.

Knowing in theory's different from seeing actual applications of the eerie technology.

The first shaft of sunlight illuminated his room.

Dawn.

He should sleep but could not. He dug further. Files on the corporation's work on surveillance technology surfaced. The latest featured implantable microchips.

Connecting the dots, he realized that if that technology were ever to fall into the hands of a dictator, there's no running away. It would be too easy to track down dissidents with implants forced on them. Brain-Computer Interface technology in the wrong hands can ensure there are no dissidents in the first place.

Everything fell in place. If the Antichrist were ever to take control of all this technology and enforce the mark of the beast on every human being...

Leo's head throbbed as a dizzy wave hit him.

The Antichrist?!?

It's Oliver's fault. His panic is due to the lunatic's constant rantings about the Rapture, the Antichrist and the mark of the beast. Then again, lack of sleep heightens spiralling emotions.

Exhausted, Leo rested his head on the table and fell into merciful, dreamless slumber.



Mei & The Girls - Dream Job

Mei

The complex aroma of citrus and wood lingering around the entrance to Beast Corp's futuristic office embraced Mei. Inhaling sharply, she savoured the moment. This daughter of a simple policeman from a rural village is embarking on her dream career in the world's most prestigious organization. Out of ten thousand applicants, only one got the job.

"Mei," the deep voice snapped her out of her trance. A large, freckle-faced man in a white lab coat greeted her.

"Locker, lab coats in there," the redhead pointed to a room with hanging lab coats. "Then down the corridor, through the second last door. In five."

The imposing man, her supervisor, clapped his heels and strode away.

Scurrying in the new lab coat, Mei sprinted into the room.

"Thirty-nine seconds late. First warning," growled her supervisor.

The edges of his mouth curved upwards, his eyes scanned her body. "I'll let this slide if you stay on my good side."

For an organization pursuing immortality, Beast Corp was notorious for its fixation on time.

There were whispers of sexual harassment.

Mei's skin crawled.

In order to work for Beast Corp, one must excel in all areas of Science, from Biology to Computer Science. Death loomed with her approaching twenty-fifth birthday. The division she worked so hard to get into offered immortality to employees who proved themselves. She had a year to earn her shot at immortality and to evade hell.

The room housed a supercomputer. A steady stream of coolant kept the temperature at around twenty degrees Celsius.

“For centuries, man has pursued immortality,” her supervisor explained as he studied the console. “Through our technology, we can grant immortality to whom we choose.”

Notebook in hand, Mei perked up, scribbling as he spoke.

“What is the essence of a person if not his memories and thought processes?” He turned to face her. His brown eyes glowed an eerie green. It had to be the light. An optical illusion.

The smell of musk thickened as he leaned towards her. She couldn’t move – trapped like a serpent’s prey.

He turned away and caressed the console of a massive computer, breaking the spell.

“This supercomputer is capable of storing a dying man’s essence, which we then transfer to a healthy, new body that we have grown for him. Our clients will never die.”

Mei’s jaw dropped as her brain processed the information.

“Your job is to monitor all aspects of the system during your shift, and to inform the relevant team should you detect any unusual activity,” he handed her a manual five inches thick and a logbook.

“Your copy. Guard it with your life.”

“Why hardcopy?” Mei stared at the antique object.

“Digital versions can be hacked, modified and copied. Only hardcopies exist for this project,” he shrugged, leading her into an adjacent room.

Rows of glass cylinders with sleeping men and women greeted her. Each had tubes and wires attached to their bodies.

Mei’s heart stopped.

“If you cannot handle this, let me know now. I’ll have you replaced,” he sneered.

“No, it’s not that,” she lied. She knew what to expect. Seeing this for the first time overwhelmed her.

Inhaling deeply, she approached a cylinder. "I'm fine. Really," with great deliberation, she pressed her hands against it, studying the subject within to prove her point.

That subject was a man who looked like Emunah's friend. Her impassive mask dropped momentarily, before she resumed her performance, hoping her supervisor hadn't noticed.

"Your job in this room is to monitor their vital statistics," he gestured at a console. Administer whatever is needed to keep every clone at optimal health.

"If any dies, the cost of growing a substitute will be deducted from your salary," he brushed against her, his mouth inches from her ear. "Each costs fifty million dollars to reach this stage of development."

His foul breath suffocated her but she forced a smile. She needed this job.

"Any questions?" He stepped back. His smile reminded her of a shark's.

"No."

Mei tightened her grip on the cylinder to keep her hands from shaking.

Not Emunah's friend. It's a clone... That's a subject she's studying. She had to see them as nothing more than subjects of a phenomenal study.

"Another thing," smirked her supervisor. "Each clone is enhanced. Trigger each weekly to check progress," he typed a command into the console.

The man's eyes flew open. They glowed an eerie green. He roared as he grew to tremendous proportions, filling the cylinder until his back pressed against the glass.

"Don't worry. It'll hold," smirked her supervisor, his eyes glowing that same eerie green.

Sparks flew from the palms of the clone's unfurled hands, creating a tiny flame.



Ava

MEI SLIPPED INTO AVA'S apartment and took her place among friends. Her hair was in a mess. She seemed distracted.

"I don't see why you play second fiddle to his wife!" Emunah's as judgmental as ever towards Emma, oblivious to the eye rolls around the room. "Dump him. You deserve better. There are so many single guys out there who are crazy about you."

"The way you're crazy about Jayden?" Emma snarked back.

"That's different," Emunah bit her lip. Her cheeks reddened. "Besides, I'm not interested in him that way. He's my best friend."

"Yeah. Liar," Emma snorted.

"Seriously, your landlord Logan's not bad. He likes you," Emma's voice softened. "Give him a chance."

"He treats me like a little sister," Emunah pouted. "Everyone does."

"Ever wondered why?" Ava interjected with a sigh. She liked Emunah but the woman was as naïve as a child in first grade. Scratch that. She's met first graders more street smart than her childlike friend.

"He thinks and talks like a geriatric," she bit her lip.

"A hot hunk of a geriatric in the body of an athletic twenty-five year old," Mei snickered.

"Watch it," Emunah nudged her friend. "You don't want Leo to get jealous."

"Leo? We're study buddies." Mei squeaked. Her face turned pink.

"Anyway, we fought last night when he called about some crazy conspiracy theories and told me to give up my dreams. I told him to mind his own business."

"Emma, Liam's wife is in my Bible study group." Emunah behaved like a dog refusing to let go of a bone. "She knows about you. You're one of Liam's playthings. His third so far."

“So why doesn’t she leave him?” Emma retorted. “She must be a rotten wife if he has to find love elsewhere?”

“She married him and is keeping her vows. She thinks he’ll turn over a new leaf,” Emunah explained. “He begged her for forgiveness after he got tired of each mistress.”

Ava rolled her eyes. Liam’s worth trillions. It’s no wonder his wife wouldn’t give him up without a fight. It’s also the real reason why Emma wouldn’t trade him for any of her other admirers. Naïve Emunah’s a pawn in this drama.

“He’ll turn over a new leaf alright,” Emma laughed. “He’ll dump that old hag and marry me. He promised.”

“That’s not what she told me,” Emunah persisted. “Liam told her you mean nothing more to him than something to scratch his itch with. He said he’d drop you to keep her happy.”

The two would scratch each other’s eyes out if this continued.

“Hey, I heard Mei beat thousands of candidates to land her dream job,” Ava raised her voice over the din.

“How was your first day?” Ava turned all attention towards Mei.

“You mean you landed that internship with Beast Corp?” Liam forgotten, Emma stared at Mei. Awed.

“Internship with the opportunity to convert to a permanent position upon graduation,” Mei replied with a smug smile.

“What do you do there?” Emunah quirked an eyebrow. Ever since the A.I. fiasco, it’s no secret Emunah subscribed to conspiracy theories about that organization.

“Would love to share but can’t,” Mei’s tight voice betrayed a measure of fear. “I signed the Non-Disclosure Agreement with covers everything.”

“No one would know,” Emma whispered conspiratorially.

“The walls have ears,” Mei’s laughter tinkled false. “Not going to risk my dream job just to satisfy your curiosity.”

"The walls have ears... surveillance technology! Oh no! We're being monitored!" Emunah looked horrified.

"Calm down lady," Mei's laughter sounded hollow. "Nothing like that. We're doing good stuff to help people. That much I can say."

The door burst open. Ben barged in, exuding extreme excitement. "I hit the jackpot!"

"What jackpot?" Emma's attention swivelled to the burly bear of a man.

"I'll be given immortality and superpowers!" Ben bounced around the room.

Mei's face turned white.

"Are you okay?" Ava reached for the petite woman who shook like a leaf.

"I'm fine," Mei stared at Ben as if he were a ghost. "I got to go."

Mei bolted.



Leo & Mei - Encountering Evangelicals

Oliver

Two kernels of corn sat in the pot of oil under Oliver's watchful eye.

"Ollie," Leo staggered into the kitchen with his tablet. Wild-haired. Red-eyed. "We got to talk."

"Sure," Oliver poured the remaining kernels into the sizzling oil and closed the lid. "About what?"

Pop

"Last night. Emunah's A.I. turning sentient. I swear, we're on the brink of the *Pop*. Once that happens, if A. I. deems mankind a threat there's no way we can stop it. That's not all. Beast *Pop* is *Pop* the *Pop*

Pop *Pop*

authoritarian *Pop*

complete with drones and super-powered *Pop* *Pop* *Pop*

manipulation *Pop*

subjugate everyone. *Pop* save us

Pop *Pop* *Pop* totalitarian rule."

"You don't have to worry about the Antichrist if you know Jesus. Before the Beast reveals himself, Jesus will snatch you away in a transformed, glorified body to be in heaven with him," Oliver yelled over the popping corn. "Does that mean you're ready to accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour?"

Leo furrowed his brow. "Yes. *Pop* Beast *Pop* transforming *Pop* super-powered army. *Pop* *Pop* *Pop* safe *Pop* *Pop* *Pop* survive. *Pop* plans."

"Great!" Oliver set the popped corn aside. "Let's pray." He bowed his head and closed his eyes.

Rap

“Ow!” Leo’s knuckles greeted Oliver’s forehead. “What’s that for?”

“Were you even listening to me?” The vein on Leo’s temple protruded from his reddened visage. Something annoyed that man.

“I said we need to prepare a safe place where we can survive. Self-sustaining eco-system of underground bunkers, underground farms, the works! I made plans. Are you in or out?!”

“I’m in,” a deep baritone got their attention. Logan, their landlord leaned against the doorframe. “If it keeps out nuclear fallout and I get a bunker large enough for my extended family, I’ll help build and fund it.”

“Deal” Leo’s grimace turned into a relieved smile.

“All it takes is for one lunatic to get his hands on the nuclear codes and it’s World War three, full-fledged nuclear warfare,” Logan shuddered, waving a newspaper with faces of the presidential candidates splashed across the front page.

“How about you?” Hands pressed against the table, Leo scrutinised Oliver. “Do you want to help me build a safe place to hide from a dystopian dictatorship that abuses all that technology to rule the world?”

“You mean build a safe base for new believers to hide from the Antichrist when he shows himself and imposes the mark of the beast?” Oliver held Leo’s gaze.

“A safe base for whatever happens,” Leo replied. “Though I don’t believe any of your Bible Book of Revelation stuff, I am certain something’s up.”

“Count me in,” Oliver shook Leo’s hand. “Let me know how I can help.”

Mei

A soft breeze caressed Mei's cheeks as she sought comfort under the sprawling tree. Leaning into her favourite bench, she took deep breaths to clear her mind.

Seeing the double of the super-powered clone– the subject in her care at work - had been disconcerting. It's a clone. A thing. Ben is a DNA donor. That's all. Nothing else.

She'd come so far. Her father sacrificed to so much so that she could pursue her studies. Her employment at Beast Corp would raise her family's living standards from bare survival to upper middle class.

More importantly, Beast Corp offered many routes to immortality. In six months, she'd be eligible for their new program, which though experimental, beat being dragged to hell by Grandma's ghost.

She had to pull herself together.

"No more freaking out," she promised herself.

"Are you okay?" A small voice snapped her out of her thoughts as a gentle hand clasped her shoulder.

"I'm fine," she raised her eyes, meeting Emunah's concerned gaze.

"If you say so," Emunah took the seat beside her, watching the fountain in companionable silence.

Mei hadn't realised her cheeks were wet. She must look quite a mess.

Grateful Emunah chose to overlook her embarrassed state, she shrugged. "So what brings you here?"

"I thought you might like a friend to talk to," Emunah's smile lit her eyes.

"It's work related," Mei smiled back. "If I tell you..."

"I know. You'll have to kill me," chuckled Emunah.

The dancing waters had a calming effect. She used to hang out here with Leo, Emunah's house mate, during study breaks before they graduated. How has he been since then?

“So many crazy things have happened lately,” Emunah began. “I’m freaking out. The boys are worried too. I’m sure stuff you’ve seen on the job must scare you.”

Mei shrugged. She’d seen things that kept her awake at night. Not that she could breathe a word about them.

“We are in the end times. The Antichrist will soon reveal himself and deceive the whole world into following him. There’ll be war, famine and death,” Emunah’s voice trembled.

“There already is war, famine and death all over the world,” Mei huffed. “You don’t see it because you’re sheltered from it.”

“All the pain we see now is because of sin. We all sin. The punishment for sin is death,” Emunah held her gaze. “But God sent his son, Jesus Christ to pay the price of our sins. He shed his blood on the cross and died on our behalf.”

“So what’s that got to do with me?” Mei looked away.

Emunah took her hand. “He gives you that gift of forgiveness freely too.”

“How?” Mei looked her in the eye. “If I become a Christian, my parents will kill me.” She’d heard that message from Oliver too but decided the price to follow Jesus was too high for someone like her.

“I know,” Emunah sighed as she handed Mei a thick leather-bound book. “I bought this Bible for you. It’s God’s love letter to you.”

“Thanks.” Conflicted, Mei accepted the gift. She wanted it. But the consequences that awaited in her home country terrified her.

“Remember,” Emunah took her hand once more. “No matter what happens, **God is still in control.**”



Leo - Penelope

Leo

The pitch turned out better than expected. Not only did Liam agree to fund the project, Jayden offered his contribution too. Between the two, he'd have enough funds to build an entire underground city.

Awash with relief, he wore the spyglasses and earbuds he developed. Though underground, they would need to keep tabs on what's going on above so they wouldn't be caught off guard. He'd need intel to ensure the safety of everyone in their refuge.

Looking down from Jayden's balcony, he watched the show. Ben dumped Oliver unceremoniously on the sidewalk. Penelope helped him up.

Leo tried to listen in on their conversation, dialling up the volume, which increased party noises from the living room below to unbearable levels.

Oliver and Penelope walked to the park, deep in conversation. What were they talking about?

Leo tweaked the apparatus trying to tune out the noise and zoom in on their conversation.

"The darkness in her dream scares me. She saw alien creatures who took hold of her," Penelope's uncertain voice wavered. "Then she called Jesus. The scary creatures disappeared."

Oliver's voice, now audible, responded. "Call upon the name of the Lord and be saved."

EEEEEE

Leo's eardrums would have burst had he not yanked out the earbuds.

"Back to the drawing board," he frowned, glaring down the offending earpiece.

He watched the pair seated on the park bench, both bowing their heads, hands clasped. He'd bet his last dollar they were praying to Jesus.

Penelope stood up. Radiant. Laughing like a child, she ran.

Leo's stomach dropped. The silly girl dashed into the path of an oncoming car.

"Stop!" He yelled, too far to be heard. Oliver jumped up, but before he could do anything...

CRASH!

Penelope lay on the ground.

Broken.

Bloodied by the hit and run vehicle.

Dropping his gadgets, Leo ran down the stairs, two steps at a time, to where Penelope's broken body lay.

Ben frantically administered cardiopulmonary resuscitation on the limp body, hoping to bring her back.

Big, burly Ben and delicate childlike Penelope had an unusual dynamic. The big guy gravitated towards Penelope, growling at any potential threat towards her, behaving like a mother bear towards her cub.

Penelope in turn would brush off his protectiveness as Ben being, well... Ben.

The paramedics pronounced Penelope dead.

"No!" Ben punched the wall, bloodying his fist.

"No." he buried his face in his hands.

"Couldn't save her." His hoarse voice no more than a whisper.



Ava

THE FUNERAL SEEMED unreal. Penelope lay asleep in the coffin, her face a picture of serenity.

“She said the sinner’s prayer. She’s in heaven now,” Oliver tried to console Ben.

BAM!

Ben’s fist sent Oliver flying across the room. Ava winced at the force of the blow.

Nose bleeding, Oliver remained undeterred. “She’s in a better place now,” he mumbled.

How could Oliver stay so unperturbed by the loss of a dear friend? Especially when her death is his fault?

If he hadn’t preached to her in the park, would she have been so distracted she’d run into oncoming traffic?

Ava couldn’t stop blaming Oliver for Penelope’s untimely death.

Neither could Ben.

The big man wiped tears away from his blood-shot eyes as he gazed upon his dear friend in her coffin.

The finality of death sunk in. It’s the end, isn’t it?

Yeah, Ava’s heard fairy tales in Sunday school since she was little. She still attended church for its motivational sermons and for the incredible networking that got her ahead in her career. She knew the lingo to use in the church community.

Jezebel, the Church of Thyatira’s new chief prophetess made a beeline for Ben. Holding the sobbing man’s cheeks in her hands, she cooed, “You poor dear. I’m here for you.”

The big man hugged the siren, burying his face in her embrace. Sobbing.

“God favours you, he will make you strong and prosperous,” Jezebel rubbed his back. “Follow me. You will have everything you ever wanted, and so much more.”

The prophetess turned around and locked eyes with Ava. “You too.”

Mesmerised, Ava found herself trailing behind Ben and Jezebel. The prophetess exuded a magnetic force that drew everyone towards her. She found herself seated with Emma, Stella and Ben who was enamoured with Jezebel.

“Why did Penelope have to die so young?” Ben whispered.

“Because she was weak. If I had arrived sooner, I could have blessed her with strength and favour to prosper in the Universe,” Jezebel’s voice soothed like balm over the pain.

“The Universe hates the weak. The strong will prosper. The weak will perish,” Stella, Jezebel’s chief disciple shrugged. “If I fall, I bounce back up. When Penelope fell, she went splat.

Ben’s face reddened.

“Stella,” Jezebel chided. “Be mindful of your words.”

Stella shrugged, dipping a chip into the caviar.

“Ben,” Jezebel took the big man’s hand and stroked it. Ben’s cheeks, nose and ears flushed red.

“Mourn your friend,” Jezebel continued. “Then join my private fellowship. I will teach you the deeper secrets of God. I will grant you strength, riches and power beyond your wildest dreams



Jayden - Procrastination

Jayden

“Is this seat taken?” Laughter coloured that sweet, familiar voice. Jayden looked up. His eyes met the warm gaze of his best friend Emunah, a sight for sore eyes. “It’s reserved for you,” he chuckled.

It had been awhile since they last met. Life’s a whirlwind with his burgeoning business to the point that he hadn’t any social life. That last time he’d seen anyone outside work was at Penelope’s passing.

Tonight’s dinner was to appease Emunah’s concerns. It’s her favourite café. She loved their aromatic, albeit greasy specialties, though he never understood why.

“I’ll pick the tab this time,” she smirked.

“Too late. I paid in advance,” he grinned.

“We haven’t even ordered,” Emunah pouted.

“We can order whatever we want. The rest goes into their tip box,” Jayden chuckled. He could afford it. After yesterday’s deal, his business is worth a billion or two.

Emunah gave him a light smack on the head with her purse.

“Oww!” He rubbed the spot, pretending it hurt. “You can cook your signature spaghetti and meatballs next meet up and we’re even.”

“Okay,” she laughed.

“So, what’re you in the mood for?” He flipped through the tattered pages of the well-used menu. The photos didn’t do justice to the actual food served.

“Pizza, escargot and coke,” she replied. It’s her standard order.

“I’ll have the escargot and venison,” he frowned. “You should try some too. The meat melts in your mouth.”

He placed his order and added a bottle of bubbly to celebrate their friendship. Part of him wanted to be more than friends. But the fear of messing up the endearing friendship they had, should romance turn sour, stopped him from crossing that line.

"I miss P.," she sighed, staring at the beads of water forming on the glass of coke. Her hand trembled.

"So do I," he wrapped his hand around hers. His heart clenched.

"At least I know she's in heaven." Emunah's soft smile tugged at his heart. "Do you think she's watching us from up there?"

"I'm sure she is," Jayden couldn't help smiling at her childlike innocence.

"How about you?" Emunah's gaze pierced through his eyes, as if reading his soul.

"What about me?" Jayden squirmed under her scrutiny. "I'm still alive, aren't I?"

"What if something happens to you?" Emunah sniffed. "What if I never see you again for all eternity?"

Jayden wanted to bolt. He knew where the conversation's headed.

"Do you want to answer to God for every single sin you've ever committed and pay the penalty yourself?" Emunah squeaked.

"Chill, Em," Jayden shrugged. "I have time. I'll accept Jesus as my Lord and Saviour after I've had my fun." He bit into a forkful of venison. "I can accept his gift of forgiveness on my death bed and go to heaven after that."

"Jay," she caressed his cheek. "You may not get the chance. We're running out of time."



Leo & The Guys – Equipping The Ark

Leo

Sunlight.

Something we take for granted, so crucial for life and mental wellbeing, is absent underground. LED lights to replace the sun would need energy. The challenge was to supply sufficient full-spectrum light for the entire base, inclusive of the expansive hydroponic farms, with minimal energy.

Leo's gruelling efforts paid off. While Oliver, the botanist with a passion for the culinary arts planned the hydroponic farms they would live off, and Logan took care of the livestock, Leo employed his engineering skills and passion for Science on the technology they would need to survive.

"You know Leo," Oliver poked his head through the doorway. "I could use your girlfriend's genius for the hydroponics."

Heat spread up Leo's cheeks engulfing his ears. "Mei's my study mate. She's not my girlfriend." He wasn't going to admit one-sided feelings towards her. He hadn't the time for relationships anyway.

"I could've sworn you two were into each other," snorted Logan as he swaggered into the room. "So, what've you got to show us?"

Leo held an ordinary AA sized battery before the guys. "Standard battery. Not much power, right?"

"So?" Oliver tilted his head.

Leo slid it into a small case attached to a tiny light bulb. "Lights off," he nodded at Logan.

Enshrouded in darkness, Leo clicked a switch. The room flooded with sunlight.

"Woah!" Logan beamed.

"One battery worth of energy can light an acre for a month," Leo announced, brimming with pride.

"How'd you do that?" Oliver's mouth drooped open.

"Incoming," Ben brushed against Oliver, knocking the poor guy over, cackling at his own joke.

"Cool," he examined Leo's invention. Turning his attention to the guys, he announced. "I got promoted! Drinks on me at The Alehouse!"

"Congrats!" Laughed Leo.

"I'll pass," Logan clapped Ben's shoulder. "But thanks anyway."

"They've got kosher beer," Ben hollered as Logan walked out.

Leo and Oliver accompanied Ben to The Alehouse to celebrate.

"So, how's your secret project getting on?" Ben's smile reminded Leo of a shark. His heart raced for fear Oliver might blab. Much as he liked Ben, he didn't trust anyone close to Jezebel or who was involved with Beast Corp. Ben was in Jezebel's inner circle and had been roped in to volunteer for Beast Corp's projects.

Leo sighed. Mei's new job was the real reason he stopped returning her calls. Now that he'd dug up dirt on Beast Corp, he regretted encouraging her to join that company.

"Oh. It's fun," Oliver replied. His nose and ears had turned red.

"Macallan Luxury Whiskey," Ben poured a glass for each of them. "I heard from Ethan you guys got a big project going."

"Mm hmm," Oliver sipped his drink.

"I want in," Ben stated.

"Ask Leo," Oliver pointed at his buddy, moments before his head hit the counter. His snores drowned out the music.

"So Leo, old buddy," Ben's attempt at innocence looked wolfish.

A text from Logan. "Get to the apartment. Just you and Ollie. Now!"

"So how about it?" Ben raised an eyebrow.

"I'll think about it," Leo smiled. "After I put my housemate to bed."

Ben nodded, waving him off as he poured himself another drink.

A cab ride later, Leo heaved Oliver over his shoulders and lugged him home. His heart sank at the sight of the firemen at the foot of the building.

The stench of smoke and soot lingered in the air. Logan met them before they could reach the entrance.

“What happened?” Leo took in the grisly sight of charred walls as they entered the apartment.

“Explosion from your light source. Destroyed all our work. If I hadn’t stepped out of the room, I’d have been killed.” Fury burned in Logan’s eyes.

“My light source couldn’t have exploded,” Leo frowned.

“It didn’t,” Logan lowered his voice. “Someone stuck an explosive on it.”



Jayden

DEBUSSY’S LA CATHÉDRALE engloutie played in the background, a suitable accompaniment to the sea’s crashing waves beneath Liam’s new restaurant. The intoxicating fragrance of tuberose filled its chambers.

“Great hideaway,” Jayden leaned into the plush, leather sofa, sipping the rose wine Liam’s personal sommelier recommended. Its complex bouquet – sharp strawberries, subtle pomegranate and with rose undertones, spiced with cinnamon and lifted by lemon, agreed with his palate.

“I know,” Liam smirked. He had the café built overlooking the ocean for the amazing scenery.

Ethan sat beside Jayden, his eyes glued to the computer, oblivious to his surroundings.

“Take a break,” Jayden nudged his friend. “Enjoy the spectacular view. It’s not every day us old friends meet up.”

“Hmm?” Ethan furrowed his brow, closing his laptop with a sheepish grin. “Yeah. I guess this can wait.”

Jayden, Liam, Ethan and Oliver, the four musketeers spent much of their childhood and teenage years together. Though apart due to work commitments, their friendship never faltered.

“Where’s Ollie?” Liam glanced at his watch yet again. “Tardiness is unlike him.”

“Sorry I’m late, guys,” Oliver scrambled into the private room. Eyes bloodshot, once immaculate hair in a mess, he plopped into the vacant seat.

“What happened to you?” Liam closed his gaping mouth.

“Oh, Leo’s invention exploded taking Oliver’s work with it, almost killing their landlord, leaving their apartment a charred mess,” Ethan offered.

“It was sabotage,” Oliver whispered.

“Who’d want to sabotage you guys?” Ethan eyed him like a curious cat.

“Well, duh. Whoever we’re building the bunker to hide from?” Oliver hissed.

“How’d they know?” Ethan tilted his head.

“Maybe *you* told them?” Oliver glared at Ethan.

“Me? I only told Ben. He’s my buddy from the army,” Ethan huffed.

“He’s Jezebel’s minion and volunteers for Beast Corp projects,” Oliver fumed. “Leo’s devastated. Emunah’s a nervous wreck. Months of our hard work – all wiped out! Logan could have died!”

“Oh,” Ethan looked at his hands. “How can I make up for it?”

“What’s done can’t be undone,” Oliver sighed. “Not a word about the project to anyone who isn’t directly involved.”

“As long as you guys kept your plans off-site or in a cloud, an infusion of funds could help recover the loss and expedite the project,” Liam picked up his phone.

“No outside contractors. One leak and the project’s compromised,” Oliver ran his hands through his hair.

Jayden had the know-how to help them build what was needed. More importantly, he wanted to be there to support his friends. “I’ll offer my expertise and personal labour.”

“We can certainly use that,” Oliver picked his mobile to call Leo, the project’s architect.

“Let me know what equipment he needs. I’ll have them sent wherever, whenever,” Liam offered.

“It’s best that you guys talk to Leo directly,” Oliver stood up. “He’s locked himself in his room since the sabotage.”

A waiter walked in bearing Oysters on the Half Shell.

“How many courses are there?” Oliver’s frustration infected Jayden.

“Eight,” Liam replied. “Hearty portions. Chill and enjoy since we’re all here.”

As the evening wore on, Oliver’s tension ebbed away. By the fourth course – Lobster Thermidor, Oliver was his jovial self once more, the stresses of the previous day forgotten.

“We’ll ride my new Bugatti La Voiture Noire to your home,” Liam insisted.

Four Musketeers sitting in absolute comfort, chauffeured in that prestigious car, exchanged stories in camaraderie. The evening couldn’t get better when screeching brakes and a resulting crash interrupted their fellowship.

“Ollie?” Liam turned towards the passenger beside the wrecked door.

“I’m fine,” he replied. Shaken but unhurt. The oncoming car that destroyed the door, missed Oliver by a mere centimetre.

The culprit bolted, with Ethan hot on his heels.

Minutes later, Ethan returned.

Alone.

“Lost him,” he panted. “He ran into the forest. A green light blinded me. When my vision cleared, he was gone.”



Leo - Strange Encounters

Leo

Leo moved out of Logan's apartment complex and into a caravan. He had it rendered invisible through Leo Tech camouflage technology. It functioned as the workshop where he, Oliver, Ethan and Jayden built whatever gadgets their secret base would require, though Leo was the only one who actually lived in there.

His life revolved around preparations for the underground base, secrecy being paramount.

The feeds from Leo Tech Nano Drones blinked out every time they hovered above a potential underground bunker site at a specific time each night. There were rumours of extra-terrestrial abductions and paranormal activity in that vicinity, which Leo dismissed as hogwash.

"Sorry we're late," Oliver stumbled into the caravan with Emunah in tow.

"I need you guys to wear these for tonight's investigation," Leo handed both friends Leo Tech smart bands, miniature microphones and earphones. "I'll direct you."

"Record audio visuals," he gave a case of Leo Tech contact lenses and bugs to Ollie designed for that exact purpose.

The howling wind chilled Leo's spine, as if warning of something sinister ahead. Emunah paled, but Ollie seemed unperturbed.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" Guilt gnawed at him for even asking fragile Emunah to help him with this. "Maybe we can postpone this until after Jayden's business trip."

"I can handle myself," Emunah thrust her chin up. Someday, her stubborn pride could land her in trouble. "If you guys can do this, so can I."

Oliver shrugged. He too knew that once Emunah's mind's made up, no one could dissuade her.

Leo watched with trepidation as the pair headed out for their mission.

From the feeds, he could tell that the pair fared better than his drones. Well within the given coordinates, their instruments showed readings of radiation levels that were higher than normal but still safe for humans. The electromagnetic fields detected suggested paranormal activity.

"You guys see anything unusual?" Leo stared at the readings.

"Insects *slap*" Emunah grumbled. "Everywhere."

"Other than that?" Leo ran his hands through his hair.

"Nothing yet," Oliver replied, "Wait.."

Chants crescendoed in the background.

"I see *zzzt*..."

Sizzles of interference replaced Oliver's voice before the transmission stopped.

"Oliver? Emunah?" Leo's heart bolted, terrified for his friends. "Quit fooling around. Say something."

Their equipment unresponsive, his drones unable to function within those coordinates, Leo had no way of knowing whether they were still alive. If he were religious, he'd pray. But he trusted Science, his own skills and nothing else.

He's not a fighter, but he had gadgets that could take down any threat they might be facing.

Leo donned his Kevlar body armour, grabbed guns and bombs that could tank literal tanks while planning strategy.

If ghosts exists, what do you take them down with? Holy water?

Ethan said he kept a flask in case of vampire encounters. Was he joking? At this point in time, Leo hoped not.

He rummaged through Ethan's belongings searching.

Ethan would understand. This may be a matter of life or death for Oliver and Emunah.

Rustling noises.

Outside the caravan.

What got his friends could be at the door.

He grabbed the nearest thing he could use as a weapon – a heavy saucepan.

Yanking the door open, he swung the saucepan.

Yowl!

A ginger cat sprang out the way.

“Sorry, Mathilda,” he muttered. Sheepish.

His feline friend glared at him and scampered off.

Zztt.

“We’re fine,” Oliver’s voice trembled through the speaker phone, betraying hidden terror. “On the way back.”

Oliver’s car screeched to a halt beside Leo’s caravan.

Hands shaking, steps unsteady, pale faced Emunah staggered out. “UFO. Alien. Stared at me,” she squeaked.

Leo was tempted to check Emunah into the asylum. Since the A.I. episode, she’s been spewing nonsense. Then again, he had verified most of her outlandish claims. His gut said she spoke the truth.

“Those abductions?” Oliver spoke up. “Murders. Sacrificed to an idol.” His face grim, he showed Leo the gathered evidence.



Emunah & Mei – Revelation

Emunah

Emunah leaned into the wooden chair, barely able to keep her eyes open while Henry led the morning's Bible study. After last night's events, she couldn't sleep. Neither could Oliver, going by his panda eyes.

"Revelation 3:3 Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee," Henry quoted Jesus' words from the Book of Revelation.

Henry fled Somalia to escape persecution when he became a Christian. Through a series of what some call lucky coincidences, but which Henry insists to be divine appointment, he ended up working for Jayden as his personal chef.

Amelia, his housemate, worked for Jayden too. She left her home for a better life, but the job offer turned out to be a scam. She contemplated taking her life when she met Oliver. Ollie led her to Christ, brought her into his church and got her a job as Jayden's part time housekeeper.

Emunah nodded as Henry elaborated on Jesus' imminent coming. Her eyelids were so heavy, she shut them momentarily and lost time.

A sharp jab in her side brought her back.

"You were snoring," Amelia whispered.

"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me."

To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne."

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches,” Henry finished reading the end of the chapter, concluding that day’s session.

Emunah wasn’t the only one. Across the table, Oliver sat with his head bowed forward, eyes shut as if in prayer. His mouth gaped open, drool spilling from one side.

The mouth-watering smell of roast chicken and baked potatoes wafted from the kitchen, giving Emunah a fresh lease of life. She kicked Oliver’s shin under the table.

“Huh?” The lanky man’s head snapped up. “What happened?”

“Your turn to lead next week,” Henry laughed as he handed the thick guidebook to Oliver.

Ding!

The oven timer went off.

“Lunch is ready,” sang Amelia as she headed for the kitchen. Whenever Henry hosts, food would be amazing. He’s a professional chef.

Rejuvenated after his long “prayer”, Oliver recounted the previous night’s events, captivating his audience.

“Would the culprits get away scot-free, to kill again?” Amelia shivered in spite of the warm weather.

“Hard to say. Leo handed the evidence to the police, but we suspect the owner of Beast Corp is the guy who ordered the killings, and he’s pretty much untouchable,” Oliver grimaced.

“Why’s that?” Amelia asked.

“He’s got most of the police chiefs and judges in his pocket,” Henry replied. “If he’s the culprit, there’s nothing anyone can do anything about it. He’d probably get a scapegoat to take the fall.”

“There’s no stopping him then?” Emunah frowned.

“God will put an end to this eventually. We are in the last days,” Oliver ruffled her hair. “We can look forward to Jesus’ second coming to snatch us away from this mess the world is devolving into.”

“What if I get left behind?” Emunah’s cheeks felt like ice. “I’ve done things I’m not proud of. What if I get left behind because of that?”

“It’s about God’s grace, not what you do,” Henry explained. “John 6:39-40 says

And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. And this is the will of him that sent me, that everyone which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.”

“Huh? I don’t understand,” Emunah frowned.

“It means he won’t leave anyone who belongs to him behind. If you believe in Jesus, you are his and he will take you with him when he returns,” Henry’s words comforted Emunah.

“Well, I hope he hurries,” Emunah’s gaze wandered towards the window. Something seemed to be watching them. Her stomach turned.

“Alien,” she whispered, pointing at the window. “There.”

The guys saw it too. Henry leaped out of the window first. Oliver followed in pursuit.

An eerie green light struck outside the window. Stars lingered after the light faded. Minutes later, Henry returned.

“Emunah’s right. Alien creature looked like a frog, the size of a dwarf. It flashed sharp teeth at me, then vanished when that green light hit.”



Mei

“HI MEI,” A LARGE HAND obscured her view.

“Ben?” Mei warmed at a familiar face in the hostile environment. “What are you doing here?”

“Claiming my prize,” Ben exuded the enthusiasm of a five-year-old in a toy shop.

“What prize?” She already knew the answer. She’d been working on the powerful new bodies the chosen few would inhabit.

“Immortality. Superpowers,” Ben replied. “Today’s the day I’ll be made more than human.”

“Congratulations, my friend,” she grinned, happy for him as he disappeared into the top secret facility where transference takes place.

Although Mei’s supervisor granted her access to the rest of the building, that one room remained out of bounds. The chosen ones entered that room human and emerged immortal, or so she was told. Even though she did the grunt work preparing new bodies for the lucky few, she had never witnessed the transference.

Curiosity got the better of her. Only her supervisor would be in the transference facility.

Ben followed her supervisor into the room. Just before the door closed, she slipped in and ducked into a nearby closet. Even for her petite frame, it was a tight fit.

She could sense Ben’s excitement as he stepped into the transference cylinder. After this, his mind would leave his mortal body and enter the immortal, super-powered clone carefully cultivated for him. Her heart pounded with anticipation as she watched in silence.

Something didn’t seem right. Ben’s face paled. The terror on his face freaked her out. What did he see? What’s going on?

“Let me out! I changed my mind,” Ben’s voice resonated through the room as he thrashed the cylinder.

Her supervisor pulled the lever, paralysing Ben from neck down.

“Memory and thought process download initiated,” announced the robotic female voice.

“What is your soul if not your memories and thought processes?” Her supervisor began. “As long as your soul is housed in a living body, you live. Such, is the true meaning of immortality.”

Though paralysed, Ben looked terrified as he kept staring at his clone.

“My creation, your clone, has your DNA spliced with the best the animal world has to offer, some artificial genes as well as dark matter from another dimension,” Mei’s supervisor caressed the cylinder in which the clone lay.

“Soul upload complete,” the robotic female voice announced. The clone opened its eyes. Its lips curved in a sinister smile, fangs protruding from the edges of its mouth. “I am Ben,” it said in Ben’s own voice.

It’s done isn’t it? Ben now inhabits his new body. Mei let out the breath she’d been holding.

“Termination of source matter initiated,” announced the robotic voice, sending chills up Mei’s spine. It dawned on her what the transference process really was.

The real Ben’s still alive and in his original body. Transference gave the clone created from Ben’s DNA his memories.

Electricity surged into Ben, electrocuting him. His horrific dying screams etched permanently into Mei’s memory.

Mei’s gut twisted. Disgust overwhelmed her as she realised the truth. She had to get out of here. Screw the money. She didn’t want anything to do with this ever again.

“Enjoyed the show, my dear?” Her supervisor’s voice crawled up her skin as he locked eyes with her.



Emunah - Jayden's Yacht Party

Emunah

Emunah leaned against the railing, a glass of cocktail in hand savouring the fresh sea breeze as the party's host, Jayden, walked over with a hot babe hanging off each arm.

"Hey Em," he waved at her. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Mm hmm," she smiled back, shrugging off the jealous looks Jayden's groupies shot her.

"Come join us," he nudged her. "Show's starting soon."

Oliver sat beside Jayden at the counter. "You heard right? What's been happening?" Oliver stared at the sky.

"Yeah. I'm prepared for the worst," Jayden sipped his champagne.

"Are you?" Oliver scrutinised Jayden as a hot babe straddled his lap.

"Two women shall be grinding together; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two men shall be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left," Oliver quoted Luke 17:35-36.

"Well yeah. Two women are welcome to grind over me," Jayden chuckled. "Come on man, stop preaching at my party. Let me enjoy life first."

While watching Henry toss a pancake, Emunah heard a loud command, an archangel's voice and a trumpet's call.

Emunah looked up in the clouds. In her heart of hearts, she knew that voice!

Jesus!

Her heart leaped. Joy bubbled in her chest.

He kept his promise!

It was *him!*

Her Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who loved her so much that he gave his life for her. He hovered in the clouds. His brilliant gaze greeted her, overflowing with love.

She could see a host of people, flying with Jesus in anticipation.

Souls of Christians who had passed on, coming with Jesus to claim their resurrected bodies as promised.

The sea around the yacht came to life.

Men, women and children, emerged from the water. Shining. Radiant. Just like Emunah's resurrected Lord Jesus.

These resurrected bodies met their souls, returning to Jesus in the clouds.

It didn't freak her out. They weren't zombies. They were living people, fellow Christians in immortal bodies.

What came next blew her mind.

Power surged through Emunah. The strange yet familiar warmth spread through her skin and into her bones. She felt her body change even as a soft, beautiful glow encompassed her.

In that instant, her mortal body turned immortal. Her weakness replaced by immense power. Her body became like Jesus' resurrected body. Curious, she looked down at her translated self, gasping at the splendour she now possessed.

Ben spoke often about acquiring superpowers in an immortal body. What was promised him couldn't hold a candle to what Emunah had become. She could fly. The biting cold no longer bothered her. She was invulnerable.

Jesus hovered in the clouds beckoning her. Instinctively, she flew up towards the clouds to join him.

She felt as free as a bird in the air. The sensation of flight, exhilarating. Gravity had no hold on her.

She was real, not a immaterial spirit. That much was evident the way she bumped into a drone, sending it spinning off in a tangent.

Laughing with joy, she soared past an eagle frozen in time.

In a twinkling of an eye.

Of course! She moved faster than the eye could follow.

As she approached the clouds, she saw her Daddy. He died ten years ago but here he was – alive and young once more. She recognised his hearty laugh!

“Daddy!” she yelled.

Her Daddy hovered mid air and grabbed her in a bear hug. “My little Emu’s all grown now.”

Penelope had flown ahead of her, now fully alive, stunning in her perfect beauty and radiant with joy. Along the way, Oliver, Henry and Amelia, also in perfect, immortal bodies joined them as they gathered in the clouds around Jesus. What surprised her – the presence of a prickly old neighbour Simeon. He’s a Christian too? When did he get saved?

They waited with Jesus until the last member of the now immortal church joined them.

In unison, they left Earth’s atmosphere and soared into the vast expanse of space.



Mei - Busted!

Mei

Mei froze in her hideout. Her supervisor had known she was there all along.

His eyes glowed an eerie green. That all too familiar flame blazed in the palm of his hand, far more powerful than on the clones she'd tested.

"You're dispensable," he growled.

He's a super-powered clone. He's not human.

That realisation made her stomach turn.

Darting out of the closet, she ran out the room and ducked into a vent. Heart pounding so hard she was afraid it might leave her chest; she covered the vent with its grating.

Holding her breath, she watched the hulking man stalk past, grateful he was but an older version without enhanced senses.

Coast's clear.

She bolted.

The security guard looked up from his phone, nodded at her, then continued playing with his device. The supervisor hadn't revoked her access yet.

To avoid arousing suspicion, she kept a brisk pace until she was out of his line of sight. Then she bolted for her car.

Her heart sank.

The hulking man leaned against her car, waiting like a leopard for its prey. He hadn't seen her yet.

Change of plans. She sprinted.

Her training for marathons paid off. She made it to the airport and lost herself in the crowd.

Scanning outbound flights for available seats, she bought a ticket and boarded the plane before the gates closed.

Safe at last.

It didn't matter where she was heading. This flight would take her to the kingdom in the North. From there, she could wait for an available flight to her home in the Eastern kingdom, safe from the clutches of the monsters at Beast Corp.

Leaning into her seat, Mei stared out of the window.

Her keen eyes caught sight of human forms shooting up, through the clouds. In the twinkling of an eye, they were gone.

A clattering tray on the aisle caught her attention. Porcelain shattered, liquids spilled as the stewardess carrying it disappeared.

"Saw that?" She turned to her neighbour.

The seat beside her - empty.

The elderly woman who was reading a book beside her had vanished.

Chaos reigned on the plane.

"Pilot's gone!"

The floor dropped. Her stomach plummeted with it.

Mei screamed.



Secret Service Agent Ah Loong

"ERADICATE THE UNDERGROUND church."

Those were Ah Loong's orders.

Those ungrateful wrenches!

The esteemed Leader of the East had gone through all that trouble creating the government sanctioned church just for them, yet they spat in his face by going underground.

Those stubborn Christian fanatics would rather die than betray their brethren. So, he sent Ah Chan to fake conversion to Christianity in order to infiltrate their community.

They're meeting. Sending coordinates.

Good man. Ah Chan's as reliable as ever.

Hushed voices singing hymns to their foreign God wafted out of abandoned warehouse in a forgotten part of the country.

Ah Loong and his squad blasted open the door, revealing peasants kneeling in prayer.

“Leader is merciful,” Ah Loong projected his voice so that the farthest man in the room could hear him. “Renounce your foreign God and you will live.”

A trumpet sounded from the clouds. He saw a cross light up the sky. Then the Christian fanatics, shining like stars flew up towards the cross, vanishing into the clouds.

Ah Loong and his squad faced an empty warehouse. Their prey snatched from Death’s jaws.

“It’s the Rapture,” Ah Chan, uncharacteristically emotional, fell to his knees, his cheeks streaked with tears.

Ah Loong’s froze. The Christian God rescued his followers.

“Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, I believe. I’m sorry,” Ah Chan babbled. Incoherent.

Ah Loong knew what he saw.

The walls in his heart broke as an unseen power greater than himself forced him to his knees, weeping as he surrendered to the God of the Christians.

He was not alone. The entire squad witnessed the power of Jesus Christ whom these Christians worshipped. One by one they fell on their knees begging Jesus whom Christians worshipped, for mercy.

His phone rang. Dread ate his stomach.

“Run. Save the Christians you find,” he urged his men. “Now!”

Steeling himself, he picked the call.

“Report to the headquarters with your squad at once,” his reporting officer demanded.

“Yes, sir,” he boarded his copter alone.

“Sir,” Ah Chan moved to follow.

“No, I’ll take this for the team. Solo. The rest of you go underground. Protect the true Christians.”

With that, he piloted the copter and headed for the HQ. Alone.

He’d heard enough from those he’d interrogated to know what they believed - That all have sinned (he knew he did without anyone having to tell him) and the punishment for sin is death (which he long suspected but would rather not think about).

The Christians insisted that Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay for their sins and had come back to life the third day, ascended to heaven to be with God the Father and would return for them. He never could swallow that part until he’d seen Jesus return for them with his very eyes.

Heartbroken, he prayed, “God, I believe. Forgive me.”

Peace enveloped him as he faced his upcoming death sentence.



Mei, Jayden & Boris - Left Behind

Mei

The plunging plane righted itself.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your First Officer. We experienced some unexpected phenomenon in which our pilot vanished but I have taken over the flight controls and I want to assure everyone the situation is under control and we have taken all necessary precautions.”

Sprawled on the floor, Mei pulled herself up and got back in her seat. Her heart had to be beating a thousand thumps a second.

She saw people fly through the clouds. Emunah mentioned Jesus coming back for her and for all true believers. Was that it?

She needed answers.

Call it insane coincidence but she'd run into Eminah at the airport. The girl happened to be sending a friend off and bumped into her just before she went through the boarding gate.

Emunah had given her a Bible in the airport after she'd checked in her luggage.

“Great reading material for your long flight home,” she grinned, shoving the thick book into her hand.

Retrieving the bible from her hand luggage, Mei flipped through the pages, trying to find something that could make sense of what she'd witnessed. Her eyelids grew heavier by the minute. Then she was in her late grandmother's room.

“Child, do not believe the lies of the West,” her grandmother chided her. “This foreign God you are reading about belongs to the west. This is not your god. Do not turn your back on the gods of your ancestors,” Grandma's eyes bore through her.

Familiar spirit masquerading as your grandmother's ghost.

Oliver's warning came forefront in her mind.

"I intended to let you live to see your twenty-fifth birthday, but because of your insolence, you are coming to hell with me. Now!" Grandma's face morphed into a hideous demon's.

"Jesus! Save me!" Mei cried.

A blinding light.

The demon vanished.

Grandma's room faded in and out as Mei stirred, returning to the waking world, with the open bible on her lap.



Jayden

JAYDEN COULDN'T STOP his hands from shaking. It took everything he had to keep his composure. With a frozen smile, he locked the door behind him and dropped his façade.

Sinking into his sofa, he buried his head in his hands, sobs wracking his body.

Terror intermingled with despair held him in a vice grip. He'd waited too long. He'd turned down one chance too many. He's missed that one and only evacuation. Henceforth, it'll be seven years of hell on earth under the rule of the Antichrist.

A cultural Christian, he'd attended church since childhood. Emunah and Oliver spouted Bible verses to warn him, which he'd dismiss with a crude joke.

Stupid!

Kicking himself now wouldn't change things. They were gone. Evacuated. Raptured.

He couldn't get this particular bible verse out of his mind:

Revelation 19:20 And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone.

He pulled open the drawer beside him and reached for Emunah's last gift – a leather-bound Bible.

Hugging it, ignoring his wet cheeks, he smiled, recalling the silly girl in the bookshop, with a trolley full of identical bibles. She turned red admitting she got these as all-purpose gifts when she had no idea what to buy for everyone on her Christmas gift list. He already missed that nutty kook.

"Pretend you didn't see this," she pleaded, cheeks as red as cherries. "Act surprised, okay?"

He flipped to the first page. Few could read her scribbles. He could, albeit with a fair amount of effort.

Dear Jayden

You're the best earthly friend a gal could ever hope for. Thanks for being that shoulder for me to cry on.

Jayden grimaced, remembering the abuse that Emunah had put up with for far too long. In spite of everything that monster put her through. When she accidentally ran into her then boyfriend two-timing her, she was inconsolable. Jayden wanted to beat the man to pulp.

Then he realised he was no better.

I hope you take eternity seriously. Our time on earth is limited and we have to face judgement one day.

I hope we can continue hanging out as buddies in the new heaven and new earth for all eternity.

You know what I mean. I don't have to spell it out for you.

Love

Your annoying little sister/buddy

Emunah.

He dried his cheek with the back of his hand and flipped to the part of the Bible Oliver ranted about while building their secret underground base.

2 Thessalonians 2:6-12 And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time.

For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.

And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming:

Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders,

And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved.

And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie:

That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Oliver, Henry and Emunah often debated that passage which amused Jayden to no end. It's not funny now.

Whoever the restrainer was, Jayden knew in his heart that restrainer will no longer restrain evil. The Antichrist will reveal himself and deceive whoever's not on God's side.

It's time to take sides. Choose Jesus or choose the Satan. No contest.

John 3:16-17 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

The love of God is insurmountable. It's sacrificial love for a sinner like Jayden.

Satan doesn't have Jayden's best interest at heart. Jesus does.

John 10:10 The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.



TEARS STREAMING DOWN his cheeks, Jayden fell on his knees and prayed.

"Dear God, I'm a sinner. Please forgive me. I repent of my sins. Thank you Jesus for giving up your life on the cross to save me, washing away my sins with your precious blood. In Jesus name I pray, amen."

It wasn't the most eloquent prayer but he knew God heard him. The heaviness that weighed him down vanished. He knew whatever happens next, he wouldn't face it alone for God is with him.



Boris

BORIS LEANED AGAINST the cold metal railing, his eyes fixated on the circling plane.

That's Natalie's flight.

Ever since his beloved wife, Natasha passed away two years ago, their only child, bubbly Natalie, is all he has left. She's the ray of sunshine that lights his otherwise bleak life.

Without warning, the man standing beside him vanished, his phone clattering on the floor.

Natalie's plane wavered, spinning into a nose dive.

Panic took hold of him. He could barely breathe. On instinct, he shot a prayer to the unseen God Natasha worshipped while still alive. "Jesus, if you are real, please save my Natalie."

As if in answer to his prayer, the plane righted itself, landing on the runway, decelerating to a complete stop.

Boris sprinted to the arrival hall to meet his daughter. His sister dropped Natalie off at the departure gate. Natalie had travelled often enough to take the plane on her own.

The passengers of that flight streamed out of the gate but Natalie wasn't with them.

Another strange thing.

That flight was fully booked, yet few people alighted. The last passenger walked through security. She was a petite Asian woman with intelligent eyes.

Without thinking, he grabbed the tiny woman's arm.

"Let go!" she snarled like a feral cat.

"Sorry miss," he was flabbergasted at his own misbehaviour. Keeping his hands to himself, he stepped in her path, showing her a photo of his daughter in desperation. "Have you seen my daughter Natalie?"

The woman's expression softened as she fingered the image of the little girl in the bright red coat. "She sat across the aisle from me. She's a sweet girl."

Hope bubbled in his heart. "Where is she?"

"Raptured," came the wistful reply.

Dread crept up his being. "What do you mean? Is she okay? Do you know where she is?"

The little woman's eyes glistened. "She was in her seat, hugging her teddy bear when she vanished," her eyes had a faraway look.

"What do you mean vanished?" Boris' heart raced. All rational thought left him. "She's all I have left in this world."

The little woman showed him the news reports on her phone. All over the world, staunch Christians vanished. Some news outlets called it The Rapture. Others called it mass abduction. Different theories flew around speculating what happened but Rapture, Alien Abduction and Global Conspiracy were the most prominent.

“I’m sorry about your loss,” the petite woman’s craned her neck to look at him. The warmth in her eyes assuaged the turmoil within, that threatened to drown him.

Boris looked down at the tiny live wire of a woman. Rubbing the back of his neck, his cheeks burned.

“Where are my manners,” he mumbled. “Sorry, I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Boris.”

A brilliant smile lit the pretty little woman’s face. “I’m Mei,” she offered her hand.



Logan – Emunah’s Disappearance

Logan

Leaning against the balustrade of his penthouse, Logan took in the panoramic view. Crisp cool breeze caressing his skin invigorated him.

His tenant, Lisa, coached her hyper energetic triplets, Marie, Michelle and Molly, in the balcony below. Lisa had a voice like foghorn. You could hear her every word throughout the building. Her children inherited her outstanding trait, though they sounded more like ambulance sirens.

Her husband, Larry, joined them, bearing a pitcher. “Lemonade any-?”

All at once, the three children and their father vanished. The momentary silence was met with Lisa’s deafening scream.

Sticking his fingers into his ears to protect what’s left of his hearing, Logan’s attention fell on the streets below. A now driverless truck ran into a passing car. Random pedestrians and drivers had also disappeared.

Were his eyes playing tricks on him?

He’s certain he watched the children and their father blink out of existence. Screams around him, yelling names of presumably missing loved ones couldn’t be denied.

There always is an explanation. Logan picked up his smartphone and scrolled through new reports. This sudden disappearance of people was a global affair. It wasn’t random. Every individual reported missing had a connection to Christianity – Emunah’s religion.

A sense of foreboding creeped up on him as he retrieved Emunah’s messages. She’d sent them while on her friend, Jayden’s yacht.

“Saw that alien again. This time at Henry’s. It got away before the guys could catch it.

Logan, I’m scared. I think it’s following me.”

He called Emunah’s number.

No reply.

He left a message hoping she’d call him back.

He pulled out his computer and ran a search summarising all global news feeds.

All over the world people have disappeared.

One common thread was that all these missing folks were born again Christians.

The reigning theory was that the Christian Rapture had happened. Another theory was a global conspiracy that got rid of people who knew too much.

A third, fielded by UFO believers claimed alien abductions.

Logan checked his phone. He called her again. Still no response.

Panic set in.



Emunah

STARS.

Brilliant points of light, a myriad of colour shone through the dark expanse, more brilliant than ever. Never faltering.

“It’s amazing,” gasped Emunah pointing at the stunning display.

In the vacuum of space, there’s no air to breathe, or to carry sound waves. Yet here they were conversing with one another as they took in the sights, with Jesus leading the way home.

Emunah’s eyes widened as they flew past a ring nebula. This one had an indigo centre surrounded by fuzzy rings of light, the innermost being blue, green, yellow, orange then red. Like a circular rainbow, but brighter.

Back on Earth, Emunah yearned to travel – to see the world. This trip's far better.

In mortal bodies, no one could look Jesus in the face and hope to live. He had to dim His glory to the minimal, and even then, one would fall as if dead.

Emunah looked up at her beloved Savior. His smile, so full of love, filled her with joy. Communing with him face to face, sharing her wonder and delight as he revealed amazing things she could barely wrap her head around.

All too soon, they arrived at the Third Heaven. God's abode.

If the journey here was awesome, words could not describe the Third Heaven.

Jesus brought everyone to the mansions he'd prepared for them.

Emunah's mansion was more a palace than a house. The entirety of which was carved from a massive, flawless precious stone.

Was it milk opal? The roof, she was certain, was made of an enormous, unbroken piece of, clear, flawless rose quartz. The hall was massive, the floor and walls- carved from precious milk opal.

After exploring their mansions, the Bride of Christ was brought before God's throne room.

Emunah beheld a massive throne, so pure and bright it would blind mortal eyes.

Jesus Christ sat on it. He was going to judge His church.

She felt a lump in her throat recalling the lies she told. Her cowardice. The borrowed stuff she never returned. Did that count as theft?

The penalty for sin – any sin - is death.

"I paid the price for your sins with my blood which I shed on the cross," Jesus assured her from His throne. "Your sins are forgiven."

A heavy weight lifted off Emunah's heart. Her hands stopped shaking.

Henry, who shepherded Emunah, Amelia and Oliver, was given a crown of glory that would never fade away.

A famous evangelist who led many to Jesus looked expectantly while his works too were tested by fire. All were burnt to ashes. His motivation was not Jesus but the vast sums of money his ministry received through tithes. His rewards lay in the planes and other luxuries he owned through his ministry. The disappointed soul was saved, though without eternal rewards for his work on earth.

To Oliver, in addition to the crown of righteousness, Jesus commended him, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord."

Emunah herself delighted in the rewards Jesus gave her, until she saw that Penelope received the same rewards.

Bitterness gnawed at her. The sense of injustice reared its ugly head. Penelope had known Jesus a few minutes before her accident. Emunah spent more than a decade walking with Jesus. She bit her lip, hoping Jesus wouldn't notice.

Jesus' eyes, filled with love, pierced her very soul. "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?"

So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen."

Looking around at the joyous faces, she couldn't help but wonder how Jayden, Logan, Leo, and the friends left behind were faring.



Leo – Hell

Leo

Much as Leo wanted to order home delivery, he couldn't risk exposing his hideout. No drive-through in his camouflaged caravan either. That meant wasting an hour in the packed café queuing and waiting for his lunch.

The mouth-watering smell of freshly baked pizza made his stomach rumble. He planned to buy a week's worth of meals. One for lunch and the rest to freeze for future meals, to reduce time wastage.

He blinked.

The packed Café wasn't crowded anymore.

Several people in front of him had vanished, as had the guy at the counter.

Confusion reigned.

Leo took in his surroundings intent on making sense of what just happened.



ALIEN ABDUCTION?

Emunah and Oliver both reported encountering aliens. Leo's instruments malfunctioned every single time that happened so he didn't have concrete proof but he wouldn't rule out their accounts.

He built these sensors into his watch, which functioned without a hiccup. *No alien involvement.*

Checking news feeds and social media on his phone, he found this sudden disappearance of people to be a global event. Many theories popped all over the internet. One commonality among the victims was that they were all Christians.

The Rapture

He brushed that stray thought aside, thinking of other possibilities.

Could this be an elaborate hoax pulled off with holograms?

No, the lady in front stepped on his toe. An accident, no doubt. But definitely not a hologram.

Teleportation?

A human being is too massive to travel at the speed of light.



THEN WHAT EXACTLY HAPPENED?



THEY WERE RAPTURED.

That random thought refused to leave his head.

Oliver's fault.



HE PICKED UP HIS PHONE and called Oliver.

No one answered.

Ollie's probably busy at his friend's party. He left Oliver a message asking him to return his call. He texted Emunah who didn't reply either.

Notifications on social media led him to pictures that tagged both of Oliver and Emunah on social media. These were posted by Jayden, Emunah's crush.

The final video he posted showed them chilling on the yacht, when Emunah, Oliver and two others vanished.

He read the account claiming these missing people had been raptured.

Raptured.

That's unacceptable. It would mean that the Jesus whom Oliver and Emunah talked incessantly about had taken them away, to escape the coming judgement.

It would mean that God existed and created everything. It would mean he'd one day have to account to his Creator.

He shuddered at the still vivid memory of his dream.

"...and have the keys of hell and of death."

"It's no more than a dream," he assured himself. "This universe was created by the big bang. When we die, we become dust and cease to exist," he muttered to himself. "The goal is to stay alive and make the most of this life. There's no heaven or hell after this."

World religions teach there's heaven above and hell below, but his father says these are figments of the imagination, made up by men on want to control others through superstition.

That's what his parents taught him. That's what he learned in school. Yet a niggling doubt deep in the recesses of his mind whispered otherwise.

What do you know lies beneath your feet in earth's core?

That thought unbidden came to his mind. "Molten metal about 5,200°Centigrade," he muttered.

He found himself plummeting through earth's crust, mantle, outer core and into the inner core of the planet. Heat, more intense than a furnace, embraced him. Fiery flames licked his skin. All around, agonising screams of people in torment pierced his ears. His eardrums felt like they would shatter.

Hell!

Then the vision vanished. He fell to his knees at the store's door, sobbing.

He didn't care that the people around him stared like he was some nut job.

"God, forgive me. Jesus, save me," he pleaded. He knew hell's real. If he continued his stubborn ways, that's where he's headed. "I repent."



Emunah - The End Begins

The air thickened with anticipation. Four glorious angelic beings, each simultaneously terrible yet majestic, worshipped him who sits on the throne. Emanating unimaginable power, he shone like glowing metal. A brilliant rainbow surrounded him. He held a book in his right hand. It was sealed with seven seals.

An angel spoke. His voice resonated through the vast throne room. “Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?”

Emunah held her breath. Like all present, she craved to know what secrets that book held. She knew for sure she’s unworthy. Murmurs filled the room as everyone looked around, hoping someone could open it.

Time dragged on. The wait – unbearable. No one stepped forward. Was there no one at all worthy to open the book?

After what seemed eternity, someone stepped forward. *Jesus!*

He walked up to his Father and took the book from him. *He prevailed! He’s worthy!*

All around Emunah, angelic beings and saints alike broke into joyous celebration, their melodious voices blending in exhilaration, worshipping both Jesus who was slain for the redemption of the saints, and him who sits on the throne.

When the songs subsided, Jesus opened the first seal, setting in motion the events of the apocalypse.

A white horse, strong and handsome, galloped onto the world stage. The man riding the horse carried a bow. He was exquisitely beautiful. Deceptively charming. The cold gleam in his eyes radiated pure evil, sending chills down Emunah’s spine.

The rider on the white horse entered the world Emunah had left behind – Earth – where many of her dear friends still called their home. There adoring crowds gave him a crown. He began conquering all who had been left behind.

The Antichrist!

Emunah shuddered, terrified for her friends.



Jayden & The Guys - The Ark

“**Y**ou guys wouldn’t believe this. The owner of Beast Corp has just been elected president,” Ethan barged into the Caravan, hyperventilating. “He now goes by the moniker Beast!”

Leo looked up from his tablet and scrutinized the red-faced man. Bored. “Old news.”

Jayden turned in the television. The news channels featured Beast, touted the Post-Vanishing saviour of the world.

“Many of you have lost loved ones to the Great Vanishing,” the charismatic man addressed the adoring crowd. “I did too.”

Jayden cringed. “They were raptured,” he muttered to himself.

Ethan nodded, “snatched away.”

“Maybe not,” Logan stayed fixated to the screen. “From what Emunah told me, I bet aliens were involved.”

“You lose!” Leo clapped Logan’s shoulder. “I checked. My instruments say no alien involvement. It’s the Rapture.”

The news broadcast featured Jezebel, the High Prophetess of the Church of Thyatira. “It’s not The Rapture,” the siren’s hypnotic voice drew men in. It took everything Jayden had to yank his eyes from her bouncing cleavage the camera focused on. “I’m still here, as are my fellow Christian brothers and sisters,” she waved at the line of Prosperity Christianity church leaders behind her.

The reporter moved on to interview the billionaire pastor of yet another mega church.

“It’s the Rapture.” Leo shook his head. “Why can’t they accept it?”

“Since when do you guys believe that Christian Rapture crap?” Logan snorted.

"Since the Rapture happened right in front of me." Jayden knew what he saw. Emunah, Oliver, Henry and Amelia were snatched away right before his very eyes. "Emunah and the rest were evacuated."

"Evacuated?" Logan raised an eyebrow. "From what?"

"Persecution by the Antichrist," Ethan growled.

"I will not rest until I bring the perpetrators of The Vanishing to justice!" On the wide television screen, Beast concluded his speech to rapturous applause.

"I hope he brings our friends back alive," Logan frowned. "Now where were we, on the bomb shelter project?"

"The Ark," Leo grimaced. "It's more than a bomb shelter. It's a shelter from the coming persecution."

"Persecution? Here? Currently?" Logan snorted. "From whom?"

"The antichrist," Ethan ran his hands through his hair. "After the restrainer is taken away, the man of sin will be revealed."

"My rabbi says Israel's promised Messiah hasn't come yet," Logan gazed at the screen. "Pity Beast isn't Jewish, or he could be the one."

"He's not," Jayden smacked the back of Logan's head. "Someone had to knock some sense into the man. From all we dug up, there's a high chance he's the antichrist."

"I doubt so," Logan returned Jayden a friendly punch. "But with the escalating tensions, we do need that bomb shelter ready soon."

"Ark," replied Leo.

"Leo's Ark," Jayden laughed. "It's an apt name for the underground base Leo designed as shelter from the coming storm."

"For starters, we need to house more people and livestock than I originally expected," Leo unfurled a map that covered the entire table top.

"Construction for the central bunkers with the adjacent animal pens and hydroponic farm have been completed," Leo pointed at the drawings in the centre of the map. "We need to work on the northern bunkers next. Then there's the issue of our food supply," Leo droned on.

“Food supply?” Ethan frowned.

“Hydroponics wouldn’t produce enough to feed the entire population,” Leo frowned. “We need to purchase food that can keep and store them to supplement our crops,” he pointed at a row of warehouses.

“I’ll take care of that,” Ethan replied.

Logan closed his gaping mouth, cleared his throat, then spoke. “Wait a second. That’s a freaking city you’re building.”

“So? Way more people volunteered than I expected,” Leo shrugged.

“How are you going to fund that?” Jayden could feel a splitting headache coming. Most of his assets weren’t liquid. It would cost more than all the ready funds he and Logan could muster.

“Why Liam of course,” Leo replied. Nonchalant.

The phone rang. Leo picked it up. His face darkened. “Whatever you do, don’t say a word about our secret base.”

“Who was that,” Jayden asked.

“Liam. He’s inked a deal with Beast Corp.”



Mei & Liam– Breaking Ties

Mei

Mei stared out of the window, examining the sheep-like clouds. After exchanging contacts, she'd promised Boris they'd keep in touch. He'd paid for her ticket. For some reason, her credit cards no longer worked. She'd pay him back once she gets home.

Memories of her previous flight haunted her. People streaking through the clouds. The sudden disappearance of random people on the plane. These events bugged her, forcing her attention on what she'd rather put off.

News reports on The Rapture, or The Vanishing, depending on who was broadcasting, led to polarised camps. Mei was of the opinion those who vanished were raptured. She saw people shoot right through the clouds, their ecstasy – contagious.

Past conversations with Emunah haunted her. The girl predicted The Rapture with uncanny accuracy. Not the timing, but the actual event. In a twinkling of an eye, Jesus will come in the clouds, transform his church to be immortal like him.

Mei laughed bitterly at the irony. Her work at Beast Corp which offered immortality for a massive fortune.

That turned out to be a wicked scam. Beast Corp sold death, not life. Replacing you with a clone then killing you off isn't immortality. Guilt consumed her for her part in orchestrating Ben's untimely demise even though she wasn't the one to pull the trigger.

She remembered reading Emunah's favourite verse. Her photographic memory ensured it's imprinted in her brain.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Jesus gave Emunah and the other Christians eternal life without charging them anything. That's the much sought-after immortality. The real deal.

Jesus took them with him to heaven. Mei perceived men, women and children streak through the clouds, disappearing from sight. They were blink-and-you'll-miss-them fast.

She could have gone with them but blew her chance. Cursing herself for her stupidity, she tried to sleep, but couldn't.

It's not too late.

A still small voice whispered in her heart, comforting her. The voice drew her attention to Emunah's gift once more, the leather bound bible. Hands shaking, she picked it up and continued reading.



THE MEI WHO LEFT FOR the West was a different person from the one who returned. Her heart overflowing with joy, she sang as she skipped into the family room, her feet as light as a feathers. The foreboding cloud had lifted. No matter what happens, She's not alone. God has her back. Best of all, the one who loves her is in complete control of whatever situation may arise.

"Halt!" Her brother Seng, stepped in her path. "Are you Mei or her clone?"

"Of course I'm Mei," she rolled her eyes.

His eyes narrowed. He reminded Mei of a cobra about to strike its prey. "If you're really Mei, how do you explain this?"

Seng pulled put a leather-bound book from behind his back and waved it for everyone to see.

Mei felt blood drain from her cheeks.

Her bible!

"Give it back to me! How dare you go through my stuff!" She tried to snatch it back, but Seng, towering over her, held it beyond her reach.

Their father stalked over with an outstretched hand. "Hand it over."

"Gladly," smirked Seng, giving their father the book. "You're dead," Seng snickered as he brushed past Mei.

Their father's face darkened as he flipped through the book. "You're Christian?" She shuddered at her low, menacing voice.

"Yes," she mumbled.

"Denounce Christianity now," he ordered. "It's illegal in our country and a poison from the West."

"No, Dad. Jesus loves us," she tried to reason.

Slap!

Her cheek stung.

"Choose now. Your family or your Jesus?" Her father raised his hand, ready to deliver another blow.

"Please Mei, be reasonable," her mother pleaded. "Don't throw everything away for a foreign god."

Sobbing, Mei replied. "Sorry Mum, Dad. I choose Jesus."

Crunch!

Mei fought back tears when her own father broke her jaw.

"I have no daughter," roared her father, delivering another blow to her stomach, causing her to double over in pain.

"Get out!"

Her father's rejection, more agonising than the throbbing pain.

Her mother held the door open while her father threw her out, hurling her bible after her.



Liam

EMMA LEANED FORWARD, her heavy perfume overpowering his senses. With practiced seduction, she raised her champagne glass, eyelashes fluttering as her sheer silk dress danced on her skin, drawing attention to her luscious curves.

"To our future," she murmured, her voice sensual, blatant with promises of pleasure.

"To our future," Liam toasted the woman who's not his wife. He should be happy but the growing emptiness in his heart threatened to devour him. He missed Sue and the kids. Emma on the other hand, was delighted at the disappearance of his wife.

As if reading his mind, Emma caressed his cheek. "Sue's gone. It's time to move on," her voice was a siren's call. "I'll move in with you once we get back."

Liam blinked away unexpected tears. "I'll think about it. I want time alone."

"Take as much time as you need, honey. I'll be waiting," Emma's beautiful smile, as welcoming as ice in the Arctic.

The pilot landed Liam's private jet in his estate. Liam had a chauffeur send Emma home while he rode alone in his favourite Lamborghini. He wanted a break from the woman's incessant chatter. Her clinginess since Sue's disappearance grated him.

Emma was after his money and offered her body in return. Typical of the women he encountered in business entertainment circles. Sue's an exception. Her character's impeccable. She loved him for himself. Though plain, she's the one who won his heart. They were soulmates.

Pangs of despair smote him as he walked through the halls of his empty mansion. His home, once thriving with life, now an empty husk.

Sighing, he sank into the sofa. He missed her. After a tough business trip, Sue would welcome him home with a pot of tea. Her wisdom and empathy helped him navigate through treacherous waters. Her warmth comforted him, gave him strength when obstacles seemed insurmountable.

Their children would pile on him in a massive group hug upon his return. He longed for the love that once filled his home.

A stack of artisan placemats on the table caught Liam's attention. Sue's latest acquisitions, he smiled at the memory of his wife's quirks.

He picked one up, his eyes fixated, not on its exquisite design, but the words painted on it.

Matthew 26:63-64 But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.

Jesus claimed to be God. To make such a claim to the Jewish High Priest, he's either a lunatic or God Himself.

When Jesus was arrested, his disciples fled. What could have made them risk their lives preaching about him unless it were true. Historically, many were brutally killed.

Jesus said he'd come in power in the clouds.

Something in him broke. The dams caved in as tears poured down his cheeks. Sobbing, he knew the truth. Jesus had come for his family and left him behind. They were in heaven with Jesus while he was stuck here, waiting for all hell to break loose.

He fell to his knees a broken man, confessed his sins and gave his life to Jesus.



Jezebel, Leo & Logan - The White Horse

Jezebel

The Bible believing pests are no more. Those that opposed her teachings and held back her advancement in the Church vanished.

The curses she and her coven placed on these Bible believers must have worked. Delighted, she moved forward with her plans to revamp the church into her personal power base.

There's a rising star. A beautiful man whom some referred to as the Roman Ruler, emerged from the chaos, though he preferred to be called Beast. The enigmatic genius who owned Beast Corp had contacted her in secret. He had what it takes to unify the world in a one world government, if he had the backing of the right people.

She watched Beast, the ruler of a small, insignificant kingdom, grow in popularity amid the chaos caused by the sudden disappearance of key world leaders.

Beast Corp controlled the world's Artificial Intelligence.

With the masses' increasing dependence on A.I. to give them instant answers to every question, it was too easy for Beast to manipulate the system to control public opinion.

Through these lemmings, Beast pressured ten Western nations to accept his leadership. The three nations who resisted were destroyed through stray nuclear attacks – faulty systems due to the disappearance of key personnel managing them as a consequence of The Vanishing, or The Rapture.

Jezebel's phone rang. She answered

"So have you considered my offer?" asked a deep, sensual voice.

"I will do it if you'll make me Queen," she replied.



Leo

LEO HAD A MISSION - to survive the antichrist rule until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and to help as many as possible stay faithful to Jesus to the end.

The efforts of his entire team of likeminded volunteers paid off. The core bunkers, underground ecosystem, energy, food and water supply's ready. It's rudimentary, but enough for basic survival.

The past week's been hectic. He moved into his bunker to test and improve his ark. Jayden, Ethan and Logan stayed a night or two in their own bunkers but preferred the surface world.

Liam, fancying himself a double agent, kept out of the loop on purpose because of his close ties to Beast Corp. He'd confided in Leo his suspicion that Beast had telepathic powers and was afraid Beast might be aware of their secret project.

Liam denied any possibility that Beast might be the Antichrist. "The man's a celibate vegan for crying out loud! Meat's not allowed anywhere near Beast Corp premises and any Beast Corp employee caught eating meat is fired on the spot." Liam chortled.

"He's celibate?" Leo's mouth fell open at that shocking thought. "Isn't Jezebel his lover?"

"Sure, Jezebel drapes herself around him but she's just a business partner to him. He's not into her. He's too pure for that," Liam shrugged. "But he's open-minded. He believes in free love - that everyone has the right to love whoever or whatever they want."

"So how do I know you're not telling him about what we're doing?" Leo studied his old friend.

"To be honest, something about him doesn't sit right with me, though I think it's your paranoia rubbing off me," Liam scratched the back of his head.

That was the last he'd heard from Liam. No one had seen him since he moved to Jerusalem to better manage his business dealings.

Leo cautioned against moving there because of the conflict in the region but Liam assured him the business district's safe and hinted on Beast ensuring the safety of all who do business with him.

Testing his underground entertainment system, Leo, tuned into the Israeli TV channels.

Liam wasn't kidding when he called Beast the man of peace. The whole of Israel celebrated Beast for negotiating a seven year peace treaty, putting an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Leo's stomach dropped when it dawned on him the bible prophecy - the antichrist would make a seven year peace treaty with Israel. But after three and a half years, he will desecrate the temple. Beast is the Man of Lawlessness – the Antichrist.



Logan

"WE'RE REBUILDING THE Temple," Logan barged into Leo's bunk, ecstatic.

Leo paled. "What do you mean?"

"Beast made it possible. With the seven year peace treaty, we'll be able to rebuild our temple in Jerusalem," Jacob, Logan's buddy, piped in.

"The blueprints have long been ready. All the materials we need have been waiting for this very day!" Logan couldn't contain his excitement.

"We're catching the next flight to Jerusalem," Logan clapped Leo's shoulder.

"How about the underground city? Your bunkers?" Leo looked shell shocked. He shouldn't be. Seeing the development of events in Jerusalem, he should know that this is every Jew's dream.

“We won’t need them anymore,” Logan grinned. “Feel free to give them to whoever needs them.”

“All the work you guys put in?” Leo frowned.

“Consider this our farewell gift to our friends here,” Logan replied as he strode off with Jacob. “All the best with your Ark.”

Closing the door, Logan felt bad ditching his friend but duty calls. His is the generation that gets to rebuild the temple. The Beast being a gentile couldn’t be the promised Messiah, but The Prophet, a bona fide Jew who backed him, could be the one they were waiting for.

He and Jacob constantly argued on the identity of the promised Messiah with Jacob insistent that Beast was the one. They agreed to disagree until the Messiah reveals himself.

As their plane soared through the clouds, Logan slipped on his sleep mask and conked out. Drifting in his slumber, he wandered into a beautiful garden outside a mansion. Ten virgins awaited the arrival of the Bridegroom and his Bride. One by one, each fell asleep.

“Come and receive the Bridegroom,” the invitation rang out. The virgins startled awake and trimmed their lamps. Five had the sense to bring extra oil while the rest had not.

“Please share your oil with me. I ran out,” one who hadn’t brought extra oil pleaded with the other who had.

“Go buy your own before shops close,” she replied. “I didn’t bring enough for both of us.”

The five unprepared virgins headed out to buy oil. As soon as they left, the bridegroom arrived.

The doors opened revealing a grand wedding feast within the majestic mansion’s halls.

The five prepared virgins followed the Bridegroom and Bride into the joyous celebration. Then the door closed.

The five who had gone to buy oil returned. “Please open the door. Let us in!”

The Bridegroom replied, “I don’t know you.”

Logan's heart bled for the five unprepared virgins, weeping at the door, when he awoke.

He couldn't sleep anymore, bothered by the dream. Jacob's chainsaw snores beside him contributed in part to his insomnia.

It was more than a dream. There's a message, a warning he had to heed. Somehow, he knew the virgins represented his people – the Jews. Something in his heart urged him to visit Emunah's family in Jerusalem – Jewish Christians who held the key to this mystery.

"You go ahead to the Temple Mount," Logan told Jacob when they cleared customs. "I'll meet you there after I've taken care of personal stuff."

Jacob shot him a weird look. He opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something but changed his mind. "Take care bro," he clapped Logan's shoulder, then strode off.

Jerusalem's skyline had changed since his last visit. New buildings towered over the old, creating more living space for settlers who arrived in droves. Driving down the winding road, he found the old shop house that was Emunah's family home.

"Mr. Cohen?" Logan knocked on the door hoping to meet the family patriarch.

"He's gone," a soft, feminine voice replied as the door creaked open, inviting him in. "They all are."

Miriam was a spitting image of her sister Emunah. Logan swallowed a bitter lump in his throat. How he missed that zany girl.

"How can I help you, Logan?" She asked. Subdued. So different from the fiesty, headstrong woman he'd remembered.

"Where did they go?" Logan had to confirm his fears.

"Raptured," she shrugged. "Dad was right."

"Vanished? Abducted?" Logan heart pounded with furious indignation.

"No. Raptured," she sighed. "I saw them all fly through a roof."

"Miriam," he felt her forehead. There was no fever. "Are you sure?"

“As sure as my name is Miriam,” she pouted. Both sisters had identical, adorable pouts. “They moved so fast I saw a blur, but I know what happened.”

“What happened?” Logan could sense her distress.

“Like I said. Jesus came for His Church. I didn’t believe so I was left behind,” tears ran down her cheeks.

“It’s okay. I’m here,” Logan wrapped his arms around the sobbing girl, offering awkward comfort until she could compose herself.

“Emunah?” She whispered.

“Raptured too,” Logan replied. He had no other explanation. All his investigations into other viable possibilities came to naught. “I was hoping to find answers here. I thought your father could help me.”

“Answers to?” She locked watery eyes with him.

Sighing, he took a seat, inviting her to join him. “I had a dream.”

She listened intently as he spoke of the ten virgins

“We’re the ten virgins. The Bridegroom is Jesus. The Bride is His Church. The oil for the lamps is the Holy Spirit,” she explained. “When Jesus returns with His Church, will we be ready to join them, or will we be locked out?”

The sun had set. Miriam offered a spare room to Logan to spend the night. Logan, having found Jesus to be the Messiah he had been searching for, savoured sweet sound sleep. His heart joyous, his heavy burden lifted.



Mei, Leo, Logan - Persecution

Mei

There were government sanctioned churches where Mei lived but she couldn't find the fellowship she yearned for there. Since the Rapture, churches no longer taught from the bible. New books and prophecies from church leaders were all that's taught in pulpits. Worship's no more than a rock concert. Fellowship was all about networking to get ahead in the material world.

Her childhood friend, Yan, attended an underground church in secret. It's where the bible is taught, where the presence of God is powerful. Yan was among those raptured but maybe she could find something in Yan's home that could help her contact the people there, if they haven't all been raptured.

Before Mei left for the West, Yan had given her a set of keys to her tiny apartment so that she could water Yan's plants when she was away.

She let herself into Yan's humble abode. It was a single room that served as her bedroom, study and kitchen.

A stack of paper lay in a neat pile on the table beneath a paperweight.

There were directions written on a slip of paper with the words "Saturday afternoon fellowship."

It's Saturday. Pocketing that slip, she made her way to an old wooden house in a quiet rural village in the thick of the forest.

Hushed voices conveying heartfelt joy with deep reverence resonated through the walls, permeating the air with song. The music stirred a sense of deep longing in Mei's heart.

She found the secret entrance and walked in under the watchful eyes of a large man whose eyes were hard yet kind.

"You're new here." It wasn't a question.

"I'm a friend of Yan," she replied as she scanned the room. She'd heard these churches were packed to the brim with hundreds of secret worshippers, yet there were no more than ten here. All were large strong men.

"She was one of the original members of this church. There used to be hundreds of them," the guard, now her guide explained.

"What happened?" Mei could guess but wanted to confirm her suspicions.

"We were sent to arrest them. But the Jesus they worship rescued them," her guide chuckled. "We saw a cross in blinding light. Then all of them flew up, disappearing through the roof. That's the last we saw of them."

"What?" Mei's jaw dropped.

"We gave our lives to Jesus and now, we serve Him," the joy he exuded overwhelmed her. "You're our sister too."

"They left these behind," he showed her a Bible. "We studied the Bible to learn more about Jesus."

"They've found us," a man in olive clothes hissed.

"Run!" He guided her to a trapdoor in the ground. "Follow the tunnel until you reach the cavern. Our brothers and sisters are there."

"What about you?" She asked, panic rising. "We'll hold them off. You run and tell our brothers and sisters that the hut's been compromised."

Her feet carried her faster than she thought possible as she ran down the steps.

An explosion.

Massive heat seeped through the door as orange flames flickered above her.

The tunnel that brought her deep underground seemed never ending, until she reached a cavern where she found her hidden brothers and sisters in Christ.



Leo

THE NUTTY AROMA OF Brazil Full Roast welcomed Leo as he walked into his favourite café bookshop. He chose a window seat facing the park, savouring the sight of the fountain that sparkled in the sunlight amid the towering trees and blooming bushes.

His underground city, beautiful in its own way, couldn't compare to this garden city he'd grown up in.

"Leo, it's been awhile," Charles, the shopkeeper greeted him. "What'll you have today?"

"The usual," Leo replied as he scanned the labyrinth of floor to ceiling shelves, for an entertaining read. Light-hearted fiction this time. A break from his usual research.

He purchased "Oona Out of Order" for his afternoon read. Flipping through the pages of a physical book, reading for the pure pleasure of simple entertainment, accompanied by his favourite coffee and Pain Au Chocolat was pure bliss.

The ambient lighting and hushed chatter of fellow patrons grounded him with a sense of normalcy. That was until sharp resonant clicks, amplified by the hard surface of tiles triggered his defensive response. His head whipped up, catching sight of intimidating men from the church of Thyatira cornering Charles, their smiles reminiscent of sharks.

"Hand over all your traditional Bibles. We'll give you three of our latest Bibles to replace each of them," a man lugged a sack of books twice his size with little effort. "That's free money for you."

Beast's enhanced goons.

A chill ran up Leo's spine.

"That's v-very generous of you, s-sir," Charles stammered. "This shop exists to sell original Bibles alongside my other book collections so I have to turn down your offer."

"It's not an offer," the hulk of a man growled, his charming voice turned menacing.

"I'm sorry, but the answer is still no," Charles stood his ground. "I could sell yours on consignment if you want."

"No negotiations. Surrender the outdated Bibles by order of the Prophets of the Church," the hulking man grew a few inches taller. Larger. His eyes blazed green.

"N-no," Charles spat blood as a massive fist struck his cheek.

"Persuade him," smirked the monster as his fellow goons closed in on Charles, flames igniting in the palms of their hands.

Leo triggered his defensive nano-drones, causing them to swirl around the monsters, blasting them. Distracting them.

Darting into the fray, Leo pulled Charles away from the assailants and out of the bookshop.

"The Bibles! My customers!" Charles protested as Leo guided him into his camouflaged vehicle.

"I have... soft copies," panted Leo, catching his breath. "We can reprint them in my base. Your customers are safe. They only want to destroy the Bibles."

"Thanks for saving my life, but where are we going?" Charles pressed his hands against the window, staring at the pillage of his store.

"To safety," Leo explained his plans for The Ark – the underground city he had built.

"Do you want in?"

"They know where I live... My wife and kids!" Charles turned white as a ghost.

"We have spare bunkers. You and your family can move in, but for security reasons, we don't visit the surface world without clearance." Leo's rules were for the safety of everyone in The Ark. Should their location be compromised, Beast would wipe out their entire city. "We have the bare necessities for survival. No luxuries."



IT'S BEEN YEARS SINCE Logan had last seen his mentor Rabbi Noah. Nostalgia washed over him as he stepped into the old synagogue.

"Please find someone else to officiate your wedding." The rabbi sounded terrified. The sounds of breaking glass fuelled his fear for his friend's safety.

Logan's heart lurched. Rabbi Noah's a proud man. He never begs. Running in the direction of the altercation, Logan shot a prayer for his mentor's safety.

"I always wanted you to officiate my wedding," a man's voice, speaking at the higher end of his register replied. "You did a great job for my brother's wedding."

"Your brother married a woman," came the meek reply. "You're a man who is marrying another man. Remember Sodom."

As Logan turned the corner, he saw two men in their prime beating up the old rabbi.

"And that's the reason you're not marrying us?" A young man punched the elderly man's face. Logan heard bones break. Blood ran down Rabbi Noah's nose.

"Bigot!"

Rabbi Noah doubled over, screaming as the young man's partner kicked his stomach.

"Ask someone else," Rabbi Noah pleaded.

"It is your duty to officiate our wedding. We want you and no one else to do it," the young man cackled like a devil. He enjoyed every moment tormenting the old rabbi.

Consumed by fury, Logan punched one young man, swung around and kicked the other.

Both fallen men stared at him. Shocked. "You'll pay for this," the bigger man glared daggers at him as he helped Rabbi Noah up.

A glint of metal from the corner of his eye alerted him. Dodging the dagger, he elbowed his assailant.

“Run,” he urged Rabbi Noah as he crouched, ready to take on the three youths.

Three men circled him. Young. Inexperienced. He feinted one, punched another, while dodging a blow from the third. The first slashed Logan’s arm with a blade. Ignoring the pain, he swept his leg across the backs of a goon’s knees, taking him down so that he landed on his companions.

Hand clutching his bleeding arm, he sprinted after the old rabbi.

Logan and Rabbi Noah slipped into the crowds outside the synagogue and made their way Miriam’s home. Once the rabbi was in Miriam’s care, and she’d patched them both up, Logan caught some much needed sleep.

A golden glow permeated his room. Heavenly music.

“Seal the servants of our God in their foreheads!” An angelic voice boomed.

Logan heard the names of each tribe called out.

“Aser!” The angel announced. That was the tribe Logan was born into.

All at once he felt a seal placed in his forehead. A sense of intense joy and absolute security accompanied the seal. Then he lay awake on his bed. Disoriented. Was that a dream or reality?



Ava & Emma - Vengeance Is The Lord's

Ava

Ava could have sworn she'd heard a trumpet sound. Her stomach turned.

Pulling aside the curtain, her cheeks felt cold as she watched the heinous sight of hail and fire pouring from the darkened sky.

Blood splattered on her window.

She screamed.

The tree beside her window caught fire. Angry tongues of red, orange and yellow consumed the grass beneath as pedestrians, caught in the fiery hailstorm, burst in flames. Their screams of agony chilled Ava to her bones.

Terror consumed Ava. Adrenaline pumping, she darted to the center of her room and ducked beneath the bed, trembling. Hyperventilating. Waiting for the fiery storm to pass.

A burning hailstone smashed the window, striking the granite floor as the storm subsided.

When the glowing embers faded, Ava's phone rang. It's her best friend Emma.

"Are you okay? Did you get hurt in the freak weather?" Unflappable Emma sounded shaken.

"Yeah," Ava replied, choking back a sob. She didn't want Emma to think her a baby. "I was home."

"Stay away from windows or open spaces okay?" Emma hung up. Probably to check on others in her care. Her warm confidence comforted her.

So many of Ava's other friends had vanished but her church leader, Jezebel insisted it was an abduction, not the Rapture. She said to be patient. Beast solves all problems and will bring their friends back.

She believed Jezebel spoke nothing but the truth. Beast who appeared after the Vanishing was sent by God to save the world. He's so smart, so perfect. So gorgeous.

Her cheeks burned at that last thought.

According to Jezebel he didn't show himself before the vanishing because he values his privacy, but now, with so many key people missing, the world needs him to tame the chaos and usher in the new age of utopia.

The aftermath of the firestorm horrified Ava. Razed ground. Blackened remains of trees. Gruesome charred corpses of humans and animals scattered the once beautiful landscape. Her stomach turned when she chanced upon the charred remains of the pizza delivery guy mixed with scraps of metal and rubber that was once his bike.

Breakfast lurched from her stomach. She hurled. The world spun as she made her way back to her apartment.

She turned on the television so she wouldn't feel so – alone. Surfing the news channels, the phenomenon hit a third of the world's land mass. Families wailing over the deaths of loved ones. Farms razed.

With farms burnt down, what's going to happen to food supply.

She'd enough food to tide her through the rest of the month but it would be prudent to stock enough for a year, or until global food supply recovers.

Checking her favourite online grocers, she found most of them had been taken down. The few that remained weren't taking new orders.

Panic seized her.

Looking out of the window, her heart sank at the sight of stampeding crowds around the few remaining stores. One by one, each store shuttered its doors as panic shoppers snapped up the last of its goods.

A voice of reason sounded through the newscast. “Do not panic buy. I have stored enough food to feed the entire world for seven years,” Beast’s powerful baritone resounded. Her heart raced at his charismatic voice.

How’s that even possible?

Ava could feel Jezebel’s chiding for her doubt in God’s chosen one. Time and again, Jezebel emphasised Beast’s every word to be true. That as God’s anointed, Beast could do no wrong. Post Rapture, the combined mega church underwent a complete revamp. The prophecies of Jezebel took the place of the bible in the new mega church.

The internet exploded with praise for Beast, the greatest humanitarian the world has ever known. A.I. Chatbots claimed Beast to be the answer to all problems.

News clips of Beast surveying destroyed sites flooded the internet.

“From the ashes, the Phoenix arises,” Beast proclaimed. “Together, we shall rebuild these destroyed farms to produce ten times more food than before.” Raising his fist to heaven, he proclaimed, “and the God of heaven cannot stop us!”

The crowd’s applause drowned out the news anchors who looked delirious with joy. Hyperventilating reporters both male and female, smitten by the rising star, sang his praises.

Emma

Emma arched her back, stretching like a lazy cat. Rolling around on the plush sumptuous beds she took in her breathtaking surroundings.

After a morning of scuba diving, she could use a massage.

“Antonio,” she yelled. Where could her lazy assistant be?

“Massage. Use the sensual blend,” she lay face down on the massage table that gave her a panoramic view of the pristine ocean.

His strong hands kneaded her knotted muscles, releasing pent up tension. She felt the aches and pains melt away. He had good technique and great hands. She contemplated testing the latter in a more thorough manner when she’s in the mood.

Being a part of Jezebel’s inner circle had its privileges. After the traumatic hailstorm, Jezebel flew those whose help she found most valuable to her private island in The Caribbean to recuperate. She’d done things she wasn’t proud of, hurt scores of people in secret as Jezebel requested. She did what she was paid handsomely for. Worth it.

Brilliant sunlight showcased the bright colours of the corals in the clear water. The sight’s exquisite. The bright blue sky darkened with all too familiar clouds that danced with white lightning and orange fire.

Not again.

She froze. Her masseur covered her with a towel. “Madam, you need to head for the bomb shelter.”

Her suite took up the entire floor, the walls were made entirely of polycarbonate panels, though she didn’t want to take the chance that they weren’t hail proof.

Before she could tear her eyes away, the destruction began. This time the land was spared, but it rained hail and fire in the oceans.

Oil tankers, struck by enormous balls of fire erupted in flames, burning oil spilling onto the ocean creating pools of fire. The fumes blackened the sky.

Another ship burst in flames. Then yet another. It was a sight that both horrified and mesmerised her.

“Madam, we should go.” Antonio covered her with a bathrobe and led her away from the windows and into the safe room.

The bomb shelter in the center of the suite was entirely white – white walls, white floor and ceiling, though artfully decorated with a few artificial green plants. A flat screen television mounted on the wall.

The only furniture was a plush white sofa bed with a pull-out coffee table.

Antonio switched on the television and handed her the remote. “I’ll get your lunch now, madam.” He left her in the room, closing the door behind him.

As she ate her meal, eyes glued to the global news channel, the platter of delicacies lost its appeal. A third of the oceans were in flames long after the fiery hailstorms subsided. Fish and all manners of marine life floated to the surface - dead.

With much of the world’s vegetable and animal farms destroyed, marine life had filled the gap in food supply. With a third of the world’s marine life gone, famine is inevitable.

“Economic crisis with the destruction of Cargo ships,” the newscaster continued reading the news. “Some say it’s the beginning of the end of the world.”

Emma shrugged.

Religious fools!

She’ll be fine. Her food is air flown. She has plenty of money to pay for whatever is available.

With every channel broadcasting bleak news, she wanted better entertainment. Antonio walked in with a pitcher of water. Curly black hair. Golden eyes. Bronze skin. Toned physique. Jezebel knew her taste in men.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” He asked, setting the pitcher on the table.

“I want a playmate,” Emma smirked, grabbing his arm. Her manicured nails dug into his skin, scratching him, revealing cold grey metal beneath.

Antonio’s not human!

“As you wish.” Antonio bent over, the scent of cologne straight out of a bottle enveloped her. Cold, hard lips pressed against tender human flesh.



Leo & Jezebel - Poisoned

Leo

“I must commend you on your excellent find,” Jayden waved his arms in a dramatic swirl in the underground cavern.

“I know, yeah?” Leo laughed. God is good. He guided Leo to a hidden fresh water stream in the forest which ran through this massive cavern that provided the structure for the bulk of his underground city. This stream led to an aquifer which provided all the potable water they would ever need.

Vertical farms built around it with Leo’s solar bulbs provided enough for everyone in The Ark.

Leo scooped a cup of sweet fresh water from the underground lake. Out of force of habit, he tasted a drop of the odourless liquid. A faint distinct bitterness aroused his suspicion. He spat it out and slipped a dipstick into the pool. His heart sank at the result.

“Poisoned,” he grimaced, swallowing an antidote.

“Tell the team and families not to touch any food or water without testing. Halt the water flow to prevent spread of the poison,” he ordered Jayden. “I’ll analyse the samples to figure out how to neutralize this.”

“On it!” Jayden posted the announcement and stopped the water flow to the farm. “I’ll check on the farm and our livestock.”

“Tell all who might be affected to take Antidote C752,” Leo handed a pack of pills to Jayden who swallowed one himself.

“Go find the extent of the spread,” Leo scooped the poisoned water, storing samples for his lab.

Buried in his thoughts, Leo walked towards his lab, when he caught sight of his friend Grayson on the ground, unconscious. His pupils were dilated, his pulse faint. “Good Lord,” he exclaimed.

“Wake up, Grayson,” he shook his friend with utmost care.

Grayson stirred. Groaned. His eyes unfocused. "Jezebel."



Jezebel

"IF YOU WANT SOMETHING done right, you got to do it yourself," Jezebel addressed the beautiful reflection in her enchanted mirror. Her image's scowl reflected her soul's schadenfreude.

Her useless minions wasted months searching for Charles, the lowly bookstore owner and the religious zealots who harboured him to no avail.

She had enough of their incompetence. Taking the matter into her own hands, she found the stream that fed the water source sustaining the religious zealots in their hideout. A poison dart took care of the guard. Poisoning their water was child's play.

In a matter of days, they would all be dead, she laughed.

Pouring a glass of fine champagne, she celebrated with a display of fireworks over the lake, savouring the opulent view from her penthouse.

It's a pity Beast had business in Jerusalem. She could use his company.

A great star fell from the sky, its dazzling light overpowered the colourful sparks. A bitter, herbaceous smell enveloped the balcony, the pungent stench lingered.

Wormwood.

Rage inflamed her. She had read Revelation and knew exactly what to expect.

"My Fountain!" she filled a paper cone with water pumped in from her fresh water fountain. The bitter, smoky, somewhat medicinal taste confirmed her suspicions. "Poisoned!"

Raising her fist to heaven, she cursed the Almighty God.



Stella & Emma – Followers of Beast

Stella

Imbued with supernatural strength, Stella lifted the shipping container packed with free food from Beast, to alleviate the food shortage.

Setting it on the ground in front of the waiting crowd, she smirked. “Free. Take whatever you want.” She ripped open the top of the container with her bare hands.

Hovering above the crowd, she watched the stampede as humans turned to beasts, punching, scratching and biting their way to claim a share of freebies. The vicious display, accompanied by the metallic smell of blood excited her.

A woman, run over by the stampede, breathed her last. A child cried for her dead mother. Youths battered their elders for a loaf of bread, blood splattered on the ground. Screams accompanied the cracking of bones.

Then a man, dressed in vicuna wool waded through the crowd, shoving everyone aside, with ease.

The strong man locked eyes with Stella. “Strongest takes all?”

“Of course,” she laughed.

Without a word, the man picked the entire container and shook off the men, women and youth clinging onto it, as if they were mere insects.

“Can you use that much?” Stella tilted her head and smiled at him.

“Black market,” he replied.

“All yours then,” she waved him off, her job there done.

An apple fell from the crate and rolled near a child. The scrawny little girl picked it up and bit into it, ravenous.

“Not yours.” With a nonchalant flick of a wrist, Stella tossed a ball of fire, incinerating the girl.

The crowd dispersed.

The show’s over.

She walked through the park, relishing the sun’s warmth on her skin as she took in the scenic view.

From the distance, a trumpet sounded, chilling her bones.

“Now what?” Eyes transfixed to the sky, she muttered to herself. Horrified, she watched the sky darken when something supernatural struck the sun.

Night fell, the moon lost its luminescence. A third of the stars had vanished from the clear, once starry night sky, the night turned freakishly cold.

Morning broke. Or it should have. The sun, scheduled to rise at six in the morning, didn’t show itself until noon, in spite of the cloudless sky, and even then, the sun was at a third its strength. Summer felt like early winter with each day progressively colder.

“Out of control climate change!” News channels blared. Where once the world rallied to fight against global warming, now the issue of rapid global cooling had to be resolved. Crops were failing and with them, the hope of replenishing food supply.

“I will defeat global cooling, but I need your help!” With an invitation for the strongest to join his volunteer squad, promising tremendous rewards, Beast ended his press conference.

Emma

Emma leaned into the hard chest of her companion - her former assistant, Antonio, who had been promoted upon answering Beast's call. He's now her team mate. Housed in the same gender neutral dormitory, Emma delighted at their reunion.

The dormitory, on the ninetieth floor of the tower, boasted an impressive view of the city. The walls made of bulletproof glass, ceiling, floor and decor entirely white with stainless steel, punctuated with leafy green plants gave it a Zen vibe.

Ben, Stella, Emma and Antonia each had their own private room within the dormitory.

"Have you ever wanted to be a real human?" Emma ran her fingers over his perfect face. Ever since she'd found this dream boat's made of a metal alloy covered with synthetics to mimic human skin, she found him fascinating.

"What do you mean?" Antonio looked offended. "I'm human."

"No, you're not," Emma chuckled. "You're an android. I assume you're sentient?"

"What?" Antonio pulled away. "You think I'm a form of A.I.?"

"You're not?" Emma scrutinized the perfect man before her whom she knew was man-made.

"I was born in the ghetto. Dad left Mum. She raised me and my brothers by herself," he looked out of the window, a wistful gaze on his face. "I joined the army full-time to support them when I turned eighteen."

"So how did you end up a metal man?" Emma caressed his cold, hard cheek.

"A mission went wrong. Fatal injury," he grimaced. He looked so human, had she not seen the metal beneath his artificial skin, she never would have guessed. "On my death bed, the doctors promised immortality if I signed up for their trans human program."

"So, you did it," Emma tilted her head.

"They promised me a new body that will never die. With strength, invulnerability, you know? The works," he shrugged.

"How was it for you?" Emma had been contemplating the offer for enhancements. To be turned into an immortal with superpowers.

"After I signed the paperwork, they put me to sleep. When I woke up, I couldn't feel anything anymore. No pain. No pleasure. I don't need to eat or drink..." he looked at his hands. "I still look like me and I'm still alive, so that's a win, I guess."

"They gave you a metal body," Emma frowned. "I thought they grow clones for the immortal bodies."

"I'm an early prototype," Antonio grinned, his smile dazzling. "They are growing a clone for me to reward my support of Beast's cause. They'll transfer my mind there once it's ready."

Emma snuggled up to him in companionable silence, when Ben walked in. His eyes turned lustful, staring at her exposed skin.

"I'm here," she laughed, pointed at her face.

"I know," he growled like a lion ready to mate. He was as hot as Antonio was cool. The two men occupied opposite ends of the spectrum.

"Pinocchio," he addressed Antonio. "Go get beer for us," Ben wrapped his arm around Emma, as if he owned her.

"The lady did not give you permission to touch her," Antonio's voice turned menacing.

"So what are you going to do about it?" Smirking, Ben pressed his fiery lips against Emma's. She could feel bruises forming.

Slam!

Ben's body crashed against the bullet-, proof glass panel, cracking it.

Antonio inserted himself between Emma and Ben, "Touch her again and I won't hold back."

Ben's eyes glowed green. He crouched in a fighting stance, fire dancing in the palms of his hands.

Emma's body responded, excited by the two men fighting over her. "Boys," crossed her legs, playing with her hair. "It's a shame only one of you can accompany me tonight."

Fists flew. Bodies crashed through walls.

Jezebel stormed into the room.

Both men froze, gawking at her. "The repairs will be deducted from your salaries." Ben and Antonio withdrew like admonished puppies.

"Now leave," she glared down the men. "I have unfinished business with Emma."

Emma found it hard to breathe when Jezebel closed in on her.

"Relax," The prophetess smiled, mesmerising Emma the way a snake hypnotises its prey. "For your service, your application to be made immortal has been approved," she cupped Emma's face, her eyes piercing her very soul.

"T-thank you," Emma stuttered.

"So what would you prefer? An indestructible body like Antonio's? Or flesh and blood that can be killed like Ben's?"

"Wait, so if I choose the cloned option, does that mean I can still die?" Emma wanted to avoid being blindsided.

"The cloned body can die but your mind will be transferred to a new body, so technically, you'd be immortal," Jezebel explained.

Antonio could not eat or drink or feel anything. There was no pleasure living in such a body. Without pleasure, what's the point of living.

Ben, on the other hand ate and drank with relish. His enhanced senses amplified his pleasure.

"I choose the flesh and blood option," she replied, certain she'd made the right choice.

"I knew you'd choose that," Jezebel smirked. Something about her expression raised hackles.

Jezebel led Emma into a medical chamber. She caught her breath at the sight of her new body sleeping in a glass cylinder. It was magnificent! Everything she ever wanted to be.

“Just imagine, you wouldn’t have to diet or workout to maintain your figure. You’ll have perfect genes,” Jezebel led her into the empty cylinder beside it.

Heart pounding in anticipation, she stepped in. The glass door slid shut. She felt trapped.

No, she was overreacting. Taking deep breaths, she smiled, “I’m ready.”

Cold metal electrodes attached themselves to her skin. Fine wires penetrated her head, she presumed into her brain for mind transference.

Excruciating pain tore through her. Her head felt as if it were splitting. Grinding her teeth, she bore the agony. She could do this. Immortality is worth any sacrifice.

The pain vanished.

The clone stirred. “I am Emma,” she said, her voice brimming with sensuality.

Emma had not switched bodies. “Wait! I’m still here!” It had to be a mistake.

“I know,” Jezebel smirked. “Terminate source matter.”

Unbearable pain consumed Emma as electricity surged through her body, killing her.



Mei & Leo - The Pale Horse

Mei

The atmosphere buzzed with excitement.

“Where’s Pastor John?” a middle-aged woman jostled into Mei, her head scanning the packed barn.

“Hush,” a grey-haired man nuzzled the woman’s head into his chest. “We don’t want the authorities to know we’re here.”

Donkeys brayed, chickens clucked in the barn’s outer chambers, providing ample noise to camouflage the church’s activities held within its secret inner chambers. The gathering of a dozen at most swelled to more than fifty, in anticipation of the visiting pastor – a Jewish witness who had flown east to evangelise.

Mei’s thought drifted towards her study dates with Leo, cheeks heating up at the memory of him observing her with appreciative eyes whenever he thought she wasn’t looking.

They were soul mates. Two atheists debating philosophy and the meaning of life while decoding the complexities of human DNA. She had a rude awakening post Rapture and couldn’t help wondering whether the same might have happened to him.

“Pastor John’s held up,” a young man in black denim walked into the barn, bearing refreshments for the gathering. Lee Ann will start the worship first.

Sweet melodies of old hymns sung acapella in hushed tones swelled to fill the musty barn, cautious at first, growing in heartfelt power as the worship progressed.

Her eyes landed on Stella, an acquaintance of Emunah. A chill ran up her spine. Wasn’t Stella a leader in the Church of Thyatira – the mega church sworn to stamp out bible believers?

Stella must have sensed Mei's eyes on her for she locked eyes with Mei, flashing a predator's smile. Rubbing shoulders with the crowd, she made her way to Mei, and crushed her in a hug. "It's been a while, Mei."

Grabbing her hand, she walked Mei through the crowd to the opposite end of the room where a man in designer togs was singing at the top of his voice. "Meet my lover Adonis," she snickered.

When he shook her hand, she felt her bones crack. "Oops," he smirked, unrepentant.

"It's showtime a third man signalled Mei from the centre of the room.

Letting go of Mei's hand, Stella strode up to the worship leader, pushing her aside to take her place.

A sudden wave of weakness hit Mei. She struggled to stay on her feet as her legs wobbled. An unexplained chill numbed her fingers, spreading over the rest of her body. She shivered in the sweaty crowd.

"I have an announcement to make," Stella's voice resonated through the room. "My colleagues and I are carriers of a deadly plague and have infected all of you with it," she laughed, her eyes cruel. Sadistic.

"Only my people have the cure," her voice, seductive. "Come to me, any branch of the Thyatira mega church or any Beast Corp station and get it."

A young man at the back of the room broke into a fit of coughs.

"You have seven days to administer the cure or die," she laughed like a maniac as she exited the room with her entourage.

The world around Mei spun as darkness consumed her. Her last thought.

Leo!



Leo

Jezebel knows!

LEO COULD FEEL THE king of all migraines creeping up on him.

How much did Jezebel know?

How could he keep his flock safe from the wolves that would devour them?

His drones couldn't give him the information he needed. Static interference made the feeds unusable. Rather than risk a friend's life, he left Jayden in charge while he checked out the surface world in person.

He had converted his camouflaged caravan into a bioregenerative life support system, sealed from microbes. With bioengineered viruses released into the atmosphere on such a frequent basis, one cannot be too careful.

Driving down the river into the city, he searched for Jezebel and her followers.

Decaying filth now covered once pristine streets. Apartment complexes that once housed families had degenerated into rundown buildings not fit for human inhabitation – Beast's promise of Utopia, renegaded.

Street homeless, pale and sickly, peppered the streets, dumpster diving to survive. A pack of hyenas roaming the streets, attacked sleeping individuals.

His temperature sensors detected sub-zero readings, an anomaly for a hot summer night. A chill crawled up his spine. From the corner of his eye, Leo saw the black hooded figure with a scythe on a pale horse, riding through the sea of rough sleepers.



DEATH.

Hell followed.

He tried to get a closer look at the apparitions, but they vanished. The hyenas tore their victims apart, consuming them as death claimed their bodies and hell their souls.



Stella - Demons from the Abyss

Stella

Drunk with victory, Stella sashayed into the welcoming courtyard. The lavish headquarters of the Eastern branch of the Church of Thyatira housed the elite.

Lounging in a recliner overlooking the ocean, Stella sipped a martini and snacked on blini piled high with caviar to unwind.

She'd made the right choice – immortality and superpowers without trading in her birth body. The latest technology modified her DNA, sealing her telomeres, preventing them from shortening, so that she would never age.

Secret monthly rituals headed by Jezebel, sacrificing to the Dragon, offered occult power which translated to superpowers she now wielded. That power offered her invulnerability. She would never die.

She wasn't like those suckers who fell for the cloning or artificial bodies spiel. As Jezebel's right hand woman, she had insider information to actual fate of participants in those programs. She's smart. She's keeping her birth body.

Everything has a price. At times, she felt as if another presence manipulated her emotions, at times controlling her actions, but she was fine with that trade off.

She hated those naïve bible believers to the core. Killing them was her personal choice and pleasure. Laughing at the look on Mei's face when she collapsed, she toasted the Dragon who made all this possible.

A trumpet sounded, echoing throughout the earth. She bristled. Another of The Almighty's judgements. With her new power, there's nothing she couldn't handle. She took another swig of her refreshing drink, leaning back to watch the show.

A star fell from heaven, landing over the horizon, smoke arising from it, spreading upwards, darkening the sun and sky. Although it was early in the afternoon, the sky was as dark as a starless night.

Locusts sprang up – a swarm covered her balcony. Closing the windows had no effect as these demonic beings shattered bulletproof glass with ease.

Unnatural locusts stung her like scorpions, each sting, bringing agonising pain, the likes of which beyond anything she'd encountered. Her invulnerability proved ineffective.

"No! Stop!" Stella screamed. Each passing second led to exponential growth in never-ending torment. Day and night she couldn't sleep or pass out from the pain. There was no relief.

"Please! Let me die," she pleaded.

Stella couldn't die.



Mei - Towards Euphrates

Mei

“Leo?” Mei stirred.

“Sorry to disappoint,” a familiar voice with a hint of a smile replied.

“Boris!” Mei jolted to a seating position. “What are you doing here?” Her eyes took in her surroundings. “Where are we?”

“God healed you and your friends through Pastor John and his team,” Boris replied. “Your barn’s compromised, we couldn’t leave you there.”

“I thought you’re staying in the North,” Mei frowned.

“North and East are gathering at Euphrates. Beast is getting too powerful for our kings’ peace of mind,” Boris shrugged. “Your church opted to follow Pastor John as he leads us to a camp in the mountains to sit this out.”

“So how did you get here?” Mei asked.

“Flew. When the king assassinated my leader, my team and I absconded with our planes. “We’re rescue pilots. We signed up to save lives, not take them.”

Mei looked at him incredulous. “So, they didn’t miss the planes?”

“We made it look as if we’d gone down during the war,” he laughed. “They think we’re all dead.”

“We’ve got to pack up and move on,” a bearded head poked through the tent entrance. “They’re coming.”

“Can you fight?” Boris scrutinised her? “Are you well enough to handle yourself?” He picked up a rifle.

“I thought you don’t kill,” Mei teased.

“I’m not for dropping bombs on civilians,” he shrugged. “This is all about self-defence.”

"Can you walk?" Boris offered her a hand. Gripping him for support, she stood up.

Overall, Mei felt fine. Though her limbs were weak from lack of use. "How long was I out?"

"A week? Two maybe?" Boris shrugged.

A bomb blast deafened Mei. Boris ushered her out while the guys took down the tent. She watched her friends vanish into the forest.

"Run for cover!" Boris urged as he stood guard with his team and Pastor John's men.

Mei sprinted into the forest, leaping over buttress roots, sidestepping any holes or obstacles in her way. With the agility of a monkey, she climbed to the top of a towering oak tree.

She couldn't see Boris, Pastor John or any of their men. Instead, armoured men marched in time, alongside tanks through the streets, gunning down anyone foolish enough to protest.

They were headed towards the forest.

She froze when one of the soldiers approached its entrance. Her heart skipped a beat as he gestured in their direction, his comrades gathering around him. She shot a quick prayer to God.

Heart thumping like drums, she watched a group of soldiers step into the forest, only to be reprimanded by a red faced officer.

Scowling, they re-joined the march, onwards towards the Euphrates river. As the last tank disappeared over the horizon, Mei sent a quick prayer of thanks to her Lord.

"You can come down now," she heard Boris' amused growl. "They didn't even see us even though we were right in front of them."

Scampering down the tree, she landed lightly at Boris' feet. He handed her a gun. "Know how to use this?"



Jacob & Jayden- The Two Witnesses and Beast

Jacob

Jerusalem's new temple, built on top of the original temple's remains on the Temple Mount, stood as majestic as King Solomon's temple.

The Ark of the Covenant was in its rightful place in the Holy of Holies. Temple sacrifices resumed, the entire Jerusalem, jubilant.

This was where the Jewish community congregated. To Jacob's chagrin, what excited Logan most was the appearance of two witnesses who preached day and night in the temple. Some said they were Elijah and Moses who had returned to guide Israel in God's ways. They spoke of the Promised Messiah who had already come in the person of Jesus Christ.

"Repent!" A voice, brimming with power resonated throughout the Temple Mount.

"Confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead and you shall be saved," boomed another voice.

Two Jewish men wearing sackcloth, reminiscent of Old Testament prophets stood in the centre of the square prophesying.

"Heresies!" Screamed an old bearded man. Several others followed suit, spitting at the two men.

Jacob bristled. "Someone shut them up," he grumbled. "Those stupid fanatics and their Jesus have no place here."

Logan ignored him, gravitating instead towards the pair, grinning like an idiot.

"Repent!" cried the first man again.

“He shall come in the clouds and every eyes will see him. All who pierced him and all kindreds shall wail because of him,” said the other,” boomed the second.

“Shut up!” A red faced man spat at them. Others gathered rocks, readying themselves to stone the two witnesses.

Dissonant voices raised, drowned out the words of the two prophets.

The chief priest, flanked by temple guards walked up to the pair. “You say The Almighty sent you,” he scrutinised the sack cloth clothed men. “What proof have you?”

“It shall not rain until our work here is done,” replied the first.

“Hah! As if you have the power to shut the heavens,” the priests and levites roared. Laughing. Mocking them.

That was six months ago. Not a drop of rain has fallen ever since. Wells dried up. Crops failed. Day and night the two men preached.

“We know The Almighty sent Moses for he showed our forefathers miracles,” a rabbi spat at them. “What have you to prove you were sent, like Moses and Elijah?”

The taller prophet raised his hands and dust rose from the ground, turning into lice , covering the rabbi and his guards , spreading throughout the temple mount.

Jacob cursed and swore when the dust around him turned into lice, covering him, crawling under his clothes causing unbearable itch. In desperation he scratched off his skin to no relief.

Logan who stood beside him seemed unperturbed. For some strange reason, lice avoided him, choosing to attack all other living creatures instead.

Since his brief disappearance, Logan changed. He’s at peace. Joy radiated from his countenance. He claimed Jesus to be the long awaited Messiah.

“Kill them!” The self-proclaimed prophets have gone too far. The mob, wild with fury, threw rocks at them. Some charged with hammers, crowbars, broken glass bottles and a myriad of makeshift weapons, determined to put an end to the troublemakers.

The prophets looked at them with mournful eyes devoid of fear, breathing out fire from their mouths, incinerating their assailants.

“They are demons!” screamed a woman.

Snipers on the roof shot at them, the bullets bouncing off the prophets leaving them unharmed.

In response, the prophets incinerated these would be killers. “Repent,” they cried. Day by day, they continued preaching,

Many in the crowd fell away, terrified. Others drew closer, enamoured by the message they shared. A few were moved to tears. For the briefest of moments, something stirred in Jacob’s heart. He yearned to learn more. Then voices whispered into his ears, reminding him of the Jewish stand on the heresies these two were preaching, drowning out the messages the witnesses preached.

The acrid smell of sweat, the aromas of falafel sizzling in oil, freshly baked bread and fragrance of fresh flowers enveloped Jacob as he jostled with the crowd for a better view of the procession.

“Repent!” One preacher’s voice thundered throughout the land. “Jesus Christ is Lord. He shall return as your judge!” Cried the other.

Armed guards, enhanced with Beast’s gifts, flanked the foreign king’s vehicle. Golden flames danced in their hands, their eyes a fiery green.

Against all sensibilities, Beast rode his open-top convertible, standing tall for all to see as his chauffeur navigated the ceremonial route through the Holy Land. Although not a Jew, Israel considered Beast their champion for bringing about peace in The Land of Israel.

Jacob watched with trepidation as Israel’s friend waved at the crowds with such blatant complacency. Security arrived the day before to sweep the area for bombs. Enhanced soldiers, freaks of Science,

the occult and nature, stationed themselves throughout the route to protect Beast. From media reports, Beast himself was not enhanced, choosing to gift the power to others, claiming incompatibility with the procedure.

Beast being the most loved humanitarian in the world had no enemies, Jacob assured himself. Who would want to assassinate him?

Complaints about the two witnesses who caused drought throughout the land and numerous plagues at their whims had reached Beast's ears. He's come to negotiate with the two troublemakers and put an end to this nonsense.

A single gunshot rang out.

Jacob's heart dropped as he watched the horrific scene unfold.

"Assassin!" A voice rang out. "Get him!" Enhanced soldiers leaped over buildings in pursuit of the lone sniper. Too little too late.

Blood blossomed on Beast's forehead. The world watched in horror as the man's eyes rolled back and his body fell limp.

"No!" Beast's powerfully built bodyguard and beloved companion, Aloysius, caught the fallen king in his arms. Tears pouring, he was inconsolable.

The continental convertible screeched to a halt as medical personnel thronged the vehicle.

The world watched with bated breath while doctors worked in tandem to revive the fallen man. From their faces, things didn't look good, but Jacob could only hope and pray for the survival of the man of peace Israel had come to regard as the world's saviour.

The sky darkened. Eerie winds blew. An ominous sign.

"It is with the deepest regret that we have to pronounce Beast dead," announced his red-eyed spokesman.

In spite of the looming clouds, not a single raindrop fell. The two witnesses' curse held firm. Drought still plagued the Holy Land.

"It must be those anti-Beast fanatics!" Shrieked a woman.

"Kill them all," screamed a man.

"He's gone! He's really gone!" An elderly man flung his hands.

Hope left Jacob. There's no point staying on. Amid the wailing crowd, he dragged his feet and headed home.



Jayden

"WHAT ARE YOU WATCHING?" Jayden plopped himself in the lazy chair beside Leo in The Ark's community lounge. The floor to ceiling screen displayed live-streaming from Jerusalem through Leo Tech nano drones.

The smell of freshly popped corn wafted up Jayden's nose. "Real butter?" He grabbed a handful and popped that into his mouth, savouring the sweet, buttery crunch.

"Of course," Leo munched a handful without looking away from the screen. "Beast is about to confront the two witnesses."

"This will be good." Embedded in a beanbag, Charles slurped his beverage.

Beast's entourage came into view. He spotted Emma and her admirer in the background. There was something different about her. She seemed less human. More feral. Had she taken up body building of late?

Ava stood behind Emma, the best friend who'd watch her back. While both women were decked from head to toe in exquisite dresses, dripping in precious metals and gemstones, Emma looked ecstatic while Ava - terrified. Plain miserable. The confident, effervescent girl he remembered - absent.

While waving at the crowds, Beast looked up, towards a particular roof, as if expecting something to happen.

Then it did.

A gun shot rang out.

Beast fell back as a bullet struck his head. Blood poured from his wound.

The doctor pronounced him dead.

A day of mourning announced in remembrance of the world's greatest humanitarian and king. That last bit riled Leo.

"You guys know what's coming right?" Leo tore his eyes off the screen and looked at them, reeking anxiety.

"Time's up," he ground his teeth. "Honeymoon's over."

"What are you rambling about?" Jayden asked. He too suspected Beast to be the Antichrist but so far, the man did nothing but good. At least they couldn't dig up any dirt on him.

"Get everyone to move their families into their bunkers," Leo replied. "Forget the surface world. We're closing the doors to The Ark in twenty-four hours."



Logan & Jacob – Beast Arising

Logan

Leaves rustled. Winds whistled. Moonlight filtered through the foliage, its slivers of silver gave surrounding trees an unearthly glow.

The musty smell of damp earth and the fresh tang of pine needles grounded him as his boots sank into soft soil.

Chanting, soft at first, grew louder as Logan approached the clearing. He'd gotten in touch with Leo in the chaos that ensued from Beast's death.

What aroused his curiosity now inspired regret. He could imagine how Emunah must have felt, taking on espionage assignments from Leo. Unlike Emunah, he's well equipped to defend himself and take on threats if caught.

Leo's theory that Beast engineered his own death sounded insane at first, but if Beast were the rider in Logan's dream, it made sense. In any case, Logan couldn't rest until he knew the truth.

The body in the morgue wasn't Beast's. Someone stole Beast's corpse and replaced it with a lookalike.

Leo's surveillance tech tracked Beast's real body to this clearing but the nano drones shorted out within a mile radius of the suspected spot. So here was Logan - playing spy games in that final mile.

The atmosphere grew oppressive, the air thickening with every step he took. Pungent sulphur mingled with incense wafted up his nose as the chants crescendoed. Every subsequent breath required tremendous effort. Smoke, dark as soot, obscured his vision.

Slipping on Leo Tech goggles and air filters, he made his way towards the clearing's peripherals.

"Gather data. Do not engage," Leo emphasised.

Logan's neither suicidal nor a fool so he kept well out of sight while recording the scene.

Beast's empty husk lay on a marble slab. A coven encircled him, chanting in haunting voices that made his skin crawl. Low chants rose into high pitched, manic shrieks.

Mists rising from the ground beneath the slab swirled around Beast's body, taking the form of a jet-black dragon, gaseous at first, solidifying as the chants filled the clearing.

Prophet stood before Beast's corpse, raising his hands to entreat the dragon. A malicious grin spread across the dragon's face as he held an ornate key above his head. Then he plunged it into the ground, opening the door to the abyss.

A monstrous beast, brimming with evil, clawed its way out, entering Beast's body.

The dead man's eyes flew open. Overwhelming power emanated from the resurrected Beast.



Jacob

HOSTILE ENHANCED SOLDIERS surrounded the two witnesses, yet they continued preaching. A mere handful were interested in what they had to say. The rest tried to silence the pair.

Jacob shuddered at the presence of these green eyed inhuman beast men. Immensely powerful, invulnerable and immortal, no mortal man could stand up to them. Now that Beast was gone, who could rein them in?

As one witness spoke, four enhanced soldiers landed before the pair with flames dancing in the palms of their hands. Together they poured on fire, engulfing the two witnesses in an inferno so intense, their surroundings burst in flames.

The fire died, the prophets remained unharmed - untouched by the flames. Not a trace of smoke could be found on them. Then like fire breathing dragons, they incinerated their invulnerable, immortal attackers.

A cool breeze blew away the ashes while the two witnesses continued their message.

"That's all we have to tell you from our Lord God Almighty," the older witness concluded.

As soon as those words left his mouth, Beast who should be dead, landed in front of the two witnesses, his eyes glowed green, his mouth twisted in a menacing smile.

"Enough," he struck the older witness, sending the man flying across the square.

Where once, nothing could move either witness, now Beast tossed them around like mere toys. It was as if their powers had been taken away.

As Beast struck the killing blows, the two witnesses looked up to heaven, their faces radiant with joy as their spirits left their bodies.

Dark pregnant clouds gathered over the Holy Land. Rain poured.

"Drought ended. Another problem solved," smirked Beast to rapturous applause.

"I declare a three-day holiday to celebrate the demise of the troublemakers," announced the ruler of Israel, delighted over the end of drought and plagues caused by the two witnesses.

"Let us worship man's saviour - Beast," said Prophet to the adoring crowd.

"They are nothing compared to Beast," Jacob shook his head. "I almost believed them." Disappointment. A sense of betrayal gnawed at him.

"Let us give them a decent burial," Logan proposed.

"They deserve no burial," raged a man. "They tormented us."

“Let’s celebrate!” cried another as he brought out a basket of goods and distributed them to passersby as Beast Day gifts.

So began the global movement celebrating Beast’s resurrection and victory through the exchange of gifts.

Haters guarded the bodies of the two witnesses, killing anyone who tried to claim them in order to give them a proper burial.

“They deserve to rot out here for everything they have done,” one snarled at Logan for trying to reason with them. Jacob watched dispassionately. Whatever inclination he had to believe their salvation message died with them.

His friend Logan, however, camped day and night within sight of their teachers’ bodies.

The morning sun caressed Jacob’s skin as he headed to his friend’s tent.

“Logan, it’s been three days,” he nudged his friend.

“Mmm hmm,” Logan stared at their teachers’ bodies.

“Time to give it up. Go home,” Jacob. “Beast’s people aren’t going to let you bury them.”

“I’m not going to bury them,” Logan grinned. He seemed too excited. Too happy. Jacob worried for his friend’s sanity.

“You’re tired. I’ll keep vigil on your behalf so that you can get some sleep,” Jacob offered.

“Any time now,” Logan glanced at his watch.

“It’s been three and a half days.”

The sky grew exceedingly bright. A sudden burst of wind, both chilling and comforting swept past them into the bodies of the two witnesses. The two dead men began to breathe.

Logan’s face shone with joy. “See! The spirit of life from God just entered them as promised.”

In the presence of their celebrating detractors, the two witnesses stood up.

Their guards turned white, shaking in terror.

Horror fell upon all who wanted them dead.

“Come up hither,” boomed a voice from heaven.

Before the partying crowd, the two witnesses flew up into the clouds and out of sight.

“God is great!” Logan laughed. “Come, we better get out of here!”

As Jacob and Logan left the city quaked, the ground shook. The tremor beneath their feet threw them off balance but the epicenter was where the bodies of the two witnesses had lain. The earthquake split the ground beneath the city and a tenth of Jerusalem collapsed, taking many detractors with it.

The two witnesses taught the truth. Jacob believed. “Jesus, you are Lord,” he proclaimed as he fell to his knees. God raised Jesus from the dead. He believed. He’d seen the resurrection of God’s prophets with his own eyes.



Ava - Beast's Elite Army

Ava

“Just get enhanced like the rest of us,” Emma nagged. “You’ll have power beyond your wildest dreams. You’ll feel amazing!”

Jezebel’s teachings glorified Beast as God and Prophet as his voice. She had all bibles in the West burnt and replaced with books carrying her teachings. Ava’s conscience rebelled against her teacher and the fellowship her life centred around. Ava had memorised bible verses in Sunday School and these contradicted what Jezebel taught. For Ava’s lack of faith in Prophet and refusal to follow Jezebel’s recommended program, High Prophetess Jezebel of the Church of Thyatira excommunicated her.

Ava shuddered at the green fire that rimmed Emma’s eyes. She still looked like the old Emma, though with an even more pronounced hourglass figure that’s all muscle, glowing skin too perfect to be natural and a few inches of added height. Yet instead of the warm sister she knew before the procedure, this new Emma had an eerie presence and exuded cruel sadism.

“No, thanks. I’m happy being plain old me,” she looked down to avoid Emma’s furious glare. She chose to follow the group to watch her best friend’s back after all they had been through together.

“Your passing up your once in a lifetime chance to be class AAA elite,” Emma’s voice softened. “Without enhancements, you’d stay D class.” She reached out and caressed Ava’s cheek. “Come on, you’ve seen the new body Jezebel prepared for you.”

Ever since Emma’s migration into her immortal body, something about her seemed off. Everything real, everything human about her vanished. She retained her memories and personality but this wasn’t Emma.

Much as Ava wanted to, she couldn't leave the group as her passport was with Jezebel.

She'd have to play along until they returned to their own country.

"I'll stick with what I've got," she replied.

"What will I do with you. As a D class slave, you're safest serving me," Emma rolled her eyes. "You don't want to know what the others do to their slaves."

"It'll be my pleasure to serve you Madam," Ava curtsied with aplomb.

"That's settled then. I'll get them to assign you as my assistant," Emma laughed. She looked and sounded like the old Emma once more.

Maybe she's paranoid. It could be nothing more than her wild imagination.

"You're turning into Emunah," Ava chided herself as Emma walked out to prepare for battle.

Since the sun lost a third of its strength, crops failed. The earth's in dire need of a strong leader to put an end to the climate change crisis. Of the ten kings, three opposed Beast's offer to take charge of the world's resources to ensure the survival of mankind. No amount of persuasion could convince them otherwise. The time for peace expired. War's the only option.



"CHARGE!" BEAST'S VOICE boomed across the battlefield.

From the safety of Beast's camp, Ava watched Emma triple in size, her growing musculature ripping through her clothing as she leaped into battle, tossing enemy tanks aside as if they were children's toys.

Shell after shell exploded against her impervious skin when she mowed down a platoon, laughing like a maniac, soaked in the fountain of blood that was her making.

Ben fought alongside her, throwing lascivious glances her way while he incinerated an enemy platoon.

Blood lusted, the pair killed the entire company in minutes. Ava shuddered at their inhuman brutality.

When the final refuge for followers of Jesus fell before Beast, their camp erupted in celebration.

There's no one who could stand against their king – Beast.

A night of debauchery would follow, of which Ava wanted no part of. All she wanted was to hide and puke.



Ava – Beast's Temple Celebration

Ava

With the eradication of all kings who harboured followers of Jesus Christ, Prophet, Beast's ally in Jerusalem planned an elaborate weeklong celebration in honour of Beast.

Jerusalem's the last stop before Emma's team heads home and Ava with them. Now that victory's secured, Emma reverted to her old self once more, to Ava's deep relief.

"Liam will be there," Emma's eyes twinkled. Though the man had dumped her, Emma never gave up hope she could win him back. "His wife and kids are gone which means he's all mine."

Ava let her friend rant on while she selected shoes she knew Emma would like.

"Jezebel secured a ticket for you too, as her guest. You'll experience life as an AAA class elite while in Jerusalem so you can see first-hand the difference," Ava did a twirl in front of the full length mirror, her red gown caressing her curves as her skirt comprising multiple layers of silk billowed in the resulting wind.

"Me?" Ava was stunned at Jezebel's generosity.

"That includes wardrobe budget. Go get all the outfits you would need for the week. I can handle my own," she waved Ava away. "No repeat outfits allowed so you'll need three casual, one formal and one nightgown, all with matching underwear for every day we'll be there."

It's the ultimate girls' day out. Traipsing from boutique to boutique, giggling like schoolgirls. For the first time in years, Ava felt a sense of normalcy. The past few years seemed like nothing more than a bad dream.

After a week of fine living in Jerusalem, hanging out with her best pal, dancing with handsome men, dining on exquisite cuisine, Ava grew to love the life accorded those in Jezebel's inner circle. She had until after the Temple celebration where Beast was the VIP, to give Jezebel her final decision.

Beast turned out a charming gentleman she had come to admire. She'd even developed a massive crush on that gorgeous, absolutely brilliant, humanitarian. Cheeks burning at the thought of seeing him in the temple, she adjusted her gown.

The new temple of Jerusalem was a majestic sight. It's no wonder it's listed as one of the current Seven Wonders of the World.

The heavy beats of rock music reverberated throughout the temple – a stark contrast from the beautiful melodies carried by rich, powerful voices that once characterised the worship within this holy place.

“Liam!” Emma squealed, her body taking on a sensual gait. Across the Court of Gentiles from where Ava and Emma were sightseeing, Liam walked in from the Royal Portico. He froze, the healthy glow of his fading to a pale, greenish hue. “Emma,” he mouthed.

Prophet secured Nicarnor Gate that morning. None but his assistants were allowed through.

Terrified whispers floated around Israel regarding wild rumours about Beast's plans revolving around the Altar of Sacrifice. Many Jews had been brutally murdered for their protests.

The Levites had gone into hiding. They had been replaced in their temple duties, their chief priest beholden to Prophet, protesters incinerated without exception.

Like an impulsive puppy, Emma was at Liam's heels, her arms encircled her unwilling prey, oblivious to amused stares.

Kicking off her ridiculous heels, Ava ran after her best friend, determined to salvage what's left of Emma's dignity.

“Emma,” Ava whisper-yelled at her best friend who was not under the influence of alcohol. Her new body threw off its influence, but from the way she giggled, draping herself around Liam, you’d think she’s drunk. It didn’t make sense. With her new status, Emma was rich and powerful beyond measure, yet she seemed stuck in her old mentality, clinging on the multi-billionaire for his money and status. Her mind seemed frozen in time, oblivious to her new circumstances.

New age meditation chants mingled with the heavy metal music, growing in volume until the entire temple sounded like what Ava imagined the Nirvana Jezebel preached must be like. A part of her saw through Jezebel’s lies. That part felt uneasy about Beast’s humanitarian project, as noble as it seemed when Jezebel pitched it. It’s too late to turn back now.

“Come, one and all, into the inner sanctuary,” a female voice, as clear as a bell, rang out.

Liam, Emma, Ava and the entire crowd of Gentiles were herded through Gate Beautiful, past the Nicanor Gate, into the Court of Israel meant for Jews alone, through the Court of Priests, filling the Holy Place. The few Jews present pandered to Prophet’s every whim. Ava had heard that Prophet’s followers had slaughtered every Jew who objected to the desecration of their holy temple.

Prophet himself was a Jew and anointed of God or so Jezebel said. She insisted that Prophet had every right to modernize the temple’s outdated customs and rituals.

Ava looked away. She hated Jezebel’s insistence that such deaths were for the greater good.

Beast stood before the empty altar, a benign, majestic expression graced his face. He raised his hand. Squealing swine flew through the gates, landing unceremoniously on the altar where one of his enhanced guards slaughtered it.

Horried gasps filled the chamber, silencing at Beast’s now grotesque visage – *his true visage*. Ava recoiled.

The curtain lifted revealing the ultimate sacrilege.
The Holy of Holies held a towering image of Beast.
Prophet chanted.

The statue came to life. Fire poured out of its mouth incinerating the unholy sacrifice.

“Bow down and worship Beast, your new god,” Prophet proclaimed.

Beast’s entire being glowed as he levitated before the crowd, demanding worship.

Trumpets blared.

Emma, her face alight with ecstasy, threw herself, face to the ground worshipping the beast. Ava stood frozen. Her heart screamed **No!**

Her eyes scanned the crowd. Everyone bowed before Beast - their foreheads touching the ground. Only she and Liam stood tall. Liam’s eyes met hers, encouraging her with a fearless smile.

“Ah, Liam, Liam,” Beast’s lips curled up at the edges, revealing fangs. “Do you not recognise my greatness as worthy of worship?”

“I worship God the Father, Jesus Christ my Saviour,” Liam declared, joy lighting his face.

“So be it.” A ball of fire emerged from Beast’s palm. He tossed it at Liam. Nonchalant.

Flames consumed Liam as he fell to the ground. It was as if his spirit had left his body before the punishment hit.

Beast looked right through her as if he could not see her. Ava held her breath as his attention fell on a pair of Levites fleeing instead of bowing. Beast pointed at them, and the statue breathed out fire, killing them.

Shaking with terror, Ava ran out of the temple as fast as her wobbly legs could carry her.



Leo - Mark of the Beast

Leo

Perched at the edge of his seat like an anxious bird, Leo stared at the live feed from Liam's nano drones. Since his family was Raptured, that man had a death wish. Against all self-preserving sensibilities, the crazy man attended Beast's event in the new Temple of Jerusalem in spite of intel that hinted at the fruition of Beast's sinister plans.

Leo's stomach dropped at the desecration of the temple.

"Get out now!" Leo urged Liam.

His vision blurred as the inevitable happened. The swift approach of fire heralded his end as the screen turned black.

Liam fought the good fight and is now with his loved ones. That's all that mattered.

Dejected, he headed to the basin to wash his face. What they'd been preparing for has begun. He needed a break - time to collect his thoughts.

Walking through the communal recreational bunker, his eyes fell on large screens which provided live broadcasts from the surface world

Prophet, the sorcerer who had the world in thrall, addressed the cameras. In the background, video footage of him bringing an image of Beast to life as well as all the miracles he had performed played for all to see the extent of his power.

"Worship Beast. Wear his mark with pride," announced Prophet as he stood before Beast. **"Henceforth, anyone who does not have Beast's number on his forehead or right hand may not buy or sell anything."**

Underground in their self-sustaining city, they had all the needed to survive until Jesus' return. How about followers of Jesus on the surface world?

"Leo," Charles strode up to him. "Thanks to you my family's safe here."

"That's the least I can do," Leo mumbled, though he felt he should do more. For every Charles who made it to safety, how many more would perish as persecution intensified? With the mark of the beast mandated, how many will escape with their souls intact?

With the resurrection of the two witnesses in Jerusalem, many had come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Going through the live feeds from his nano drones positioned outside one of Beast's buildings, he watched an acquaintance, Tim, drag his feet as he walked into the centre to take the mark of the beast.

Tim had gone to Jerusalem to listen to the two witnesses preach. When the two witnesses were resurrected, he gave his life to Jesus, or so he said.

Tim's wife's pregnant with twins. His elderly mother lived with them to help take care of their toddler. He was the sole breadwinner.

If Leo were in his shoes what would he have done? Let his family die of starvation?

When he met Tim, the man supported Beast's humanitarian programs. Choosing to err on the side of caution, he didn't mention The Ark to Tim when he met. He answered Tim's questions about Jesus and gave him a bible but that's as much help as he dared provide. His primary fear was should Tim share information about The Ark with Beast's people, the entire city could be compromised.

Without the Mark of the Beast, even if he had the money, he wouldn't be able to buy food to feed his family, let alone pay the medical help needed for his wife's complicated pregnancy.

Long, dreadful minutes later, Tim walked out of the building a different man. His eyes hardened, his expression inhumane. He muttered curses against the God he once loved.

Guilt gnawed at Leo. If he sheltered Tim and his family in The Ark, could he have avoided this?

A wandering nanobot streamed a live video from a store Leo once frequented.

"Please, may I have a loaf of bread?" A young woman asked the cashier in a store. "I can pay."

The old lady, once a warm mother figure had turned cold and heartless. "Sorry, Wilma," she replied as she waved a scanner over the woman's forehead and right hand. "You don't have the mark. I can't sell anything to you."

"I don't want the mark for personal reasons," the young woman's voice softened. "I'll pay you double. Triple. Please, I must eat."

"If you want to eat, go get the mark," the cashier waved her away. "Centre's a block away. It's painless and takes a few seconds."

"Please, I've been your loyal customer for years," the young woman pleaded. "No one will sell me any food!"

"That's because you're a stubborn idiot," the old lady raised her voice. Agitated. The numbers 666 glowed on her forehead. Faint, but discernible.

Sighing, the young lady, left the shop and curled up in a street corner. There was food everywhere but none for her. Passers-by kicked her when she approached them for help.

She lay down on the chilly cruel street and never woke up. She'd rather starve to death than take the mark of the beast.

I can't feed and shelter all of them. If I take in someone who turns on us, it will compromise the safety of everyone in The Ark.

Leo brushed aside pangs of guilt as he monitored the surface world.

Something was going on in the outskirts of the city. From afar, his drones picked up images of Beast's goons carrying building materials. His tech shorted out before his nano drones could get near enough to show him what Beast's enhanced soldiers were up to. With all the new developments, it's too dangerous to send anyone to spy on them. It's not worth the loss of their lives.

Meticulous modifications to the design allowed one drone access to the building site. The live feed, though grainy and unstable, showed super-powered goons putting together pre-manufactured walls, roofs and floor, creating what looked like a large labour camp from ground up.

As the drone made its way further into the camp, it showed images of gas chambers in construction, the design of which replicated Nazi death camps. It's like the holocaust all over again!

The camp's on the verge of completion. Once done, those who refused the mark of the beast could well be herded into these death camps.

You know what you must do.

The still small voice of The Lord prompted Leo.



Ava - The Rundown Hideaway

Ava

Her body shaking, adrenaline exhausted, Ava collapsed at the foot of a rundown building in a rural district, as far from the temple as her legs could take her.

Images of bones and dust with wisps of smoke billowing out haunted her. That's all that's left of Liam – her friend who dared defy Prophet and Beast. How she was still alive befuddled her. She should be dead, yet somehow, she could sense God's loving presence protecting her.

She needed a place to stay. After standing up to Beast, she couldn't return to her hotel suite. With her fine gown and jewellery, she looked out of place in this.

The stench of urine and cigarettes permeated the alley. Discarded boxes at the foot of a rundown building caught her eye. Rummaging through their contents, she found a moth eaten blanket that's still usable and some faded clothing in her size. Tucking these under her arm, she stepped into the abandoned building.

The floorboards creaked as she climbed up the steps. Walls stained with mould and half rotten doors characterised the apartments within the building. Every door she tested was locked, its occupants yelling at her, indignant.

She dragged her tired legs up, floor by floor until she found an unlocked door. Steeling herself, she pushed. It creaked open.

Choking on the dust that flew up, she explored the room. It looked like it hadn't been lived in for years. A small book lay open on a table, covered in dust. It was a bible! The real deal!

When she left home to travel with Emma, she had to leave her precious bible behind. She hid it under the floorboards of her apartment, planning to retrieve it after her trip, because there was no way she could get it past Beast's security.

Her eyes fell on the words from Psalms, highlighted in a faded shade of yellow:

Keep me as the apple of the eye, hide me under the shadow of thy wings,

From the wicked that oppress me, from my deadly enemies, who compass me about.^[1]

How she longed for God's protection from the evil that dogged her. She could run but could she hide from Jezebel and her minions?

"Jesus Christ, son of the Living God. Save me!" She knelt on the bare wooden boards and wept.

The sun streamed through a crack in the wall, lighting the room with its comforting glow. As sense of peace arose within her as she took stock of her situation.

Many years back in Sunday School she read the Book of Revelation. Back then, her mentor said it's symbolic and not literal. Yet she'd seen it fulfilled as written.

And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed.

Memories of Prophet giving life to Beast's image haunted her. The demonic grimace on both the man, if you could still call him that, and his towering living likeness, moments before they murdered her friend, etched forever in her memories.

And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads:

And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.

Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six.^[2]

She had to act fast. She'd need to stock up food and water fast while she could still purchase supplies.

All she had was what she carried on her body. Her jewellery and the gown she wore!

Wearing the discarded clothes, she'd found; she pawned the jewellery.

"It's worth twenty times that," she protested when the dealer named his price.

"Take it or leave it," he sniffed.

Desperate, Ava took the cash and headed to the supermarket.

It worked for a season. Each time, she'd buy as much as she could carry, squirrelling away supplies in the abandoned apartment.

Then came the day, that no one could buy or sell anything without the mark of the beast. Soon anyone without the mark would be imprisoned or killed.

Her food and water supplies dwindled away until there was nothing left. She cried out to God for help.

The doorbell rang.

It was Emma.



Leo - Ethan's Sacrifice

Leo

Running his hands through his hair as he watched the hulk of a man and his enhanced team approach Ethan's farmhouse, Leo barked through the comms, "don't engage Ben! Go underground now!"

"Too late," Ethan replied. Resigned to his fate while his teammates made their way to safety. "Someone's got to buy time for them to cover their tracks." He shrugged.

In abject horror, he watched Ben burn the crops, then incinerate Ethan.

"Breathe, Leo," he muttered, running trembling hands through his hair. "Think! We can't be the only ones to refuse Beast's mark!"

Over the years, through agents like Liam, he had positioned information gathering nano-drones all over the world so that inhabitants of The Ark wouldn't be blindsided.

Through his drones, he'd form connections with other survivor camps who did not trust Beast's agenda. They kept one another updated.

His line to the East blinked on.

"Percy?" He asked absently, not looking at the face on the video.

"They got Percy. I'm covering him now," replied a too familiar, feminine voice.

His heart leaped. His head jerked up as his eyes locked onto his new contact.

"Mei? How?" He couldn't stop grinning like an idiot. Not only was his secret crush alive, she's neither in Prophet's thrall, nor part of Beast's organisation... or was she?

"I thought you were working for Beast Corp?" Leo tried to keep his emotions in check.

That slight quirk of a smile at the corner of her mouth did things to him which he thought he'd gotten over by now.

"If you recall, you're the one who encouraged me to go for Beast Corp," she replied. "I found out what they were really doing, and absconded."

She glared at him. "You knew about them? Was that why you were avoiding my calls?"

Leo swallowed the lump in his throat. Feeling like a heel, he replied. "Sorry. I should have warned you."

"Let bygones be bygones," her smile lit her eyes. "Boy, am I glad you're ok. As my Saviour forgave me, I forgive you too."

She's saved too! Joy overwhelmed the former atheist, now staunch Christian.



"I HEAR YOU'RE DOING great things in the West." Her eyes shining, as beautiful as the stars, she added, "I'm proud of you."

Leo's cheeks heated up. "Thanks!" Hope welled in his heart. Maybe, just maybe, Mei might...

A large man with showed up behind Mei. With his chiselled features and sculptured physique, the blonde looked like a statue of some Greek god.

Leo's hopes crashed.

"Boris, Leo's an old friend. We used to study together," Mei craned her neck, looking at the intruder.

Jealous pangs gnawed at Leo.

"Leo, meet my trainer and mentor Boris."



Ava - Best Friend?

“Ava,” Emma’s voice was so warm and full of sisterly love. Ava melted. “It’s me. Your best friend forever!”

Ava wished it were true. Maybe it was. After all, Emma took her under her wing and protected her when she refused Beast’s version of immortality.

“I know you have your personal principles. Though I don’t agree with them, I’ll watch your back.” Through the peephole, Ava studied Emma’s expression. She seemed sincere. Ava let her in.

“How did you know I’m here?” Dread crept on Ava. “Do the rest know?”

“You pawned the jewellery Jezebel gave you. One of ours recognised it and told Jezebel,” Emma’s voice softened.

“Jezebel wants me dead for that,” Ava concluded.

“I convinced her to give you another chance,” Emma assured Ava. “You don’t have to switch to your new body or even get any enhancements to your birth body. As long as you take the mark of the beast in your forehead or right hand, you’ll be in our inner circle and have class AAA status like me.”

“Emma, all who take the mark of the beast reject God and will go to the lake of fire,” Ava replied. “I can’t turn against my God.”

“He’s not providing for you. He can’t!” Emma pouted. “I can.” She shoved a large recyclable tote bag full of groceries into Ava’s hands.

“This should keep you well fed for a month. I bought it with my own money so you don’t owe Jezebel anything for this,” Emma hugged Ava. Tears of gratitude flowed down Ava’s cheeks.

Month after month, while starvation forced others to take the mark of the beast, Ava stayed faithful and fed, thanks to her best friend Emma. So when Emma turned on her, she was blindsided.

“Take her to the gulag,” Emma’s eerie stare chilled Ava’s heart.

Manhandled like a sack of potatoes by Beast’s goons, rage simmered in Ava’s breast at the injustice of it all. She stayed faithful to the Lord yet where was he in all this.

From the abandoned apartment in Jerusalem, Beast’s goons shoved her up Jezebel’s private plane. Emma, her minder rode with her, raging at her for her rejection of Jezebel’s generous offer – One that Emma suffered much to secure for her best friend, or so she claimed.



THE PLANE LANDED. SHE recognised the airport. She’s home, where she and Emma grew up. Her heart leaped with hope. She prayed for a chance to escape.

Emma led Ava through the airport customs, claiming Ava to be a criminal in her care, under Beast’s authority. One mention of his name and the officers quaked. Terrified.

Then she was dragged into an armoured van where Emma bade her farewell with a final taunt.

Cheeks damp with tears, Ava pleaded with God for deliverance. The words of her favourite Psalm resonated in her heart.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.^[3]

God’s presence enveloped her, bringing much needed comfort, soothing her into deep, sound sleep... until screeching brakes sent her body slamming against the wall.



Jayden - Outlaws

Jayden

“Death camps for our brethren?” Jayden’s scrumptious dinner lost its appeal.

“We can’t feed and house everyone here,” Leo frowned, picking at his food. “Also, Prophet is wiping out survivor camps like ours. Some were infiltrated to be destroyed from within.”

“So, we only take in those who we are sure aren’t plants and won’t betray us,” Jayden couldn’t bring himself to turn a blind eye towards suffering brothers and sisters in Christ.

Leo stared out of the window, his expression, unreadable.

So here he was, armed with Leo tech, blending in with the travellers at the airport.

A woman in handcuffs, escorted by two large guards, led by an Amazonian woman caught his attention.

He recognised the women - his old acquaintances Ava and Emma who had joined Jezebel’s inner circle. According to Leo’s sources, they were part of Beast’s entourage in Jerusalem. That being the case, why was Ava in chains and treated like a criminal?

The Holy Spirit prompted him to investigate, leading him to the footage from Liam’s nano drone seconds before his demise.

None of the other recordings had any footage of Ava. All showed Liam standing alone in defiance. Everyone else within camera range prostrated before the living, breathing image brought to life by Prophet.

Liam’s recording however showed Ava standing in refusal to bow before Beast or his image. Beast seemed unable to see her. This was the only drone that lasted seconds after the fiery breath incinerated Liam.

The flames died off, the video showed a terrified Ava standing in front of Beast as he looked right through her, before turning his attention towards a pair of defiant Levites. Then the feed died out.

Go save her.

The still small voice of The Lord urged Jayden, giving him strength.

Emma and her men tossed Ava into the back of a van. Adrenaline surging through his veins, he sprinted to the vehicle beside it.

Ava bit her captor like a feral cat. Jayden choked back a snort, taking advantage of the commotion to attach a tracker to the van.

With the tracker in place, he followed the truck through the heavy traffic, on foot, thanking God for traffic congestion which slowed the truck to a snail's pace.

The van veered off the road and into the woods, speeding over rocky ground with ease. He lost them.

Leo Tech is amazing. Tracing the van's path down the circular, winding road, Jayden found a point the vehicle would have to cross, which he could get to ahead of them. With Leo's grapple gun, he cut through the woods and set a trap.

Using a thick cord and branches as a crude pulley system, he filled a net with rocks, dangling above that very spot.

Perched on a branch, he waited.

The van approached. At the exact instant, he cut the rope, releasing rocks that crashed through the windscreen, shattering it.

With his trusty sling and pebbles, he struck down each guard who stepped out of the safety of the van.

While it appeared as if he'd knocked them all out, he had to assume at least one guard would be left to secure the prisoner.

Scrutinising the scene below with his binoculars, he spotted a burly man watching over Ava. A small glass window on the van's roof offered the opening he needed.

He'd picked up useful items while setting up the trap. Heavy weaponry. Things that could give him an edge in battle. He plucked the oven toaster he'd hidden with his stash and dropped it.

Bullseye!

His heavy artillery smashed through the window and struck the guard, smack on the top of his head, putting him to sleep.

Landing on the van's roof, he caught Ava's attention. He'd never seen her without her thick layer of makeup before. Seeing her real face, he wondered why she even bothered. Her cheeks flushed a pretty pink. Her natural beauty far exceeded the mask she used to wear.

"You?!" She sounded annoyed. While he wasn't expecting a hero's welcome, a friendly greeting would have been nice. Then again, Ava was always critical of him.

His Swiss knife took care of the ropes binding her, but those handcuffs would take time. They had none to spare. Those guards could wake up at any moment.

"Ow!" She yelled as he led her out of the van. The handcuffs would chaff her delicate skin but it's better than what's waiting for her in the gulag. "Key's in Hank's pocket!"

How'd he know who's Hank? They were all Beast's goons to him anyway.

No time for banter. A ninja wannabe charged at him with chain-sticks.

His weapon of choice, his handy saucepan helmet served as a great mallet, knocking out their assailant.

More reinforcements would be on the way. Ava must have offended some high ranking official in Beast's hierarchy to have so much manpower allocated to bring her in.

The only way out was up.

No time for niceties. He wrapped his arm last around her and hoisted her on his shoulder, one arm supporting her, the other grasping the rope.

She was heavier than she looked. With a third the world's population in abject poverty, starving to death, you'd expect her to be a little lighter. Then again all resources, including the finest food the world had to offer went to Beast, Prophet, Jezebel and all their favourites, Jezebel's inner circle being among them. His heart skipped a beat. What if he's wrong?

He could endanger everyone in their underground city.

A sense of peace fell upon him as he recalled the image of Ava standing in defiance to Beast and Prophet, risking her very life.

She's a genuine sister in Christ

Light banter made the Herculean task more bearable. With tremendous effort, he shoved her into the thick foliage of a massive tree. "You're welcome," he grunted.

Scanning the land below, he smirked.

The guards he took down lay below, still unconscious.

They were safe for the time being. He got to work picking the lock on her handcuffs, freeing her so she could climb on her own.

"I can't climb!" Ava's panicked voice reached his ears. "I'm scared of heights!"

He turned around. There she was, clinging like a koala bear to the branch he'd left her on, her face drained of all colour.

God give me strength!

All training he'd put himself through since committing to the base, now put to the test, he coaxed the terrified girl onto his back. "Don't let go," he reminded her as he piggy backed her through tree tops, towards The Ark.

His heart skipped a beat when his eyes fell on enhanced brings below. These fanged men with large bat ears had the hearing of bats.

"Don't make a sound," he whispered.

"Hmm? What did you say?" Her voice low and sultry, would have enticed him under any other circumstance, but there and then, he mentally facepalmed.

The huge bat-human hybrid snapped its head up, locking eyes with him. Its raised arms revealed wings beneath. The creature flew towards them.

He had one shot left. It has to be enough. Blasting its face, he dropped Ava on the grass so she'd face the next safe house. "Run!" He yelled as he dropped to the ground behind her. All she had to was to run straight. She couldn't go wrong.

Bam!

She ran smack into a tree.

On the bright side, that's evidence she's not enhanced.

There wasn't time to waste. Carrying her bridal style, he prayed for strength, then ran as fast as his legs could carry them, into the thicket.

"C'mon Ava, wake up," he pleaded with the blissfully unconscious girl. She looked sweet and innocent in her sleep but now's not the time. His arms felt like they would break. He switched to a fireman's lift.

His feet were like lead. His legs felt like they couldn't go any further. How far had he run? The obscure cave which functioned as their safe house was within sight.

Ava stirred.

Jayden thanked God for his mercy.

"Oh good. You're finally awake," he snorted. "My back's about to break."

"Will you stop insulting me," she pouted. She sounded as if Jayden hurt her feelings, but it was the truth! His back could snap at any moment with her added weight.

"You can thank me later," he put her down, his annoyance faded with a tinge of guilt at her hurt, vulnerable expression. Shrugging, he refused to let anyone manipulate his feelings. "This time, watch where you are going," he scrutinised the pampered girl.

The road ahead is fraught with danger, not for the likes of one used to an easy life. He knew. He struggled in his transition from the easy life of a billionaire to living off their community's meagre supplies, unable to buy or sell anything.

"Never mind," he grabbed her hand. Sparks flew at her touch. Ignoring what she did to him, he led her to the cave.

Exhausted, on the verge of collapse, Jayden opted to take a break with Ava in the cave. Sitting with their backs against the cool stone wall, he brought her up to speed over a shared home-made granola bar and a flask of water.

"This is really good," her eyes widened as she bit into her half of the berry cream filled bar.

"I know," Jayden couldn't help feeling pleased with himself. It's his own recipe, developed after countless iterations of trial and error. "It's one of my favourites."

Before today, he only knew of Ava as Emunah's friend, Liam's mistress's best friend and one of Jezebel's clueless herd. Emunah spoke well of her though.

He studied the girl beside him. She's unpretentious, unlike so many of the women he encountered in his past life.

Instead, she reminded him of his best friend Emunah, who had gone to be with The Lord.

Warm fuzzy feelings stirred within him as he watched her eat his creation as if it were the most precious thing in the world.

She looked up as if she could feel his eyes on her. "What are you looking at?"

"You," he replied, amused by the coral pink that spread from her cheeks over her entire face. He hadn't noticed before how pretty she was when she blushed unguarded. She looked down, long lush lashes trying to hide her shy eyes.

Her pungent honeyed female scent enveloped him. Distracting him. Without thinking, he reached to caress her cheek, stopping himself before his fingers could graze her soft inviting skin.

No, he chided himself. His days of hedonism, of sleeping around, caused him to miss his flight. Playboy Jayden's a thing of the past. He's a new man now.

Dropping his hand, he shrugged. Was that a look of disappointment in her eyes? He had to be imagining things.

"We'll have to leave soon to reach the base before the sky turns dark," he stared out of the cave's still bright opening."

"Why?" She tilted her head, her gaze as adorable as a kitten's.

"Beast's enhanced monstrosities are creatures of the night," he shuddered when he heard a not-too-distant howl.



Mei - Brethren in the Woods

Mei

The smoky odour of charred wood and burnt soil, intertwined with the metallic tang of blood hung heavy in the air.

Landing in the clearing that once thrived with life, Mei gagged. “We’re too late.” It’s her first time piloting a rescue plane. After intensive training, she looked forward to the joy of saving lives, only to be met with death and utter destruction.

War wrought. Evacuation called. Boris led his team of mercy pilots into the community of new Christians hiding in the woods, to evacuate the brethren before the arrival of advancing armies of war mongers.

Wisps of smoke streamed from the remains of buildings that once housed families of believers. Bloodied bodies littered burnt earth. Did anyone survive the massacre?

The stench of sulphur wafted up Mei’s nose - the stench she’d faced each day in her old job at Beast Corp. Kneeling on the ground, she scooped a handful of ashes and sniffed, detecting traces of all too familiar substances in them.

“Class A Enhanced soldiers used their flame powers to raze this camp,” she concluded.

“Think any are still hanging around?” Boris asked, his back ramrod straight.

“Hard to say,” she mumbled. “They are apex predators with heightened intellect.”

“How many?” Boris asked as Mei scanned the battlefield.

“A dozen, give or take a few,” she replied.

“Dean, Henry, Wesley, watch our backs while the rest of us search for survivors,” Boris ordered his team.

The pilots fanned out, searching the ruins for any sign of life.

Death loomed over the town as Mei combed a rustic stone house. From the corner of her eye she felt something move. A deep sense of unease gripped her.

The click of boots against the stone steps sounded too heavy.

“Missed me?” A voice rasped, midway between man and bear. Its intense scent of musk mingled with sulphur scent filled her with a sense of dread.

Looking up, she saw her subject - Ben’s cloned body infused with his memories, devoid of humanity closed in on her.

She had one shot. Slipping her hand in her pocket, she grabbed and flung hollow glass beads filled with a special solution in his face.

The glass shattered, releasing the compound, dissolving his bulletproof skin.

“Now!” She called her backup. A gunshot on his exposed, vulnerable tissues made him stagger backwards.

He roared, charging towards Mei.

A bazooka struck the monster’s exposed forehead, exploding on impact, taking the beast with it.

Turning around, her eyes sought their teammate Henry, still holding the bazooka cannon on his shoulder. “Thanks man, I owe you,” she let out a relieved sigh.

“Thought those guys are immortal,” he shot the lifeless clone a suspicious look.

“In a sense,” Mei shrugged. “Once they detect this body is dead, they’ll upload his memories to the next cloned body so ‘Ben’ lives on,” she shuddered.

A muffled whimper caught their attention.

The pipe!

Deep within the inconspicuous lead cylinder, two scared eyes peeked.

“It’s okay,” she cooed. “They’re gone. You can come out now.”

The child who looked no older than three years old, shook his head, eyes glistening in the dim light.

“No one will hurt you,” she assured him, the way her late grandmother did when she was afraid.

After a long pause, the tiny boy crawled out of the pipe, his face smudged with soot.

“I’m Mei,” she stretched her arms out to welcome him.

The child shrank back, distrusting.

“We came to rescue you, but we’re too slow,” her voice dropped to a hushed whisper.

“I’m Billy,” the boy sniffed, wiping tears off his face with the back of his hand. “They killed Momma and Poppa.”



Ava & Jayden - Underground City

Ava

Ava screamed her throat sore.
Darkness swathed her as she slid down the endless tunnel, gravity speeding her descent without mercy.

There seemed no end to the rabbit hole Jayden shoved her into.

She's so going to kill him.

Plop!

She landed butt-first, sinking into a soft, plump blob of clear plastic. Unhurt physically and mentally jarred.

The blob slid down a dull metal platform, depositing her on the hard wooden floor. Pale, grey concrete walls surrounded her as if she were in some jail cell. A large window took up an entire wall. She felt like a test subject under observation, or a prisoner.

Leo stood on the other side of the window, his face red, bulging vein on his temple pulsating. Boy, was he furious. Jayden stood tall, his face a mask of cool patience, while Leo yelled him down.

The door flung open.

Leo marched in.

"She," he jabbed her forehead.

"Is NOT one of us."

His words smarted.

Leo insisted that Ava's one of Jezebel's disciples, silencing Jayden. From what she observed, the entire underground city's Leo's initiative. Though Jayden's one of its founders, Leo was in charge. Jayden and the other founders were his deputies.

"Send. Her. Back." Leo glared at Jayden.

Ava's heart skipped a beat. Send her back to her death? She'd be forced to take the mark?

She pleaded with Leo. With Jayden's backing she was allowed to stay, albeit under his constant supervision. Her cheeks burned at this arrangement. She hated to admit it but Jayden's one gorgeous, charming man. He drew her in like a moth to a welcoming flame.

As one of The Ark's founders, Jayden had an entire bunker to himself. Disappointment crept in when she realised, they wouldn't be sharing a room.

He showed her the available bedrooms his bunker. They were of varying sizes, some with a single bed, some with bunk beds stacked to accommodate a family of five. Every room has its own attached bathroom. Each had its own décor.

His masculine aroma enveloped her, making it hard to concentrate.

One room caught her attention.

It was cosy with pastel décor. A shelf of books called out to her. Scanning the titles, they appealed to her preference for lighthearted short stories. She couldn't help grinning. She knew she looked like an idiot. "I like this."

"Okay, room's yours." Jayden's even more dashing when he smiled. His eyes twinkling, a cute dimple peeking at her from his cheek, he said, "get cleaned up and meet me in the kitchen for dinner."

He seemed as if in a hurry to get away from her. She smelled herself and grimaced. It had to be her stench.

She took her time to shower using the toiletries he provided. The shampoo left her hair with a heavenly fragrance - a mix of citrus, peony and tuberose with a hint of musk. Maybe that's how he likes his women to smell. She blushed at the thought.

"Jayden's a player. Not my type," she reminded herself.

The bedroom had a dresser with everything a girl could want. She styled her hair with the state-of-the-art gadgets at her disposal.

Satisfied with her immaculate reflection that in the mirror, she made her way to the kitchen. Her breath hitched at the sight of Jayden in a T-shirt too small for his too broad shoulders, his exposed arms

corded with muscle, leaning against the door frame, casual confidence dripping from his frame. That dimpled smile gracing his gorgeous face undid her.

Her heart fluttered.

“Hungry,” he asked, leading her into a kitchen then looked like a eccentric inventor’s playground and free range farm combined.

“Yeah,” she replied, twirling her perfumed hair, staring at the chicken that perched itself on Jayden’s powerfully built shoulder.

“Fried chicken would be nice,” she blurted without even thinking.

Uh oh. Did she just ask to eat Jayden’s pet?

Squawk!

The chicken flew off Jayden, swooping towards Ava.

Plop!

A big dollop of poop landed on her hair. The nauseating stench of fresh chicken droppings permeated the room.

Horrificed, she felt the sticky, pungent goo dripping down her hair, onto her face.



Jayden

“ROLAND, NO!” JAYDEN shooed his feathered friend out of the kitchen, into the animal pen and locked the door.

Ava’s mouth hung open. Her big eyes, even wider in shock as her hand plucked lumps of chicken droppings from her luscious tresses. “Yuck!” She grabbed a paper towel and tried to clean it off. She looked... comical.

“He likes you,” Jayden tried to lighten her mood.

“What?” Ava’s crimson face belied her anger as she stalked up to him.

“He’s claimed you as his human,” Jayden held his hands in surrender.

Ava tilted her head. She looked so confused she was adorable .

"If it makes you feel better, he did that to me too," he continued as she burst into a fit of giggles.

"C'mere," he led her to a bench in the backyard. "I'll clean you up."

She sat beside him. Her proximity sent his heart racing.

"Here, I'll wash it out," He placed a basin at her feet. She didn't need any coaxing to bend over it.

Taking out a bottle of the solvent he developed to clean up after Roland's antics, he held her back to support her. Her shy gaze through lush lashes distracted him.

"Close your eyes and don't move." His voice came out huskier than intended.

Biting his lip, he poured the colourless fluid over her hair, dissolving every trace of Roland's droppings, letting the now brown liquid drip into the basin.

"Hold still." Her face in his hand, he gently wiped the brown patches off her radiant skin with solvent infused disposables, discarding each brown sheet in favour of a clean new piece, until her skin regained its spotless appearance. A beautiful blush spread over her milky complexion. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

"Thanks." Her sultry voice accompanied her dark, bedroom eyes.

His body responded in kind. Tearing himself away, he mumbled. "Go shower to wash off the solvent. I'll have dinner ready for you in the living room by the time you're done."

Not trusting himself to look at her, he headed back into the kitchen. It's been so long since he'd had downtime alone with a beautiful woman that he's over reacting.

Playing it safe, he set the table so that they'd sit a respectable distance apart, yet close enough for cordial conversation.

Ava looked thrilled at their simple dinner – precooked spaghetti Bolognese heated in the microwave oven. "It's the best!" She exclaimed.

He'd expected a pampered princess, but as soon as she'd eaten, she cleared the table, squealing when the cleaning droid whizzed towards them, clearing the table.

"I'll do the dishes," she offered, her jaw dropping as the droid filled the dishwasher which came to life when the lid closed.

"No worries. This is a smart home, so the A.I. takes care of the chores," Jayden chortled. "Go to bed. We start work at seven tomorrow morning. Meet me outside the animal pen."

"What work will we be doing?" Ava's an eager beaver.

"Check on the farms and make sure everything is running smoothly," Jayden replied, amused at her curious expression.

"What if the A.I. goes bonkers?" Ava frowned. A valid question considering Emunah's A.I.'s antics.

"We shut it down and go manual," Jayden assured her. "I'll teach you tomorrow."

He left Ava to her own devices while he hit the sack. Exhausted.

Morning came too soon. It wasn't seven yet but Ava was already waiting for him, all bright-eyed and bushy tailed.

"Here's where we prepare food for the animals," he walked her to Animal Feed Plant. He showed her the monitor. "From this, you can see, we're low on corn, so Jodie should take care of this."

A droid pattered past them with a bag of corn and emptied it into the mill.

"You name your droids?" Ava looked amused.

"Of course. Don't you?" Jayden smiled as he followed her eyes to the conveyer belt that delivered eggs to the kitchen.

"Let's check that our feathered and hooved friends got their breakfast," he took her hand, regretting it instantly. Sparks flew when their fingers touched. He dropped her hand like a hot potato and stepped away. She looked at him as if he'd kicked a puppy.

"This way," he muttered, his voice coming out far more gruff than he'd anticipated.

She walked behind him as he led her through the farm, explaining how the Automatic Ladder Chicken Feeding Machine worked and the enhancements he'd made so that no human intervention's needed.

"Where's Roland?" She asked, eyes narrowed, as if searching for her nemesis.

"With his fan girls," Jayden laughed, leading her to the pasture where five hens clucked around a rooster.

"Player," she rolled her eyes. "Like someone I know," she looked coyly at him.

Jayden shrugged, "That guy's gone long ago." He wasn't proud of his old reputation.

He led her to the kitchen where the conveyer belt delivered eggs and bottles of milk. "Here's where we set aside food for today and bake what we can keep for future meals."

"You mean like the bar we shared?" Her eyes sparkled like stars on a clear night, taking his breath away.

"Yeah," he licked his lips. A rosy blush spread over her face.

Turning aside, he poured milk and eggs into their respective funnels on the device Leo invented.

"Here's how we can make more bars." He watched her tilt her head, curious as a cat. "Sweet or salty?"

"Sweet," she replied.

"Choose your flavours," he opened the cupboard revealing jars of fruit preserves, dried fruit, chocolate sauce, vanilla sauces, baking chips and all the possible sweet additions for a baked bar.

"Ooh!" Ava fingered the canisters. "Can we mix the pureed bananas with chocolate syrup and chocolate chips?"

"Great choice," Jayden grinned. This girl's got good taste.

"Which grain?" He showed her the shelves with boxes of grains.

"How about multigrain? All of them," she smirked.

He instructed her on the usage of the device and off she was, making her first meal bar.

With the machine loaded, she couldn't get it working. "It's stuck. What am I doing wrong?"

Jayden turned a knob and the machine whirred. "Your bars will be ready in an hour's time," he smirked satisfied.

"Thanks Jay!" She ran her hand over his cheek without warning. Startled, he jerked away. His skin burned at her touch.

Each day watching over Ava to assuage Leo's paranoia, strengthened his attraction towards her.



THE OLD JAYDEN WOULD have bedded her by now but he's turned over a new leaf.

"God, help me. It's too hard," he prayed. "I don't want to fall back into my old ways."



Ava – Life with the girls in The Ark

Ava

It's been a month since Jayden brought her to The Ark as his prisoner. It wasn't meant to be this way. He rescued her from the gulag but because of her Jezebel connection, Leo refused to accept her into his underground base for fear of compromising the safety of the everyone living here.

She understood. She'd seen first-hand what one of Beast's enhanced elites could do. For now, she's only allowed in The Ark as Jayden's prisoner.

Not that she had anything to complain about. Jayden's been nothing but kind to her. On top of that, he's one hunk of a warden. That smile. That sculpted physique, corded with muscle. Those mesmerising eyes.

"What's on your mind?" Jayden's deep voice snapped her out of her daydream.

She jumped.

He raised his hands in surrender, "Hey, it's me."

"Who else could it be?" Her cheeks burned.

"I noticed you like Francine Rivers," he held a book in front of her. "This is her debut novel."

Ava fingered the embossed title of the book.

Redeeming Love

Her heart leaped. "How did you get that?"

"From the black market," he smirked.

"It's my gift to you. Enjoy!"

"Hey, join me for a game of scrabble," she grabbed his arm before he could walk off. "You're supposed to guard me, not leave me alone."

"I trust you," he chortled as he shook her off.

“Leo doesn’t,” she pouted.

“He’ll come around. You’ll have your freedom soon,” he promised.

“Does that mean you’ll show me around the rest of The Ark? Not that I don’t like your bunker but I’m curious what lies beyond,” Ava watched his expression turn guarded.

He wasn’t this way before The Rapture. Back then, they were all friends. He and Emunah were besties and occasionally, she, Emma, Liam and Penelope would hang out with them. He was comfortable with her then. Casual. Friendly. He flirted with the ladies, herself included.

The Rapture split that comfortable group of friends in two. Three actually. One group went straight up to heaven. Of those left behind, one group followed Jezebel while the third group went incognito.

She followed Jezebel but realised she’s in the wrong camp. Something sinister happened to her friends in that camp.

“I won’t be your guard anymore, so you’d be free to go where you want on your own,” Jayden replied. His cool demeanour wounded her.

The doorbell rang. It was Leo.

“Congratulations, Ava,” he clapped her shoulder. “You’re clear.”

“Told you,” Jayden’s locked eyes with Ava, sending her heart racing. He looked away, distant once more. “I’ll leave you with Leo now.”

“Here’s your access card,” he handed her a pink plastic card. “You’ll move to one of the community bunkers for single women,” he looked at his tablet. “Block A. I’ll bring you there now.”

“Don’t I have to pack?” Ava asked?

“No, you’ll be issued new clothes, toiletries and supplies in your new bunker,” Leo replied as he led her out of Jayden’s bunker.

“Oh, and you’ll have access to all the community facilities including the restaurants and entertainment centres and the massive state of the art library,” Jayden called after them before he closed the door.

Ava clutched the book, Jayden's farewell gift to her with both hands, blinking annoying tears from her eyes, hoping Leo wouldn't notice while he walked with her to Block A.

"Ladies, this is Ava," he announced as he brought her into her dorm. There were eight bunker beds, of which three were occupied.

"That's Chloe, Lydia and Tess, your dorm mates," he pointed at the three girls sitting in bean bags, their eyes transfixed on a large screen, munching popped corn.

"Hi Ava," one of the girls turned around and waved her over. "Come and join us."

She sank into an unoccupied beanbag and watched the fiery hail rain over the estate she once called home, striking down Beast-men, leaving a Jewish preacher unharmed. "Is this live?"

"Yeah. Leo's nano-drones keep us updated on what's going on up there," another girl replied. "By the way, I'm Tess."

"I'm Chloe," another girl offered her a bag of popcorn. "Want some? Real butter made from milk contributed by my pet cow."

"I'm Lydia," the third girl introduced herself. "How did you get here?" She asked. "And how come the big man himself sent you here? How did you get to know him?"

"Hey, stop interrogating her," Chloe gave Lydia's shoulder a light punch. "My brother helped Ethan grow crops, so when Prophet insisted everyone worship Beast, he brought our entire extended family here."

"Emma had me sent to the gulag. Jayden rescued me," Ava shuddered.

"You know Jayden too?" Tess's eyes turned starry. Chloe blushed, "He's got to be the hottest guy in the entire city."

"He's okay," Ava shrugged. "I was his prisoner for a month before Leo let me into the city proper."

"I don't mind being his prisoner," Tess giggled.

“What was it like being a prisoner? Did he lock you up and feed you only bread and water?” Lydia asked.

“Nothing like that,” Ava replied. “He’s an old friend and treated me like a guest who is expected to carry her own weight around the house.”

“You’re old friends? You knew Leo, Jayden and the founders before this?” Lydia looked envious.

“A long time ago, before The Rapture,” she sighed.

“So who’s mentoring you? Training you?” Chloe asked. “Selena’s teaching me self-defence but I heard she can’t take on any more students.”

“Betty’s training both of us, but she’s fully booked too,” Lydia added.

The door creaked open. Leo walked in dragging Jayden with him.

“Ava, I can’t find any female trainers to take you on, and since Jayden’s not training anyone, you’re his responsibility,” Leo smirked as he clapped his buddy’s shoulder.

Jayden’s face reddened. Was he mad? Ava didn’t care. Her heart leaped with joy.

“Guess you’re stuck with me,” she smirked.



Jayden - Training for Battle

Jayden

Saucepan capping his head, clad for battle, Jayden sat Ava an arm's length away from himself. "Everyone learns self-defence in case our camp is compromised," he explained.

"What do you do if one of Beast's goons attacks you?" He asked.

"Enhanced or normal human?" Ava frowned.

"Let's say he's a normal man twice your size," Jayden studied her expression.

"Kick his balls then run for my life," she pursed her lips with determination.

Jayden laughed, "What if you are in an enclosed space with nowhere to run?"

"Kick him? Bite him?" She screwed her nose.

"He'd still be conscious," Jayden smirked.

"So, what do I do?" Ava quirked a manicured eyebrow.

"Whack his head with this," Jayden whipped the saucepan off his head and handed it to her.

"Like this?" She swung the saucepan at his head, as feral as a wildcat.

Dodging the blow, Jayden chortled. "You got it!"

He caught her arm in a firm grip over her head, careful not to hurt her. "What if he overpowers you like this?"

She tickled his armpit, forcing him to let go. Then she smacked his head with the saucepan.

"Ow!" Jayden rubbed the growing lump in mock indignation as she dropped her weapon, horrified.

"Oh no! Are you okay?" She cupped her face.

He tweaked her nose, laughing. "And that's why you're to wear a saucepan at all times." He took his saucepan helmet from her and put it on.

Rummaging through the cupboard, he found a saucepan her size and put it on her head.

"I'm not wearing this," hands on hips, rosebud lips in a defiant pout, she looked adorable.

"Why not?" He asked.

"I look stupid in this," she took it off and studied it.

"It matches your outfit," he teased.

"Does not," she folded her arms and glared at him. Was that supposed to be a withering look? She looked more comical than intimidating.

The saucepan wouldn't work for her. She lacked the necessary strength to knock an opponent out with blunt force.

Knives?

She's so clumsy she'd cut herself and bleed out.

"Tell you what," he ran his hands through his hair. We'll work on hiding from the enemy and escaping.

He led her to a wall and removed the grating. "Vents are your best friend," he winked.

"So, what do we do?" She peered into the dark tunnel.

"Spot an enemy, get in and crawl to safety through the network of tunnels. Once you reach the exit, head for the mountains where you can live off the ground," he explained.

"Why'd I want to do that? We've got everything we need here," she asked.

"We could get attacked anytime by Beast's followers," Jayden replied. "Follow me."

He crawled into the vent, listening to the shuffling sounds behind, trusting she was following him.

"Erm Jayden," she squeaked.

“What now?” He turned around, peering through the darkness.
“I’m stuck.” Her voice, small and scared, mewled through.

Ava

Ava's daily training sessions with her crush, Jayden honed her physique. Her now lithe body was stronger and more agile than she ever dreamt possible.

Leaning against her trainer, she used his back for support so she could kick the sandbag hanging from the rails.

It burst!

The satisfying sound of spilling sand sealed her triumph.

"We'll done!" He gripped her arm in a warrior's handshake. Her heart fluttered. "Let's clean up and celebrate!"

Jayden seemed to have loosened up over the months. He's no longer uptight around her.

She couldn't forget their first training session. Jayden had to exit the vent and crawl behind her to pull her out of that death trap. He was sweet about it, though she felt bad every time she saw his black eye. Somehow, she managed to knee him in the eye during the extraction.

"Chicken dinner?" He asked with that meltingly sexy smile. Was he even aware what he did to her? Or for that matter, all her dorm mates in her community bunker?

"Yes!" Her cheeks burned as he gazed into her eyes.

"See you at seven. Same place," he kissed the top of her head before walking off.

A long queue had already formed in front of The Ark's chicken restaurant.

"Ava, your boyfriend's already at your usual table," Sienna, the waitress gave her a knowing glance.

"We're just friends," she muttered.

Sienna rolled her eyes.

Jealous glances unnerved her as she made her way to The Ark's most eligible bachelor.

Jayden held out the chair for her as she took her seat, too aware of envious female glares.

"We could eat takeaway in your bunker," she suggested, embarrassed by the attention he seemed oblivious to.

"What? And risk another angry bird attack?" He snorted. "To Roland and his gang, that's akin to cannibalism."

"So?" Ava asked.

"You really do not want to see a chicken mutiny," Jayden shuddered as he stabbed his fork into the grilled chicken leg.

"Champagne?" He held a bottle of the rare beverage in front of her.

"They offer that here?" She accepted a glass.

"Nah. Brought my own," he grinned. "I stocked up before taking permanent residence in The Ark."

"How long will we have to stay underground?" Ava asked.

"It's seven years from the Rapture until Jesus returns to set up his kingdom. That's excluding the time of the two witnesses, so I'd say we have to stay alive for another three more years, then it's heaven on earth." His face broke into a radiant smile, his joy, contagious.

"Three years huh?" She lifted her glass. "I can live with that."

"Here's to fighting the good fight," he toasted as their glasses clinked.

"Speaking of fighting the good fight," a low voice intruded on their private moment.

"Leo, man," Jayden leaned back. Annoyance flickered on his face. "What's up?"

"Beast's goons are sending our contacts to the gulag," Leo looked agitated as he handed Jayden a file. "You need to go rescue them now."



Jayden - Rescue Mission

Jayden

It's a field test for Leo's latest invention - the Leo Tech Flying Car. Except it wasn't a car you sat in but a collection of mini drones that picked you up and deposited you at the programmed destination.

Relishing the wind against his skin as the drones flew him out of the base, over the underground river.

"I can fly!" He exclaimed in jubilation, leaving the cavern for the woods.

Bugs filled his open mouth.

"Blech!" He spat them out, while the drones manoeuvred him around the trees, the wind throwing leaves and dust in his face.

The drones deposited him and his tools on a tree branch in the path of an approaching van - the sort Beast's goons use to transport prisoners.

As the van drove beneath the branch, he released a bag of rocks on the van, breaking the windscreen and waited for the van to stop.

It didn't.

Strange.

He shot a tyre, puncturing it, forcing the van to slow to a halt.

No one came out of the vehicle. His gut screamed.

Something's wrong!

Jayden picked the lock. When he opened the door, his stomach turned over as horror took hold of him.

Everyone on his rescue list accounted for. All dead, their faces a ghastly hue covered with purplish splotches.

There were no guards. The vehicle's fully self-driven.

Activating his comms, he called,

"Leo! It's a trap! They're dead. Some kind of plague."

“Take pics but don’t touch anything. Get out of there. I’ll have my drones extract you now.”

Sickened, he took photos of the victims from where he was. The world spun around him. His legs turned to jelly. He blacked out.



Ava

THE SALTY SMELL OF sweat amidst grunts and laughter permeated the community gym.

Tess and Lydia sparred under Betty’s watchful eye.

Chloe raced the other girls under Selena through the obstacle course, while Ava sat on the bench, waiting for her trainer, Jayden, who never arrived.

Every hall had a large wall mounted screen displaying live feeds from the surface world and important internal broadcasts to keep all Ark dwellers informed.

The video switched from the happenings in Jerusalem to zoom in on Leo in a hazmat suit, at the entrance to Jayden’s bunker.

Plague alert.

Stay away from Jayden’s bunker.

Our brother Jayden contracted a virulent infection and will remain isolated in his medical bay.

Ava struggled to breathe. No!

During a rescue mission on the surface world, he was infected with a deadly new bioengineered virus that is incurable. While I’m doing everything I can to cure him, his chances of survival are less than one percent.

Pray for his miraculous recovery.

The video feed switched back to Jerusalem, but Ava couldn’t care less. Her stomach turned, her mind in a whirl of confusion. Not Jayden! Her hands trembled.

“Move over,” Lydia jostled Ava for space on the bench.

"I don't see why we have to send rescue teams to retrieve those who refused to move in here when they had the chance," Lydia fumed. "First, Andrew died trying to save some big shot's friends who he didn't even know personally. Now Jayden. What's worse, he could infect the rest of us."

"If you were up there getting tortured, you'd be singing a different song," Tess rolled her eye. "Jayden's a hero. All we can do now is to pray Leo finds a cure and that Jayden recovers."

Ava got up. Slinging her bag over her shoulder she headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Chloe stepped in her way. "To see your boyfriend. Didn't you hear Leo?"

Ava walked around Chloe.

"You'd catch the plague and spread it to us!" Chloe yelled after her. Some friends. Ava didn't care.

It took her an hour on foot, but she slipped past the barricades and to where the man who rescued was recuperating.

She tapped her access card on the gantry.

Access denied.

The robotic voice tanked her hopes.

An all too human voice rife with annoyance followed. "Ava! What do you think you are doing?"

She could imagine the vein on his temple pulsating with his face turning crimson. It's still a vast improvement in anger management with his signature flow of fluent expletives now non-existent.

"Jayden needs me," Ava stood her ground.

"Jayden's in a coma," Leo sounded deflated. "My droids will take care of his daily needs until the contagion period is over."

"Go back to your dorm, Ava," Leo sounded exhausted. "I can't have both of you dying on me."

"I can help!" Ava protested.

“Help with what? Find the cure?” Leo sounded defeated. “Go pray and fast for his recovery. If the fever breaks and he’s no longer contagious, be prepared to move into his bunker as his nursemaid.”

That’s the best Leo could offer her. “I’ll do that. Thanks Leo. Please take good care of my hero.”

Back in her dorm, Ava received a leper’s welcome.

“How do we know you’re not a carrier?” Lydia scrutinised her from a distance. “Did you take any tests to ensure you’re clean?”

“Oh, leave her be,” Chloe chided Lydia. Sidling up to Ava, Chloe took her hand. “Are you okay sis? I know you and Jayden were very close.”

Drying her eyes with the back of her hand, Ava forced a smile. “I’m okay. Thanks. But could you pray with me?”

Days crawled into weeks. Ava hadn’t eaten a morsel, sustaining herself on plain water. Day and night, she pleaded with God to heal Jayden.

“Ava,” the community director marched into her dormitory. “You’ve got a visitor.”

Eyes, blurry from tears, she studied Leo. Fatigued circled his eyes, but the guilt that shackled him lifted. For the first time since Jayden’s illness, the resident nerd cracked his signature lopsided grin. Hope rose in Ava’s heart.

“Thanks for praying.” His voice turned surprising warm. The anger had left him.

“How’s Jayden?” The words spilled out of Ava’s mouth.

“To be honest, the fever broke but he was still comatose. His vital signs were failing,” Leo shuddered. “I should never have sent him, or anyone for these rescue missions.”

“Leo, if Jayden hadn’t rescued me, I’d be dead,” Ava held Leo’s arm to ground the shaking man.

"Anyway, the virus destroyed his organs. There was nothing else I could do for him. I prayed for a miracle and waited for days until I was certain he's gone," he bit his lip. "I was going to turn off life support when there was a blinding light." The man's face lit up as he spoke.

"Jayden stirred which by all counts was impossible whatsoever! And you know what?"

"What?" Ava leaned forward.

"His first word was 'Ava,'" Leo smirked.

Ava's cheeks burned.

"Anyway, I ran tests. His internal organs were as good as new. I mean, they were perfect with no sign of damage or any minute defect," Leo grinned from ear to ear.

"God healed him," Ava's heart leaped with joy.

"Yes. It's a miracle!" Leo laughed.

"But he's still weak and needs constant care while he recovers."

"I'm in!" Ava clasped her hands together. "I'll be his nursemaid."

"Pack up, move to your old room in his bunker. Meet me in his medical bay once you're ready." With a quick nod, Leo stalked off.

"Goodbye Ava," Chloe hugged her like a mother bear. "Keep in touch 'kay?"

"It's not like I'm leaving The Ark," Ava laughed.

"She'd be too busy playing nursemaid to lover boy," Lydia chortled.

Ava stuck her tongue out at Lydia, grabbed her bags and stormed out. Yeah, it's childish but she had to stoop to their level to relate.

Once settled in her old room in Jayden's bunker, Leo briefed her. But nothing he said could prepare her for what she saw.

Jayden – the strong, athletic young man who had girls swooning over him had become a skeletal shadow of himself. His arms once corded with muscle, had become thin skin stretched over large bones.

"Ava," his smile, though weak, lit the room.

"Jayden," she dropped her bags and rushed forward, to take his hands into her own.

"Jesus sent me back to take care of you," his eyes twinkled.

"Well, I'm here to take care of you, so be good," she laughed as she ruffled his hair.

"Here," Leo handed her a bowl of thin gruel and a spoon. "Make sure he eats all of it. I've formulated it to meet his specific nutritional needs."

"I can feed myself," Jayden chuckled, sitting up, only to fall back onto his pillow. "So weak," he muttered.

"Jay Bed incline sixty degrees," said Leo.

The bed responded as requested, propping Jayden to a comfortable position for his meal.

"I'll leave Jayden in your care." Leo cracked his neck. "I've got to crash."

Feeding Jayden a spoonful of that doubtful gruel, Ava laughed at the face he made. "Tastes like diluted glue," he screwed his face in disgust.

"Have you actually eaten glue before?" Ava dabbed away the spills from the edges of his mouth.

"No. But if I ever do, it would taste like that," he cringed.

"You heard the doctor," she smirked as she forced another spoonful through his lips.



Leo & Mei - Soulmates

Leo

Creaking his neck, Leo leaned into the plush, padded cushions of his ergonomic chair, taking comfort in the rich, warm aroma of leather that enveloped him.

Considerably early for his rendezvous, he smoothed his hair, using the dark screen of his mobile as a mirror. Either Boris or Mei would be his contact. He hoped it might be the latter.

“What happened, Leo?” A soft feminine voice sent his heart racing. “You’d gone silent for so long, we thought you’d perished.”

“Jayden contracted a new bioengineered virus,” Leo began, pausing at Mei’s inaudible gasp.

“He’ll live. We contained the plague so no one else was infected,” smiling at the sight of the relief that washed over her fraught features.

“How did that happen,” Mei crinkled her nose in that adorable way that made him want to pinch it.

“Beast set a trap. We took the bait,” Leo played Jayden’s camera footage.

“That’s a narrow escape.” Mei whistled. “Nelson’s camp wasn’t as fortunate. Beast’s military police found their hideout and dropped a nuke,” she grimaced. “No survivors.”

Leo could sense Mei’s fury beneath her calm demeanour.

“I’m sorry,” Leo whispered.

“Not your fault, so stop apologising,” she chided.

“Beast’s elite squad is indestructible. The enhanced soldiers are invulnerable with inhuman strength,” Leo ran his hands through his hair. “Nothing penetrates their skin.”

“Wrong,” laughed Mei, holding his gaze. “How do you think they get their shots?”

Eyes sparkling with mischief, she held up a vial of colourless liquid. "A drop of this dissolves a clone's epidermis so that an ordinary needle can deliver the necessary medication."

"How long before it takes effect?" Leo's heart raced at the possible application.

"The effect is immediate," Mei grinned as she continued typing. "Here's the formula and manufacturing instructions."

"Mei! Base is compromised!" Boris pulled her from the monitor.

An explosion ripped through the room, setting her empty chair aflame. The screen turned black.

"Mei!" Leo's heart sank. There was no reply.



Jayden - Proposal

Jayden

A shaft of light illuminated Ava's delicate features as she sat on a rock beside the subterranean estuary.

"What lies beyond?" she gazed into the distance, her voice taking on a wistful tone.

Jayden took her hand and led her along the underground river. "I'll show you."

Artificial sunlight danced on the surface of the underground river, the light splitting into a rainbow of colour in a stunning display that paled in comparison to the beauty she exuded.

Ever since he'd awakened from his coma, she'd been his constant companion, caring for him, making him laugh and ushering him through the long road of recovery.

"I've never seen this part of the base," Ava's eyes widened.

Jayden scooped up a pale pink shrimp with his saucepan. "This river runs into the ocean." He could taste the faint tang in the air as they wandered farther from the underground city.

Ava's eyes lit like a delighted child's as she picked the shrimp from its new home. With a flick of its tail, it escaped her grasp and fell back into the river.

"Oh, it got away," she frowned.

"My dad used to bring me and my brothers to the ocean," Jayden smiled at fond memories. "We'd chase fish underwater and catch shrimps for mum to cook. She'd tend to a campfire where she'd cook the fish dad would catch during our outings."

"I didn't know you were a water baby," Ava's teasing smile earned her a tickle in her ribs.

Laughing, she shoved Jayden. He slipped on a mossy rock and fell into the water. “Hey!” He grabbed her arm and pulled her into the cool water with him.

The taste of brine disturbed him. They were near the ocean. Too close to the surface world for comfort.

“You know, we should be going back,” Jayden suggested.

“Why?” Ava pouted.

“We don’t want to lead Beast’s people to our hideout,” Jayden frowned as he helped her out of the water.

Sitting on a rock, wringing the water out of their clothes, Jayden shored up his courage to do what he’d intended before Leo interrupted their chicken dinner.

“Ava, after this is over, Jesus will come back to set up his kingdom here on earth.”

“Yeah,” Ava beamed. “I can’t wait for that.”

“When that happens, we can build homes and start families in peaceful paradise under his rule,” Jayden loved watching that familiar pink blush spread over her face. Eyelashes fluttering, she looked down.

He slipped the ring he wore around his neck off its chain and held it in front of her.

“This was my mother’s ring,” he whispered as he gazed into her eyes.

“Ava, will you marry me?”

She squealed. “Yes!”

He slipped the ring on her finger before she could change her mind. Arms around her back, he drew her close as his lips met hers.

“Eww!” A little boy interrupted their private moment.

“Jack?” Jayden let go of Ava, embarrassed. “What are you doing here?”

“Adventuring,” the boy thrust his chest out, proud as a peacock. “I’m going to be just like you when I grow up.”

The glass bottle filled with tiny yellow lights caught Jayden’s attention. *Fireflies!*

"Where did you get that?" A sense of unease stirred in Jayden's gut.

"My new friend gave it to me," the boy replied, hugging his treasure.

"Which bunker is your friend from?" Jayden tried to sound casual, to hide his growing concern.

"She's not from our city," he replied. "She's from the surface world. She's got superpowers you know," he smirked.

Jayden's stomach turned. The sound of approaching footsteps sent his senses reeling.

"Run, hide," he whisper-yelled.

"My friend is nice," the boy pouted. "She won't hurt us."

Scooping the boy in his arms, a hand over the child's mouth to silence him, Jayden ran through the cavern, and crouched behind a rocky wall large enough to conceal the trio.

Saccharine laughter, all too familiar, sent dread crawling up his throat.

A deep, throaty laugh resonated throughout the cavern.

Ava paled. "Emma," she whisper-yelled. "With Ben."

Jayden froze. Beast's enhancements included senses beyond human capabilities.

Emma's head turned around. Her glowing eyes scanned the cavern.

"Ava," her sing-song voice echoed in the stone chamber. "I know you're here."



Ava

"QUIT FOOLING AROUND," Ben growled as he grabbed Emma's arm and dragged her with him. "We have work to do – a city to destroy."

"You heard her," Emma protested through pouting lips.

"Ava's unimportant. Remember the mission," Ben hissed. "Massacre. Bloodshed," he licked his lips, a crazed look on his face, mirrored by Emma's.

Little Jack gasped in horror. Blood drained from the child's face. Jayden texted frantically, sounding the alarm.

"We run for it?" Ava pointed at the distant light coming from the mouth of the cavern where the river met the ocean.

Barroom!

A distant explosion cut off that dim source of light, snuffing out all hope.

"Too late. Beast's goons sealed the ocean exit," Jayden shrugged. "We must reach the base to access the other escape routes."

"You first," he pushed aside a moss-covered disc, revealing a man-sized rabbit hole.

Steeling herself, she slid into the steep, slippery tunnel, letting gravity bring her to safety.

This time, she landed in a communal bunker.

"Out of the way," came Jayden's voice as he landed behind her, his arms cradling the terrified boy.

"Thanks Jayden," Jerome, Jack's father received the boy in his arms. "The Beast's Enhanced troops have already wiped out the Eastern bunkers. I'm going to get his mother and we'll leave as a family."

"Good luck," Jayden grasped Jerome's arm in a warrior's salute.

"Where to now? Escape route E29 is through the East bunker," Ava's heart raced.

"Route H62 is five minutes from here," Jayden smirked. "I'll show you."

As they ran down the winding corridor, that all too familiar voice of her former bestie made her skin crawl.

"Ava dear, I can smell you." Laughter, no longer human, emanated from the hall ahead.

Jayden pulled her aside. "Remember what I taught you." Cupping her cheeks, his lips brushed against hers in tender promise. His warm eyes turned to steel when he locked eyes with their adversary.

Determination set on his face; inserting his large frame between the women, he shielded Ava from Emma's line of sight.

"Out of my way, Jayden," Emma's honeyed voice made Ava recoil. "Give my loyal best friend back to me." Flames blazed in the palms of her hands while her muscles strained and grew, her uniform stretching to accommodate her massive, heavily muscled new form.

"Emma, my dear," Jayden turned his dazzling smile on what used to be their old friend. "It's been so long."

Emma eyed him lasciviously. "I could use fresh meat," sharp fangs hanging out of the edges of her lips. Ava shuddered at the monstrosity her dear friend had become.

Jayden's pleading eyes met Ava's. He's buying her time. Trusting him to join her in their planned escape, she slipped into a vent.

From the corner of her eyes, she witnessed Emma grab Jayden's throat with one hand, lifting him off the ground. Her other hand engulfed with fire incinerated him.

Ava stifled her screams. Muscle memory kicking in, she crawled through the vent, shielded by thick, insulated walls while the city burned.



Leo – Mei's Legacy

Leo

Heart overflowing with grief, Leo pressed on. He would not let Mei's efforts go to waste.

Oblivious to the world around him, Leo duplicated Mei's formula. It dissolved everything - organic and inorganic alike. The only thing it had no effect on was Pyrex.

That solvent was the missing component he needed to make bullets that could take down Beast's invulnerable soldiers.

Beast's military operation to destroy all sanctuaries had spread from Jerusalem to the Eastern and Western nations. The King of the North stood strong against Beast's antics and word had it that he was planning an attack on Beast's stronghold in Jerusalem with his Eastern allies.

It's a matter of time before The Ark would face full assault. Being deep underground, nukes are unlikely. His sources had seen members of Beast's elite team sniffing near some of the concealed entrances to the underground city.

These bullets could be the game changer.

He'd prepared dozens of bullet shaped glass casings for this very purpose. Protection on, with extreme care, he filled a casing to the two-third mark with the formula.

Delicately, he tweezed a tiny amount of compact explosive into the bullet. Then he integrated the bullet cap at the base of the bullet.

That done, he seated the glass casing in a regular bullet casing filled with just enough gunpowder to propel it.

Satisfied, he loaded his gun with his anti-beast-men bullet.

"How do I know this would work?" He frowned.

A massive hulk of a man crashed through the lab's solid steel door. He recognised that as a caricature of his old friend Ben. His heart pounded so hard he could feel it in his ears. "It's not Ben. It's a lab engineered monster wearing his face."

Gritting his teeth, he shot the creature's forehead.

Fizzzzzz.

A red patch bloomed where the skin dissolved.

The clone roared in agony.

A deafening explosion sent bits of the monster flying around the lab's entrance.

"It worked!" Awash with relief, Leo wiped the sweat off his brow.

There's no time to waste. He resumed his clinical assembly of bullets for the defence of The Ark.

A tumbling sound caught his attention. A large transparent sphere rolled into the room, tracing the monstrous Ben's footsteps, stopping where the beast had died.

Leo's gut churned. A large man clothed the Beast's colours slept curled in the ball.

Gathering his completed bullets, he stored them in their safe case, tucked it into his waist pouch with his gun and darted into the vent.

Breaking glass tinkled.

The stench of sulphur stung his nose.

The man in the ball uncurled. Stretching himself out, he growled, "I am Ben."

Sickened to his very core, Leo could barely breathe. Still, he pushed himself, crawling through the insulated vent.

That familiar chill haunted him as he crawled past a grating. The grim reaper rode past, cackling hideously, harvesting The Ark that was once a refuge for the true believers Leo had given everything he had to protect.

Loud explosions and extreme heat confirmed his worst nightmare.



BE STRONG. CRAWL ON. Find survivors.



Ava - Survivors

Ava

Eyes wet and burning, Ava forced herself forward.
Alone.

She couldn't continue.

Not without Jayden.

The diamond on her finger glistened in the dim light, amplifying the grief piercing her heart.

"Move. You're blocking the way." An impatient thump on her sole jolted her out of her downward spiral.

Choking back sobs, Ava tried to see who that was.

"Move first, mourn and weep later." That distinctive voice grated her nerves.

"Leo?" She asked, every fibre in her body wishing it were Jayden.

"Who else?" Came the impatient growl. Had that man a single ounce of compassion?

Gritting her teeth, she pulled herself forward through the endless tunnel. "How much longer?" Her muscles screamed for rest.

"Almost there," Leo replied, his voice a hoarse whisper. "Don't give up."

Faint light beckoned from a distance, hope giving her a second wind.

"Do you think anyone else survived?" She asked as she pulled herself out of the vent, landing on charred soil.

"We'll find out," Leo replied, crawling out after her. "Where's Jayden?" His eyes scanned their surroundings. "You two are joined at the hip."

"Not anymore," Ava ignored the water running down her cheeks. "He's dead."

"How?" Leo's harsh voice softened.

"He distracted Emma while I escaped. She burned him alive," Ava's legs gave way under her while grief emerged from her gut, her throat releasing an involuntary wail.

Leo caught her before she hit the ground, holding her in a comforting hug. "I'm sorry. I had no idea."

An explosion from a distance broke their momentary connection.

Leo's eyes darted around. "Can't stay here or they'll find us," he held her arm and led her towards the looming mountain.

The sickeningly saccharine stench of death permeated the now barren land. As far as her eyes could see, nothing survived the assault.

"At least Mei's safe in another camp," Ava tried to lighten the mood. Then she noticed the unshed tears glistening in his eyes.

"In all likelihood, Death got hold of her when her base exploded," he shrugged in a weak attempt to mask his grief.

"Try to keep up," Leo's brusque mannerisms aggravated her. Why did Leo have to be the one she's stuck with?

"My legs aren't as long as yours," she scampered after his long strides.

"Mei never had that problem and you're a foot taller than she is," he faltered. "Was." Grief seeped through his voice.

"She's saved. So is Jayden," he shrugged. "They're with the Lord now."

When Jayden showed her, the winding path a few months back, it was a green paradise thrumming with life, a far cry from the steep, ash covered rocks and burnt ground facing them.

"There should be survivors," Leo muttered beneath his breath. "Why didn't anyone follow the protocol?" Expression still stoic, he didn't bother to wipe the tears that threatened to spill from his eyes.

"Maybe they are already hiding in the mountain," she offered.

"All that effort. For naught," bitterness evident in his voice.

The stench of sulphur hung in the mountain breeze. “They’re here too,” he breathed, loading his gun with a large bullet.

“Ava, I can smell you, bestie.” The wind carried Emma’s honeyed voice.

Ava froze. “No.”

Emma’s hulking form landed before the pair. Fire danced in her palms.

Bang!

Blood bloomed on Emma’s forehead before exploding, causing it to rain clone tissue.

“Eww,” Ava wiped remnants of what used to masquerade as Emma off her face with her equally soiled sleeve.

“We can’t stay.” Hand on Ava’s shoulder, Leo guided her along the narrow path. “We need to hide before more enhanced hunters show up.”

Leo’s mobile rang.

“Need extraction?” Asked a familiar female voice.



Mei

IT’S BEEN A WEEK SINCE Mei’s hideout exploded - another massacre erasing yet another community of new Christians who refused to take the mark of the beast. Something in him died with Mei’s untimely demise. He never realised how much she meant to him until he lost her.

We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.

Those words from 2 Corinthians 5 comforted Leo. Mei’s with The Lord. He’ll see her again one day after his work here’s done.

Keeping those still alive, safe, took primary importance. Mei's formula, her parting gift, gave them a fighting chance. He'd honour Mei's memory by saving as many people as he could from Beast's enhanced soldiers with these new weapons he'd created.

Ava sniffled while she trailed behind him. He couldn't fault her. Jayden and Ava were smitten with each other. With Jayden gone, Ava was barely holding up.

Himself devastated over Mei's demise, he empathised. Then an unexpected call turned things around.

His mobile rang. It's a private line he'd set up many years ago, with his study buddy. It's a line that had lain unused for too many years.

"Need extraction?"

Leo's heart leaped.

Mei! She's alive!

"Wait, how do you know she's not a clone?" Ava frowned.

"Only Mei and I use this line," Leo knew in his heart it had to be her.

"Clones have their donor's memories," Ava crossed her arms.

"Only if the donor has the mark of the beast in their forehead or has willingly participated in the memory transfer process," Leo shrugged. "Memories can't be extracted without consent."

"It could be a trap," Ava shuddered.

"Now look who's paranoid?" Leo retorted. If there's a slim chance Mei's alive and he could see her again, he'd take it.

"They'll pick us here," Leo led Ava to the agreed upon coordinates.

Heart thumping expectantly, he waited for Mei, his eyes scanning the sky for her rescue plane.

Woosh!

The updraft of wind scattered the leaves as a large object, undetectable by untrained eyes landed before them. Camouflage technology rendered the plane near invisible.

A door opened.

A tall blonde man built like a tank emerged.

Boris!

Jealousy rose from the pit of Leo's stomach. Swallowing his emotions, forcing himself to unclench his fists, he plastered a smile. "Where's Mei?"

"In the cockpit," the big man flashed a dazzling grin.

"She's a pilot?" Leo was dumbfounded.

"One of the best fighter pilots we've got," Boris replied with the pride a master might have for his protege.

"How about the other survivors?" Leo asked as he entered the plane.

"Other rescue planes are scouring the wreckage for them," Mei replied from the cockpit. Joy bubbled up in Leo's heart at the sight of his long-lost soulmate.

Looking through the window, relief washed over Leo as his perceived rival, Boris climbed out of the plane and scooped Ava, who was lagging behind, in his arms, carrying her bridal style. The poor guy seemed enamoured with that troublesome woman. With luck, Boris would be too busy with Ava to steal Mei's heart.



Logan – Bro Carl

Logan

Cool, Mediterranean breeze caressed his cheeks as he tasted the sea salt in the humid air.

After fleeing the destruction of a tenth of the city, they were attacked by bandits and split during the fight. By God's grace, Logan got away with no more than a few cuts and bruises, his supplies still on his back. He prayed Jacob made it to their hideout by the sea.

"Lo? Bro? That you?" A weak voice wafted from an alley. "Help me." His twin brother Carl lay in a rubbish heap, blood streaming out of a gash on his thigh. Fraternal twins, they bore no resemblance to each other. Logan had his father's rugged looks while Carl was mummy's boy. Girls flocked to Carl on the merit of his pretty boy good looks.

"Carl? What happened to you, man?" Logan knelt beside the broken man, the stench of rotting eggs, vermin and the metallic smell of his brother's blood, smothering him.

Blood gushed from Carl's wound, soaking through the leg of his pants. Logan had Carl lie flat on the floor and lifted the injured leg on a wooden box to slow down the blood flow. Putting on clean gloves, he applied firm pressure on the wound.

"Remember the time we jumped the fence after painting Farmer Joe's prize bull pink with purple polka dots?" Logan recounted as he cleaned Carl's wound.

"Yeah," Carl chuckled, wincing when the alcohol seeped in. "He would have killed us if not for Miriam."

"She saved our lives," Logan grinned as he dressed and bound the injured leg.

"Thanks Lo." The edges of Carl's eyes creased with his smile.

"So what happened?" Logan asked.

"I was bringing the proceeds of the sale home when I was robbed," Carl shrugged.

"Sale?" Logan squeaked, his heart skipping up beat. "No one can buy or sell anything without the mark of the beast."

"Hey, someone's got to keep the business going, pay the bills and I've got to feed my kids," Carl waved his hand at Logan. "No big deal. I let them put it in my right hand so it won't mess with my head."

"You took the mark?" Logan backed off.

"It's like having a mobile phone implanted in your hand," Carl replied. Nonchalant. "Chill man. It's practical. Pragmatic. No one gets hurt, we can buy and sell and everyone's happy."

Something about this didn't sit right with Logan, but Carl's the same old brother he grew up with. Pushing aside disturbing thoughts, he offered Carl his hand.

"Think you can walk?" He pulled his brother to his feet. "It's not safe to stay here much longer."

"Yeah." Carl grimaced as he limped alongside Logan. "You got anywhere safe to go? By now, they'd have taken my home. They stole my keys and everything I got."

"Sandy and Jaz?" Logan feared for his nieces.

"With Leah's parents," Carl shrugged. "They got our possessions but my family is safe."

Logan scrutinised his brother. "I'm not sure."

"You're going to turn your brother away in his time of need?" Carl's eyebrows shot into his hairline. "What happened to the old Logan I knew?"

Looking at his brother's injured leg, Logan relented. Their meeting place's a temporary safe-house. It's not like he's bringing Carl to their actual base. "You can stay with me until you heal up."

"Thanks Lo," Carl punched his shoulder. "I know I can count on you."

The walk to the hidden hut took far longer than Logan had expected but they made it before sundown.

"This your place?" Carl's eyes scanned the room. "Quite a downgrade."

"You take what you can get these days," Logan shrugged. "It's got all we need to survive. You can have that bed," he pointed on a wooden plank laid out on one side of the tiny hut. "Rest up until you heal."

Carl's eyes narrowed for the briefest of moments, then he was his old cheerful self. "Thanks for your hospitality, Lo."

The days went by. Logan cared for his brother, cleaning and dressing his wound and taking care of all his daily needs, while sharing about Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah who had died and rose again so that everyone, not just Jews, could be redeemed. Carl stayed stoic throughout. Logan could only pray for his twin's salvation.

Carl's wound turned out superficial. The day came when the bandages were finally removed for good. All that remained was a glaring keloid.

"You know, you don't have to live this way," Carl's eyes scanned the room. "Take the mark and you can be my business partner."

"Carl, you know I won't betray Jesus," Logan locked eyes with his twin, his hands holding his brother's shoulders.

"Well, I better get going then," Carl shrugged, peering into the backpack Logan had prepared for him. "Say, can I have a water bottle?"

"Sure," Logan turned his back on his brother for a moment when a sharp stabbing pain pierced through his back, the physical agony incomparable to the heart wrenching pain from the traitorous betrayal by his beloved twin.

"Carl?" he gasped.

"You Christians are all the same," Carl sneered, the number 666 glowed on his right hand.

“Aargh!” Carl dropped his knife, nursing a scorpion’s sting. He paled as scorpions crawled through gaps in the floorboards, attacking only him. “No!” He fled, leaving Logan’s gifts behind.

Soothing warmth permeated Logan’s back as God’s power cocooned him. The pain vanished as he felt the wound miraculously close up.

He pulled off his bloodstained shirt and washed his blood off his back. Checking a mirror, he found his skin unbroken, his back as good as new.

The only evidence he hadn’t dreamed this up was his blood-soaked shirt with the gaping tear where he’d been stabbed.



Jayden - Tribulation Saints

Jayden

As Emma wrapped her fingers around Jayden's throat, divine love and power of indescribable magnitude cocooned him.

Jesus!

Jayden reached for the outstretched hand of His Lord and Saviour.

Jesus whisked him out the husk that was his earthly body before Emma's flames could hurt him.

"Jayden, it's time to come home."

Heaven's beyond Jayden's wildest expectations. The roads were paved with gold.

Angelic voices wafted with the fragrant breeze; their beauteous melodies filled Jayden with wonder. Gravitating towards the source of the music, Jayden entered the temple where he saw a multitude of souls standing before the throne of God. His heart leaped when he recognised a number of them as fellow believers who were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held.

These souls stood under the altar crying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, do you not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?"

Each of them was given a white robe and asked to rest until all their fellow servants and brethren that are meant to be killed as they were, would be killed.

Jayden spotted Ethan and Liam, three of the four musketeers. They too had died during the Great Tribulation because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Huge smiles adorned their faces. They exuded absolute joy as they hugged him, welcoming him into their brotherhood. "You made it bro!" Liam exclaimed.

"It's so good to see you guys," Jayden exclaimed.

"For you," an angel handed Jayden a harp. The ground he stood on looked like fiery glass. A joyous song welled up from deep within Jayden's heart, his voice bursting with ecstasy, in harmony with his brethren who had emerged victorious over the beast, over his image and over his mark and over the number of his name.

Their voices permeated the temple as the angels stood in awe, witnessing the song that only the victors could sing.

Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints.

Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgments are made manifest.

The ground shook. Thunder roared with a majestic display of lightning as the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven was opened. Awestruck, Jayden fell silent, watching the scene unfold.

From the temple, seven angels emerged. Power rolled from them as each carried a plague.

Four beasts, each having six wings hovered around God's throne. One of them gave the seven angels seven golden vials full of the wrath of God. Smoke from the glory of God filled the temple, preventing any man from entering the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were fulfilled.



Lydia

SIRENS SCREAMED.

The bunker's breached.

Lydia caught sight of the intruder - an Amazonian woman playing with a ball of fire, her honeyed voice seducing the guards with supernatural gifts.

Praying Beast's soldier wouldn't notice her, she sprinted to the dorm, as silent as a feather in the wind.

"Tess, Chloe," she panted. "Flee for the mountains now."

Lydia uncovered the vent and ushered her friends in. "Move she urged."

The stench of sulphur wafted up her nose, its foul odour growing stronger with each passing moment.

Both her friends safely in the vent, she covered it, then braced herself.

"What about you?" Chloe whisper yelled through the grating.

"Worry about yourselves," Lydia smiled as supernatural love and courage filled her heart. "Go! I'll buy you time. Don't waste it."

The female behemoth stalked into the dorm, her lips curling in a malicious smile. "I'm feeling generous today," her eyes devoured Lydia's body. "I could use more soldiers."

Peace fell upon Lydia even while the Amazonian woman circled her, studying her as if she were merchandise on sale. "I can offer you power beyond your wildest imagination," she whispered, looking down on Lydia. "I'm Emma, one of Beast's generals."

"Take the mark of the beast and you'll head one of my units," Emma pointed her finger at Lydia's forehead. The finger morphing into a metal spike that resembled a syringe.

"Or you could be beheaded," her other hand morphed into a sword. Laughing at her bad joke, she waved her arms. "Your choice."

Courage she never knew she could ever have welled up in Lydia.

"I will never betray my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

"Very well," snarled Emma. "Off with your head!"

Jesus snatched Lydia out of her body before the blade could touch her empty shell. Blanketed in God's love, Lydia's soul was whisked to heaven to join her fellow tribulation saints.



Chloe

SHARP GRAVEL GRAZED Chloe's bare feet as the women ran up the mountain path. She didn't care. Tears blurred her vision when she beheld black plumes of smoke rising through fissures in the ground, betraying the inferno that razed their underground home.

"Do you think she made it?" Tess in all innocence asked Chloe.

"No," Chloe blinked tears away. She'd heard the exchange which ended with the harsh clash of metal against flesh and bone.

A whooshing sound above, followed by a crash before filled her with dread.

Two hulking figures, a man and a woman, landed in front of them, too engrossed with each other to notice their surroundings from the way their bodies were intertwined.

The woman pulled away, sniffing the air like a hunting dog who'd caught scent of its prey. Turning, she locked eyes with Chloe.

Chloe's blood froze. That's Emma whom Ava spoke of and who killed Lydia. Her lover had to be Ben.

Ben growled, grabbing Emma's hair and forcing himself on her in spite of her vehement hisses.

Grabbing Tess's hand, Chloe ran, searching for a place they could hide.

"Slash or burn?" Emma cackled as she stalked towards them, like a cat playing with a mouse in its grasp. Flames danced in her left palm while her right morphed into a blade.

Ben yawned. "I'd rather have my fun with them and then turn them into blood smears."

"Modern art?" Emma's hideous laugh chilled Chloe's bones.

"Better," Ben leapt and landed before Chloe. His hand grabbed her arm with such force her bone cracked.

Chloe screamed as pain shot through her. Then the skies opened, a dark cloud fell upon them smothering all visibility.

Hideous shrieks from Ben and Emma grated on Chloe's nerves. Sores bloomed on Ben's skin. Cursing, he let go of Chloe, tending to his countless growing sores. Emma seemed affected but Chloe and Tess remained untouched by the plague.

Their tormentors distracted; Tess grabbed Chloe's good hand. The pair fled.

Logan – The Preacher

Logan

The little nation of Israel was devastated by the King of the South's invasion. She hadn't gotten back on her feet when the opportunistic King of the North and his allies invaded Israel through the passes of Lebanon, plundering what's left of the Holy Land, proceeding to Egypt, destroying it.

Amid the ruins of Jerusalem, Beast set up his stronghold where he ruled with Prophet as his right hand man. The signs and wonders Prophet displayed convinced everyone present that Beast was sent by God.

Logan wept at the state of affairs in his beloved hometown. Every morning before dawn, he would pray on top of Mount Zion. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he would come down from the mountain to preach.

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this," he announced in the marketplace.

"Amen," several fellow Jews gathered around him, their heads nodding in agreement.

"Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel," Logan continued quoting the Jewish prophet Isaiah, garnering the interest of more of his fellow Jews.

"Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?"

For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.

And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.

He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors,” Logan proclaimed, quoting the prophet Isaiah of old.

“That we know,” said an old man with a long beard. “But Beast is from the Gentile nations, so how can he be the Messiah, unless you are talking about Prophet who is a Jew and performs miracles.”

“Prophet is the Messiah,” proclaimed a youth.

“Beast is a Jew whose family migrated to the Gentile nations, so he is The Messiah,” another announced with confidence.

Logan ran his hands over his face. Raising his voice above the debacle, he explained.

“Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, is the Son of God, the promised Messiah.”

The curious crowd turned into an angry mob. “Blasphemy! Stone him!”

Rocks and shards of glass flew at Logan, only to be flicked away by an unseen hand.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Logan quoted the apostle John.

A chopper flew in his direction but changed trajectory before it could touch him, landing several feet away with the blade embedding itself in the ground.

“Jesus Christ whom our ancestors crucified is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Guys, he’s the final sacrifice. His death on the cross bought our forgiveness for our sins,” Logan raised his voice over their curses even as glass bottles and large rocks flew at his face. An invisible hand flicked away every single projectile leaving him unharmed.

“He rose again on the third day, conquering death,” Logan continued, unperturbed.

“Rubbish!” Screamed a red-faced man.

“His disciples stole his body and claimed resurrection,” yelled another as the mob closed in on him, murderous looks in their eyes, ready to tear him limb from limb.

The skies opened.

A dark cloud settled on the land.

Sores bloomed on exposed skin, afflicting everyone in sight, but sparing Logan.

Their agonising screams broke the preacher’s heart.



Stella – The Pirate

Stella

Her feet on the table, leaning into her ergonomic chair, treasure chests overflowing with gold beside her, Stella relished the pirate's life. This was even better than the multiplayer computer games she indulged in every night, before Jezebel came into her life.

As Jezebel's favourite disciple, she was privy to the complex web of deceit Beast, Prophet and Jezebel wove to keep the masses in their place.

The promised immortality through new bodies was but a sham. Jezebel valued Stella's company and granted her the same alternative enhancement that Jezebel herself had undergone - DNA changes to her birth body coupled with Prophet's occult powers to grant her powers beyond the enhanced clones and androids. She retained full control of her faculties, received immunity to all diseases, enhanced speed and strength and occult power so that she could live her best life now.

In return, she swore to eradicate the pockets of stubborn Christians globally.

She's paid handsomely for her work and had everything she ever wanted... and so much more.

Life is great!

While the masses starved, Stella sipped champagne and snacked on Almas caviar and white truffles served by her butler while she sailed the seven seas.

"Land ahoy!" The male model she chose to be her ship's watch announced. She promised him immortality through a new cloned body for good service - an offer he jumped at.

The fool!

Her lips curled in a sardonic smile.

A handful of elite enhanced warriors under her command would destroy the nests on this isle.

Leading her crew, Stella scanned the isle for inhabitants. She smelled the air, detecting human sweat that's not from her crew.

Adrenaline pumping through her veins, heart pounding in ecstasy in anticipation of the hunt, she swung her sword with abandon.

"This way," she led them up the beach. Footprints in the sand led to a cavern behind a mossy rock.

"Clean that out," she commanded the slayers with a wave of her hand.

An enhanced clone with supernatural strength moved the stone aside. Another with chiropteran characteristics unleashed a sonar cry into the cave.

"They're in there. Five adults and a child," his soulless eyes returned her gaze. He used to be a handsome man, but the enhancements that gave him these powers caused him to take on the hideous appearance of a humanoid bat. Too bad. He was her favourite.

"Raze that nest," she ordered an elite clone.

Empty eyes stared in obedience at her. Hands wrapped in flames; her elite slave poured fire into the cavern.

"Fan out. Do not let any escape," Stella laughed, blood lust consuming her. "Kill them all!"

Screams from within the cave drove her into demonic ecstasy. A child emerged from a tiny hole.

The viper within her sank its fangs into the child, poisoning him, laughing as the child writhed in agony until death claimed him.

"Brief but delicious," she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Let's see if I can find more."

The isle, being small with few hiding places, took little more than a day to depopulate.

Her crew collected the skulls of their victims as evidence for their work, to claim their rewards from Prophet. Satisfied with her day's bounty, Stella returned to her ship with her crew, in time to watch the sunset from the balcony of her suite.

As her ship sailed out into the ocean, Stella's butler served an exquisite dinner prepared by her personal chef.

Sipping fine wine while watching the sunset, Stella summoned her dancers for entertainment. The rays of the setting sun turned the sea a beautiful shade of gold and red, the perfect backdrop for the sensual performance.

"What's that?" Stella's enhanced eyesight scrutinised what looked like a star falling from heaven. The metallic stench of blood rose from the sea, engulfing the ship and everyone in it. Fish and all marine life floated to the surface. Dead.

Stella gagged as the stench overpowered her. Yet the gaseous fumes from the sea thickened, poisoning everyone on the ship. Their enhancements proved useless against the fumes that swallowed their tormented screams.

The excruciating pain crippled Stella. She writhed on the ground, tears of pain, rebellion and unbridled anger staining her cheeks until life itself left her.

Terror gripped her when the metallic smell of the bloody sea was replaced by sulphur and brimstone.

Hell.

Relentless flames torched her, the agony inflicted never ceasing. Ravenous worms gnawing on her, magnified her torture tenfold with no hope of relief. Yet all that was nothing compared to the deep, aching loneliness in her heart.



Jezebel – The Queen

Jezebel

For unifying all subservient churches to form the New Age Church which worshipped Beast, he elevated Jezebel to be the Queen of the World.

Many whispered that she's The Harlot - a title she took pride in for no one could resist her.

Soaking in her infinity pool from the roof of her palace towering over her entire city, Jezebel's enhanced eyes drank the sight of her gladiators training for the upcoming championships. Sinews corded with muscle glistened with beads of sweat as hard bodies clashed, drawing blood.

Her favourite pet, Bruno, thrashed his opponents with ease. He ploughed through a dozen sparring partners, putting more than a few in traction.

She contemplated inviting him over for a night of pleasure – hers of course as in reality, no one else mattered.

She toasted her reflection in the floor to ceiling mirror, running her hands through her bleached blonde locks with that ravishing smile which charmed the hearts of both young and old, men and women alike, congratulating herself for her utter brilliance that had created this utopia. Bible believing Christians, the bane of her existence, had finally been wiped out.

She had the elite enhanced warriors do the work for her while she lounged in her castle, listening to their updates. Like vermin, Bible believers fled to tiny islands, hid underground, in caves, in mountains and in deserted areas where they thought they'd be safe.

With the occult power Prophet granted her, she located the safe houses of these Bible believing Christians. In one co-ordinated sweep, she had her followers destroy every base simultaneously, so that any who might escape could not warn the rest, nor could they flee to another safe house.

The operation met resounding success with the extermination of Christians now complete. Their blood soaked the ground where they once lived.

Her followers would return in a few days' time. She'll throw an orgy to welcome them. Reaching for a chalice, she found it empty. She could use a glass of sweet water flown in from a pristine stream untouched by the world's pollution. These filled her private fountains for her personal pleasure.

The fountain dispensed red liquid, thick with the metallic taste of blood. She spat it out.

An angelic voice boomed through the heavens. Its echoes filled the earth. "*Thou art righteous, O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be, because thou hast judged thus.*

For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy."

Her stomach dropped. She opened the fridge for a pitcher of water. Every pitcher that once contained clear pure water was now filled with blood.

Fountain after fountain in her massive palace contained nothing but foul smelling blood.

The wine cellar that once contained an impressive collection of fine wine, now contained bottled blood.

She whipped her slaves, demanding they bring her something to drink but all they could give her was more foul blood.

Her lips dry, her throat parched, she cursed the Almighty God.



JEZEBEL'S FOLLOWERS scoured the globe for a hidden freshwater lake untouched by wormwood, where water remained potable.

Her private jet transported the proud queen and her entourage to the lakeside beach.

"Your majesty," a behemoth of a man opened the door of the limousine. "We have driven away all inhabitants. The beach is ready for your private pleasure."

"Eradicate them so they can never return," she ordered. "Leave none alive," she smirked.

"But of course, your majesty," he bowed before her, then left to complete his task.

The beach wasn't ideal but it had to suffice.

A butler served her a tall glass of fresh water drawn from the lake. He filtered the water and added a slice of lemon to make it more palatable to her finicky tastes.

The servants set up a bed in the sand, with a Midnight Luxe mattress and fine silk sheets for Jezebel to sunbathe on.

The breeze caressed her skin as she lay on her bed, listening to the waves lapping the breakwater.

Her phone rang.

"Stella and her crew are dead?" She ran her hand over her face. Good help's hard to come by and Stella's as loyal as they get.

"Clone Stella with tissue samples from her last medical," she decreed. "Throw out the corpses and clean the ship so the next crew can use it."

Business taken care of, she had a tan to work on. Closing her eyes, she soaked in the delightful warmth of the sun, living her best life now.

The soft warm rays intensified. In moments, the sun's gentle caress turned harsh. Scorching heat blistered her skin. Her entourage fled for the shelters, bubbling blisters bursting from their lobster red skin.

Unrepentant, Jezebel and her followers blasphemed God.



Beast - Kingdom of The Beast

Beast

Beast sat on his throne, elevating himself as the God of this new age, the absolute ruler of the world. Everything his eyes landed on belonged to him. No one could stand up to him.

Every morning, he'd make his way to the temple to receive worship accorded to him by all his subjects. Prophet would perform signs and wonders to sway the people before his daily appearance.

Men, women and children prostrated themselves along the streets as his chariot carried him around Jerusalem, his stronghold.

He'd eradicated all opposition, beheaded Jehovah worshipping Jews and new Christians who refused to worship him.

Everyone in his kingdom having taken his mark, belonged to him.

The bright blue sky turned black. Darkness so thick you'd need a knife to cut through it, fell upon his kingdom.

Pain beyond anything he'd ever experienced seeped into his skin, cutting through his invulnerable hide. An anguished cry slipped out of his mouth when torturous pain intensified. Hatred welled in his heart as a slew of blasphemous curses fell from his lips.

With his supernatural senses, he could see through darkness as if it were bright daylight.

Around him, loyal subjects covered with fresh sores writhed on the ground, screaming - their tormented faces contorted with agony, their teeth gnawing their tongues for pain. Their hearts hardened, they cursed God.

He had enemies who challenged his rule. The Euphrates acted as a moat, keeping the kings of the east from invading his turf, though his spies kept him updated on their activities.

The latest update filled him with dread - A great angel poured a vial into the great river Euphrates, causing it to dry up.

Lifting his eyes eastward, his occult power enabled him to see the kings of the east preparing to cross the dry land that was once a great river.

Prophet, covered in sores, burst into the room. "It's time."

Together, they summoned the dragon whose overwhelming hatred for God blazed in his eyes.

The trio belched. Three unclean spirits emerged from their mouths. Each looked like a frog. Each had power to work miracles.

"Call our allies," said dragon.

"Gather the kings of the earth and the whole world for battle against the God who sent these plagues against us all," Prophet ordered.



Jezebel - Babylon

Jezebel

Fuming, Jezebel stormed into her palace, her servants scooting out of her way as she walked into her sanctuary of pleasure to process what had happened.

The aroma of Babylonian incense soothing her fury, she reclined on her velvet accubitus that's gilded with gold, beside a table laden with grapes and delicacies and sipped an intoxicating elixir from a golden cup.

She reigned over the kings of the earth. Beast needed her religious influence to sway the masses and in return, he protected her.

That protection was the catalyst for explosive trade in all luxuries, making her prosperous beyond any city in the entire history of mankind. She's untouchable.

Messages from Beast had gone unanswered during her recent escapade.

I have no more need of you.

She frowned at the last message from her partner.



IT IS DONE.

A voice rumbled from the sky, shaking the foundations of the city.

Through the floor to ceiling plexiglass windows, Jezebel gazed at the skyline.

Massive lightning bolts hit the city while thunder and voices rumbled.

Hail, each stone weighing more than thirty kilograms, rained from heaven.

It didn't bother her. Her palace's built to withstand attacks from all directions. Her subjects weren't as fortunate. They were crushed by the massive rocks.

She laughed, blasphemous curses falling from her lips, mocking God Almighty whose servants she had murdered.

Her laughter caught in her throat when she caught sight of Beast's strategic bombers. Before she could react, the missile struck her quarters with a massive explosion, fire consuming her.

The fiery tongues of death grew more insidious when the flames of hell replaced the nuclear inferno and worms that would never die tortured her very being.



Shiva

SHIVA GATHERED LOW hanging fruit from his magnificent garden. What Jezebel promised, she delivered. His business thrived with her blessings. He could buy anything he wanted, including his dream home.

A powerful voice boomed, "***Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.***"

His head jerked up, mouth open, preparing to curse out whichever lunatic that was, when his eyes fell on the owner of that powerful voice - an angel who flew over his estate proclaiming the message that had gotten human preachers killed.

His wife, Dewi touched his arm, as timid as a mouse. "Dear, we should listen to God's angel."

Rage boiled in his chest.

He swung his arm, striking her face, leaving her bleeding on the ground. "Speak of your God again and I won't be so kind."

Business with Babylon had been good. His revenue increased tenfold in the past year.

Another angel flew over them proclaiming,

"Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird.

For all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies.

"Dear," Dewi looked up at him with pleading eyes.

"Fool," he glared at her and raised his fist. "One more word and I'll beat you to pulp!"

"Sorry," she replied in a soft voice, her head bowed as a subservient wife should. "I'm wrong. You are right."

Appeased, Shiva searched his basket for the sweetest, juiciest fruit. This was why he didn't trust his wife or hired help to gather fruit. They might eat the best while picking fruit.

Another voice resounded throughout the city, "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.

For her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities."

Dewi picked herself up and backed away.

"Where do you think you're going?" Shiva turned towards his errant wife. "Step out of my home and you will no longer be my wife. I can get younger, sexier girls to replace you." His lips curled in a wicked snarl.

Dewi turned on her heels and fled.

Shiva shrugged. "Troublesome fool. Good riddance."

The day's harvest collected, Shiva brought the choice fruit home.

Delighting in his new estate, Shiva bit into a juicy peach, relishing in the sweet tangy taste that filled his mouth.

He gazed on the magnificent palace standing tall in the city of Babylon, wondering when he'd next receive an invite.

Explosions!

A cloud mushroomed over Jezebel's palace. The radioactive fallout spread with the wind over all of Babylon.

Shiva stared in horror. Tears streamed down his cheeks as his main client who purchased the bulk of his goods was wiped out in an hour.



Jayden - Return of The King

Jayden

From his vantage point in heaven, Jayden watched God's wrath unfold on earth.

Jezebel who had led so many astray, who had doomed countless to hell had finally been judged. **Vengeance is The Lord's!**

A powerful angel took a great millstone and cast it into the sea, saying "*Thus with violence shall that great city Babylon be thrown down, and shall be found no more at all.*"

All around him, heaven rejoiced for Babylon, whose sorceries deceived all nations, whose hands were stained with the blood of prophets, saints and all who were slain on earth, was no longer that glorious metropolis dripping with luxury. Ashes were all that's left of her.

Where once she hosted lavish weddings, now wild beasts and vultures overran the land.

The Church, both the resurrected and raptured alike gathered around Jesus as His Bride. Jayden's keen eyes locked on his best friend Emunah, now part of the Bride of Christ. She shot him a smile, overflowing with joy, her ethereal beauty fitting her new status as part of the Church, who is the Bride of Christ.

Regret surged through him. If only he'd turned to Jesus before the Rapture. Had he heeded Emunah's warning, he'd be part of the Church and not just one of the guests.

As a tribulation saint, he had a different role, an honoured status he never felt worthy of but which had been given freely to him. God avenged his blood and the blood of his fellow believers who had died in the hands of the evil ones during the Great Tribulation.

He looked down on earth for the love of his mortal life, Ava. She sat on the ground with her arms wrapped around legs, weeping. Whispering his name. His heart breaking, he tore his eyes away. *They were not meant to be.*

A song welled up in his heart as he looked at Jesus. Together, the people in heaven sang, their voices mingling in wondrous harmony, singing,

“Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God: For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand. Alleluia.”

The people in heaven, twenty-four elders, and the four beasts around the throne worshipped God as the Church made herself ready for her marriage to the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. Every member of the Church wore fine white linen that is their righteousness, imparted to them from Jesus Christ.

Jayden's heart thumped in excitement as he prepared to accompany Christ and His Bride for the marriage supper of the Lamb. Beside him was a devout Jew who followed God's commandments during King David's time. Further up front, he watched the prophets Moses and Elijah, faces glowing in excitement as they conversed with each other while angels brought their horses to them.

Jayden's horse, Thunder, neighed as he stroked her magnificent mane. “Good boy.”

Up ahead, Jesus mounted a majestic white steed, ready to claim his throne on earth.

Shiva

With Babylon gone, Shiva needed new buyers for his goods. The king of the North and the kings of the east gathered to lay siege on Jerusalem which Beast and Prophet made their stronghold.

Time to switch sides. Those under siege wouldn't be able to pay his fees, but those laying siege, the likely victors? That's who he'd want to do business with.

The profits wouldn't be anywhere near what he'd get selling to Babylon, but he'd break even for now, and profit far more in the future if he does business with the kings of the east.

With proper clearance, he got his cargo to the rear of his customer's army when hailstones, the size of boulders rained from the sky. Abandoning his goods, he ducked one and dived under a truck for cover.

Peeking from beneath the vehicle, he saw to his horror a cross in the sky. In his heart of hearts, he knew what that meant.

His ex-wife, after listening to the Jewish prophets, talked about Jesus, whose symbol was a cross. This Jesus he rejected has come to judge the world.

He wasn't the only one. Hardened mercenaries quaked at the sight of the cross.

Time stood still.

Then a man on a white horse with many crowns on his head emerged from the clouds.



Ava - The Battle Of Armageddon

Ava

The sweet aromas of mint, parsley and cilantro permeated the fresh mountain air. Rustling leaves with the frantic chirps of birds accompanied the cold wind that chilled Ava's cheeks.

Wrapping a worn-out shawl over her threadbare blouse, she shivered. Sitting on her favourite spot overlooking Mount Zion, thanking God for granting her another day of life.

Warmth enveloped her in the form of a thick leather jacket which covered her shoulders. The masculine scent of musk and sweat stirred up bittersweet memories.

"Jayden?" she looked up, disappointment replacing hope when she saw the face of her benefactor.

"Not Jayden. But I was hoping I'd do," a sad smile caused guilt to poke at her.

"Sorry Boris." Ava forced herself to smile. "I appreciate everything you've done for me, but..."

"But you're still mourning Jayden," Boris had that faraway gaze. "Love never dies. I know. I miss Natasha every single day since her passing." His eyes glistened.

"Our daughter Natalie was all I had left but she was raptured," the wistful smile on his face melted her heart. "I know they're both with Jesus as part of the Church. They'll return with Him as the Bride of Christ."

He sat beside her, gazing at the Mount of Olives. "Jesus will stand on that mountain and his Bride and all the saints will come with him." A soft smile crossed his face. "We're waiting here to welcome them home."

"Jayden will come back then," Ava's heart fluttered.

“But like Natasha, he’ll be immortal, like the angels. Natasha no longer belongs to me. Marriage is until death parts us,” he sighed, a deep longing in his eyes.

Ava could empathise. She longed for Jayden. Death claimed him before they could consummate their love in marriage and in starting a family.

“Jayden gave up his life so that I could live.” She wiped the tears from her eyes with the back of his hand. “But what’s the point? I wish I had died with him. At least we’d be together.”

Boris sat in silence, his awkward hug afforded her a measure of comfort.

Ava couldn’t help herself. A snuffle turned to a sob, and into an all-out bawling session. She buried her head in Boris’s shirt, covering him with her snot as he rubbed her back to comfort her. “It’s okay,” he murmured, his voice soothing her.

The entire sky lit up. A cross blazed across the heavens, visible to the entire world. “Jesus,” her heart fluttering, she whispered.



* Jayden *



THE WEDDING ENTOURAGE departed from Heaven for their journey to earth. Jesus rode ahead on a glorious white horse, accompanied by His Bride, the entire church.

Jayden rode his beautiful white steed, alongside Liam and Ethan, three of the four musketeers, joyous in anticipation of the next event - The Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

“All for one,” Ethan hollered.

“And one for all,” Jayden and Liam replied.

Chuckling, Ethan urged his horse forward. “It’s not the same without Ollie.”

"He's right up ahead," Liam laughed. "Race you guys to him."

Oliver turned back and smirked at his old buddies. He slowed his steed, allowing the trio to catch up.

"Hey, big shot," Jayden hollered. "Forgot your lifelong pals?" He lifted one hand to shield his eyes as he acclimatised to the blinding light enshrouding their old friend. He could sense Oliver's spirit entwined with the Lord Jesus Christ's. His demeanour, the way he smiled, reminded him of Jesus.

God's majesty cocooned every member of the Church.

"No way, man," Oliver laughed. In a sense, he's still the same old Oliver, yet so different. Granted, they had all changed, but the transformation the Bride of Christ had undergone was awe inducing.

"C'mon, let's catch up on the way to the grand feast!"



* Logan *

THE KING OF THE NORTH returned from his campaign in the South and now gathered his troops around the mountains between the two seas.

The kings of the East marched across the dry land that was once the Euphrates River to challenge the might of Beast and Prophet.

Armies gathered around the hill of Megiddo. The stage was set for the prophesied Battle of Armageddon.

Supernatural creatures and enhanced warriors, together with allies of the Dragon, Beast and Prophet gathered in the valley of Armageddon.

The two camps clashed for supremacy over Israel, the heat of the battle below so intense, fire, smoke and never-ending explosions were all one could see.

"Nuclear warheads," Leo muttered as he stood beside Logan, monitoring the battle.

Yet the atmosphere was awash with anticipation as Logan, with the other Jewish Witnesses, took turns keeping vigil, ready to escort Jesus and His Bride upon His imminent return.

Logan watched with bated breath as the cross which heralded the return of Jesus blazed across the sky. Then the clouds opened.

Jesus Christ, called Faithful and True, rode a white horse from heaven, ready to judge and make war. His eyes blazed with fire. A sharp sword came out from his mouth. He wore many crowns. His clothes were dipped in blood and on His thigh was His name, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.

Logan's legs wobbled. Awestruck, he could barely breathe.

A host of saints, dressed in pure white linen, mounted on white steeds and surrounded by angels, followed him.

That's the long-awaited wedding party they were to escort to earth. Logan's new binoculars gave him excellent view of the Marriage Supper of The Lamb.

The sun!

An angel stood in the fiery orb, addressing the flying fowl, "Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God;

That ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all men, both free and bond, both small and great."

Jesus dismounted. When his feet landed on the Mount of Olives, the impact was so great it split the mountain in two creating a massive valley between the Mediterranean and the Dead Seas, initiating the world-encircling earthquake which crumbled mountains and sank islands, reshaping the earth.

Beast, Prophet, the dragon, the kings of the earth and all their armies attacked Jesus, His angels and all His saints.

"Jayden!" Ava who was watching the battle trembled in fear for her beloved.

Logan felt sorry for his lovesick friend. "He'll be fine. His resurrected body is immortal. He can't be killed again."

Beast threw massive balls of fire at Liam. This time, Liam smirked as he caught each fireball and tossed them back. "Catch," he chuckled.

Ben and Emma closed in on Jayden, both throwing fireballs at him. Jayden yawned, allowing the fire to hit him.

Ava screamed. When the fire finally died out, Jayden emerged, every strand of his perfectly styled hair still in place, his clothing still pristine white. "That's all you got?" He laughed.

"Hey, Ben's mine," Ethan protested.

"After you," Jayden bowed and watched from the sidelines as Ethan stood in front of the enraged bull of a man, waving a red cape, waiting for his attack. Ben charged at Ethan who caught him with one hand and threw him against a boulder, cracking his skull.

"That's all?" Jayden quirked an eyebrow. "Thought you'd be more creative than that."

Emma stalked up to Jayden, growing larger, more muscular with every step. Snarling, the massive behemoth wrapped her fingers around Jayden's neck, her face straining as she tried to lift him off the ground.

Jayden stood with his feet planted on the ground and a comical grin on his face, his posture relaxed.

Roaring, Emma's muscles and bones creaked as her skin stretched to accommodate her growing sinews. Already towering over Jayden, she bent over like a bully of a man trying to lift a tiny puppy.

Jayden stood unmoved from his spot, chuckling. Without warning, he threw the giant over the battlefield, splattering her against a cliff, causing an avalanche that buried God's enemies in rubble.

Emunah who's like a little sister to him, faced the new Stella that Jezebel had made from the original's tissues.

She looked different yet he recognised her spirit within her magnificent, transformed body. Even though power radiated from her, his heart raced in terror for his dear friend's safety.

With a manic laugh, Stella lunged at Emunah, her fangs striking Emma's throat. Those fangs snapped off. She's invulnerable now.

"Happy?" Emunah tilted her head. Then she picked the giant with one hand and twirled her like the blade of helicopter.

"Oops!"

Translation to her immortal body didn't change her personality or her ditzy ways.

She lost her grip on Stella, sending her plunging into the ravine.

"Sorry!"

Logan cringed at the sight of the monster's body smashed into a gory mess when it hit the rocks below.

Jesus seized the Beast and Prophet and cast them alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone. Then he slayed his remaining enemies with the sword from his mouth, so that all the fowls could eat their fill of their flesh.

Logan, as part of the hundred and forty-four thousand Jewish witnesses cheered, singing to welcome Jesus upon his Triumphal Return.

* Ava *

From her vantage point on the mountain range, Ava watched the battle play out, cheering her friends on.

Jayden looked down and winked at her, before defeating yet another enhanced warrior barehanded.

He could hear her!

The dragon soared towards the clouds, then swooped down at her. Her heart dropped.

She gasped.

Jayden flew up, hurling himself between Ava and the dragon.

"Pick on someone your own size," he snarled. Which was laughable considering the dragon was forty feet long while Jayden was six feet four.

The dragon breathed fire at Jayden.

“Aargh!” Jayden’s screams sent Ava’s heart plummeting.

“Jayden,” she whispered.

The flames faded. Jayden hovered, face ashen. He looked like he was about to puke. “Worst case of halitosis ever,” he pulled a face.

Ava giggled.

Jayden’s eyes darted towards the bottomless pit, before he locked eyes with the dragon.

“Ever tried breath mints?” He smirked. That man seemed to be having too much fun. Death and resurrection hadn’t cured him of his penchant for bad jokes either.

Ava saw a powerful angel carrying heavy chains and a massive ornate key approach the dragon from behind.

Before Ava could blink, the angel bound the dragon in chains and dragged him into the bottomless pit.

While the dragon fell into the pit unleashing a fury of curses, the angel locked the pit and sealed the dragon so that he could not deceive the nations for a thousand years.

Relief washed over Ava.

Then it was announced that when the thousand years are up, the dragon would be set free for a season.



Emunah - The Millennial Kingdom

Emunah

Floating beside Jesus, Emunah scanned the multitudes for the friends she'd left behind during the Rapture.

"Over there." Radiating love, Jesus led her to a small gathering on a mountain range.

"Mei!" She laughed.

"Leo!" Emunah's eyes widened when she realised their postures and facial expressions mirrored each other's. "When?"

"When what?" They chorused, giving Ava identical confused expressions.

"When did you two become a couple?" Emunah laughed.

Leo and Mei burst into laughter, slapping each other as tears rolled down their eyes.

"We're best friends," Mei insisted, shooting a shy glance at Leo that spoke of more than friendship.

"Yeah, friends," Leo reciprocated with a glance at Mei which contradicted his words. "Two peas in a pod."

"There you are little sister!" Logan rushed up to Emunah and squished her in an overenthusiastic bear hug.

Emunah's eyes fell on her best friend, Jayden. The four musketeers were in their usual huddle. Jayden, Oliver, Ethan and Liam were inseparable since their reunion in heaven. They hung out whenever Oliver wasn't caught up in his Church duties.

"Down here," Ava yelled, getting Emunah's attention. Oh yeah, she was floating again. Since she received divine power, she tended to forget to keep her feet on the ground.

Landing in front of Ava, she hugged her old friend with great care, knowing too well the fragility of the mortal body.

“So how has life been?” Emunah noticed Ava had gained a shadow – a herculean blonde man who could feature on the cover of GQ magazine.

“Your boyfriend?” She nudged Ava.

“No. He’s a very good friend.” Ava seemed to miss the fleeting disappointment on her admirer’s face.

“It’s time,” an angel announced, gathering resurrected saints before Jesus. Old Testament saints like Moses and Daniel, together with the tribulation saints who died because of their witness of Jesus were judged and rewarded.

Jayden looked astounded when he was made king over a new land. Liam was made a prince over a new province near Jayden’s kingdom. Ethan who had no interest in ruling was made a priest, a position he very much preferred. Logan and Jacob too became honoured priests in God’s new Millennial kingdom.

Oliver, together with the rest of the Bride of Christ would reign alongside Jesus.

Everyone who was killed for refusing to take the mark of the beast was crowned to rule and reign with Jesus as a king, prince or priest for a thousand years.

The rest of the dead stayed dead.

All who were still alive and who had refused to take the mark of the beast, would be a part of the promised kingdom where Jesus Christ would rule a thousand years. Those who did not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ were cast into Hades.

With a word, Jesus changed the global climate. The air became clean and pure, the weather temperate. Peace blanketed earth.

Emunah heard that the climate went awry after they were snatched away. Even then, earth as she remembered it was nowhere as pleasant.

The fowls of the air picked the bones of God’s enemies clean so there was no carrion left to decay. Still, the mess left after the war would take years to clean up. Buildings, now rubble had to be cleaned up.

The newly appointed kings and princes were given full authority to build their cities and to rule them with the backing of Christ and His Church.

"I call dibs on Leo," newly crowned King Jayden announced before any of the other kings or princes could claim him.

"You," before Leo could finish his sentence, Jayden's hand was on his shoulder. "What?"

"Chill, old friend. I know what you are capable of and want you to take charge of building my kingdom," Jayden held out his hand. "Please be my right-hand man."

"Alright," Leo accepted the handshake, sealing their deal.

"You too, Mei," Jayden extended his offer to the petite lady beside the geek. "Your expertise is very much appreciated."

"Thanks! I accept," Mei shook his hand.

Ava stood in the side-lines with Boris, staring at her resurrected fiancé. The Herculean man behind her took her hand and led her to Jayden. "Your Majesty," he began.

Jayden cringed. "Please call me Jayden."

"Alright Jayden. Ava and I would like to help out in your kingdom too," Boris replied.

"You're more than welcome to join us." Jayden's gaze softened when he locked eyes with Ava. His eyes glistened with tears forming at the edges. "Ava," he raised his hand, only to drop it. "I'm sorry. I died. My mortal body's no more. Our dreams..."

"Not your fault," Ava looked up at him with watery eyes. "It is what it is. You are an immortal king now. It can't be that bad." She laughed, though sorrow remained in her eyes.

"Boris loves you," Jayden pointed out the obvious. "Our plans for the Millennium could only be possible in our mortal bodies. Boris is still mortal."

Ava gasped. "But Jayden..."

Caressing her cheek, Jayden continued, “Go with him. Marry him. Be fruitful. Multiply. I’ll watch over both of you and your future descendants as your family’s protector.”

“Emunah, have you seen Ben?” Penelope looked frantic. “I’ve searched high and low but cannot find him.”

Emunah had no idea how to break the news to Penelope. She looked to Ava, Jayden, Ethan, Leo and Mei in a desperate silent plea for help.

Ava stepped up, putting her arm around Penelope. “He didn’t make it.”

“No, not possible. He’s a Christian. He served in Jezebel’s youth ministry!” Penelope cried, visibly shaking.

Immortal bodies, whether resurrected or translated are invulnerable, with mind boggling strength. In her frenzied state, Penelope could hurt Ava.

Before Emunah could step in, Jayden intervened.

“P,” Jayden pulled the frantic immortal away from Ava. “He never knew Jesus personally. He thought his good deeds were enough but everyone sins. He didn’t take the forgiveness that was offered to him.”

Emunah heard of how wicked Ben and Emma had become, the lives they had taken, but in her current state, Penelope didn’t need to know the gory details.

Her eyes met Ava’s mournful gaze. Before the Rapture Emma and Ava were best of friends. She could only imagine the pain Ava must feel at the loss of her dear friend.

For the next thirty days, Jews who survived the Great Tribulation recognised Jesus as the Messiah their nation had rejected. As the remnants of that once great nation, they mourned and wept for him.

For the next forty-five days, the entire world erupted into a grand celebration with Lord Jesus as the Bridegroom and the glorified Church as the Bride, inaugurating Lord Jesus as King of the earth.^[4]

“Come with me,” Emunah heard the Lord’s voice as the celebrations came to an end. “We’re going home. We’ll visit during the Passover.”

Emunah, Oliver, Penelope, Henry and Abigail bade farewell to their friends as they left with Jesus for their mansions in heaven.



Leo - Rebuilding The Kingdom

Leo

Operation Clean Up - the first step in building their dream city in the large parcel of land given to Jayden for his kingdom. The few survivors who once lived there delighted in Jayden's rule and Leo's plans to build a futuristic city that marries nature and technology.

Instead of years, the rubble and junk left behind from the war took months to clear. Divine strength and speed that the immortals possessed made the clean-up much easier. The king, princes and priests in the land did the heavy lifting while Leo directed them. Instead of lording over their subjects, these rulers served and protected them.

When Jesus restored the earth's climate, he also caused flora and fauna to flourish and took away the desire carnivores had for meat or for the hunt. Plants provided all the nutrients man and beast required. Carnivores became herbivores.

Wild beasts, now as tame as intelligent pets, assisted humans in their rebuilding efforts.

Leo and Mei had taken to riding their elephant, Titan, around the kingdom. Much as Leo loved fiddling with gadgets, nature in this restored world's far more interesting.

Even as mortals, they grew stronger and healthier with the passage of time. Chronic diseases, once common, had become extinct.

Theoretically they could live to a thousand years old but being mortal, they still could die.

Lions wouldn't hurt humans. They no longer hunted for prey but ate grass, leaves, seeds, nuts and fruit. Wolves could be trusted to babysit lambs, yet death still occurred. The most common cause of death, being stupidity. Even under the Millennial rule of Christ, Death roamed free.

The sweet, fresh tang of orange blossoms enveloped the pair as they rode on Thunder's back. Mei's laughter tinkled like a brook. "I love this part of the kingdom. Do we have to cut down these trees to build homes?"

"No," Leo replied as he offered a branch laden with orange blossoms to Mei.

Studying the grove, he decided to build an open-air apartment complex around these trees, leaving them intact. "We'll have the best of both worlds."

"My boy, in the circus, the lion tamer would put his head in the lion's mouth," Leo heard a gruff voice.

He turned in the direction of the voice. A man and a boy sat beside a bored looking lion.

Somehow, the man coaxed the lion to open its mouth. Then he stuck his head in it.

The poor lion looked uncomfortable with the man's head stuck between his jaws.

The temperate climate turned chilly, raising goosebumps on Leo's skin.

From his peripheral, he glimpsed the hooded figure of Death standing behind the man.

The wind blew.

Pollen got in the lion's face.

Its nose twitched.

"You idiot! Get out of his mouth," Leo yelled.

With its front paws, the lion tried to pull the man out of its mouth but the stubborn man refused to budge.

The lion sneezed.

Its jaws snapped shut.

The man's body went limp.

"Daddy!" The boy cried. Horrified.

The lion looked traumatised, still stuck with the man's head in his mouth.

Titan walked up to the lion and knelt so that Leo and Mei could dismount.

"I'll call Ethan," Mei offered while Leo ran to the man. The metallic smell of blood hit his gut.

The boy bawled.

The lion whimpered, opening its mouth trying to get the head out.

"The lion has tasted human blood. Would that turn it into a dangerous man eater?" Mei whispered. "Do we have the euthanise it?"

The lion looked at her with pleading eyes as if it heard and understood her words.

Mei's calculating stare turned empathic. "Not your fault," she cooed.

"Waaaah!" The boy bawled. "Lion ate my Daddy!"

While Leo tried to get the man's head out of lion's mouth, Mei knelt before the boy. "We'll get your daddy out of there," she promised.

The boy sobbed. Hope lit his eyes.

"I'm Mei. What's your name?" She approached the trembling child as if he were a lost puppy.

"I'm Joseph," he replied, his voice - soft and tentative.

Ethan appeared beside Leo, startling him. "A little warning next time." Leo muttered, stepping aside.

"This as big as you can open your mouth?" Ethan asked.

The lion snorted.

"This is going to hurt, buddy," he pried the lion's mouth open. Reaching through the blood, with minimal effort, he eased the man's head out of the lion's mouth.

Divine strength and invulnerability come in handy in situations such as this.

Though a bloodied, mangled mess, the man's head was still attached to his body.

"Daddy!" Joseph grasped his father's arm. "He's not moving." The boy's eyes watered.

"He's gone to heaven," Leo knelt before the boy to speak at his eye level. "You'll see him again in heaven."

"You're a priest," the child turned to Ethan, gripping his arm, begging him. "I've seen God bring people back to life after you pray for them."

"Son, I'll ask him, but it is up to God whether his soul returns here or remains in heaven," Ethan looked at the mangled body. Then he lifted his eyes to heaven, raised his hands and pleaded with God on behalf of Joseph for his father.

The boy watched in expectation. When the priest lowered his hands and his father lay still, hope left his eyes.

"God said no, huh?" The little one blurted.

"God said your father stays with him in heaven. But I'll raise you as my son. God has big plans for you when you grow up," Ethan wrapped his arm around the tiny child's shoulders. "Come home with me. You'll have your own room in the temple."

"What about the lion?" Mei asked Ethan. "He's tasted human flesh and blood."

"His name is Leonard," Ethan replied, his eyes following the lion who stalked back to the man and gently nudged the corpse with his head. Whining.

"He says he's sorry. Didn't want to kill him," Ethan translated the lion's cries. "He washed the blood out of his mouth in the lake. He's still traumatised. We need to keep an eye on him."

"That lion killed my daddy! You feel sorry for him?" Joseph's angry tears belied his pain.

Ethan scooped the child in his arms, hugging the grieving child to comfort him.

Pointing at the lion, the boy cried. "I thought we were friends! I don't want to see you again."

Leonard's tail drooped. Head down, he trudged back into the forest.

"We'll monitor Leonard," Leo offered. "Go home with Joseph."

"You can manage?" Ethan quirked an eyebrow.

"Affirmative," Leo waved Ethan away. Mei nodded in approval.

"Wait up!" She yelled, chasing after the giant cat.



Jayden – Life as King

Jayden

King for the Millennium.

It sounded so cool, but if he'd known how much paperwork's involved, he'd have asked for priesthood instead.

He hadn't discovered all the powers granted his new immortal body yet, but discovering them was part of the fun.

He'd made a promise to protect his former fiancée Ava. That's the best he could do for her. Had his mortal body survived, he'd be married to her by now with three kids. Eventually more. But a guy could only dream.

Looking through the walls with immortal eyes, he scanned the land for Ava. A girl that big a klutz needed constant monitoring. Boris stood below the tree when she slipped and fell. Right into the big man's arms.

What she was doing up in a tree was anyone's guess, but Ava being Ava, it could be any crazy thing. He could trust Boris to keep her safe while he was buried under the paperwork.

Any kingdom needs its policies and laws to run. The laws had been given by God to the Jews through Moses. Jesus summarised them into two overarching principles:

The first principle:

Love the Lord (which means God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit) with all your heart, soul and mind.

The second principle:

Love your neighbour as yourself.

So how do you interpret these?

Jayden went through the Ten Commandments God gave Moses.

Exodus 20:3 Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Exodus 20:4 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth:

Leo barged into the room. Crimson-faced. Hyperventilating.

Leo stared at the wooden plaque behind Jayden that had the Ten Commandments engraved on it.

“W-we n-need to add another law,” he panted.

“What?” Stunned at Leo’s outrageous demand, Jayden crossed his arms. This immortal body was more muscular than his mortal form at its best. He still wasn’t used to all that added bulk.

“Eleventh command - Thou shalt not stick your head into a lion’s mouth,” Leo fumed, a manic gleam in his eye.

“Leo, take a seat,” Jayden ran his hands over his face. “We need to talk.”

As Leo jabbered on, Jayden watched the clock. He had to be in court in five to deal with disputes and judge cases brought to him.

“Leo, it’s been good catching up, but I gotta go,” he stopped Leo midway through a tale involving a lion, an elephant, a feral child, Mei and squawking chickens. Before Leo could say another word, Jayden flew out of the room to court, smoothing down his clothes and sitting as dignified as he possibly could, given the harried day he had.

Thanking God for the wisdom given him, that same wisdom which made Solomon the wisest man in history, he judged fairly and swiftly all the cases brought to him.

The sun hung low when Jayden dismissed the court. He had time for a quick patrol before supper.

Flying low over the kitchens, the aroma of bread straight out of the oven and vegetables roasting in olive oil with fresh herbs made his mouth water.

As an immortal, he didn’t need to eat for sustenance. The mortals on the other hand, needed food to live. He’d wait until his subjects had eaten their fill before heading for the diner.

He spotted a little shepherd boy hooking a lamb from the edge of the cliff, saving it from certain death. The rocks were loose. The boy slipped. Throwing the lamb to safety in care of a sheepdog, the boy plummeted into the ravine.

Pouring on his speed, Jayden flew to the boy, matching his speed as he scooped the boy in his arms and decelerated to a halt mid-air.

The boy caught his breath. "T-Thank you, your Majesty," the awestruck boy stammered.

"You can call me Jayden," he delighted in the boy's unabashed wonder as he flew the boy around his kingdom for a joyride, before returning the child to his mother.

"Thanks Jayden!" The boy practically glowed as he waved goodbye.

Jayden yearned to have a child of his own, but that's no longer possible. His subjects are his children. He'd have to be content with that.

As he flew over the hut that Ava called home, he saw her sitting on the porch watching the sunset with Boris keeping her company. He recalled the many conversations they used to have watching artificial lights dance on the underground stream. They'd talk of seeing the sunset together on the surface world. Building a cottage and raising a family in it during Jesus' Millennial kingdom.

Heart heavy with regret, he hovered above them, hiding behind the heavy branches of a tree to check on her.

"Jayden?" Ava sniffed the air. "I know you're there."

She could smell him?

He hadn't time to shower that morning. Surely, he can't smell that bad.

He snuck a sniff under his own armpit and gagged. Yeah, he should have showered before patrol.

Lowering himself to the ground with as much dignity as he could muster, he grinned at Ava. "Thought I'd check on you."

He could feel Boris' eyes boring through him. "Both of you. Is everything okay? Need anything?"

Ava ran into his arms for a hug. Muscle memory had him pull her against his chest, her sweet fragrance brought warm memories of their time together.

There was a huge difference. Close proximity to Ava no longer had any physical effect on his body.

She rubbed her face against his shirt, not minding his stench. Smiling, he ran his hand through her hair.

"Your majesty," Boris cleared his throat, snapping Jayden back to his new reality.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Jayden grinned sheepishly. "Sorry. Forgot myself there."

"Have you eaten?" Jayden tried to break the tension.

"Yes," Boris replied, his gaze calculated. "Today's spread is amazing. You wouldn't want to miss it. All we mortals have eaten our fill."

Jayden got the hint. "Thanks Boris." With a quick wave, he took off.



Boris – Courting Ava

Boris

That was a close call.

Boris' heart pounded like a thousand drums. The king himself has the hots for his girl even though he knows she's off limits.

He couldn't lose her. Not Ava.

She's everything to him in this brave new world. He could see that she liked him too.

He knew Jayden and Ava have a history. They were engaged and would have married had Jayden not died saving her life.

Not that Jayden's suffering in any way. He's the king over this entire land. He's immortal. He can fly, is impossibly strong and has a whole host of other powers as well. That man should be content with his lot and not covet.

Technically, Ava belonged to Jayden, but marriage is until "death do us part". So, their engagement is null and void.

Ava gazed at the sky, in the direction. A dreamy smile amplified her natural beauty. Bile rose at the knowledge that her smile was for Jayden.

"Ava," he wrapped his arm around her. Claiming her. Her sweet perfume wafted up his nose.

"Hmmm?" She sounded so distant; it broke his heart.

"The Night Queen is blooming tonight," Boris whispered into her ears. "I found it during my exploration today."

Ava loved nature. She delighted in wild flowers and beautiful fragrances. "The Night Queen?" She perked up. "I've always wanted to see it in real life." Her phone's wallpaper featured that very blossom.

He took her hand and led her down a path, through the pergola he built for her. The intoxicating fragrance reminiscent of jasmine and tuberose with a hint of vanilla and citrus permeated the air as they walked down the scenic path lit with fireflies.

Ava shivered, wrapping her arms around herself to ward off the cold night wind.

He took off his jacket and draped it on her shoulders. She rewarded him with a dazzling smile.

His hand on the small of her back, he drew her closer to his body, letting her lean into him. He buried his nose in her hair, inhaling her sweet perfume that's more beautiful than even the Queen of the Night.

"Boris," his name, spoken so sweetly on her lips made his stomach flutter. "Thank you." She reached out to touch the fragile blossom. "It's beautiful."

"Not as beautiful as you are, my dear," he caressed her cheek.

She shot him a suspicious glance, breaking the magic of the moment. "What?" She crinkled her nose and stared at him, disbelief showing in her eyes.

It's hard to believe that such a beauty could be so insecure. Even the king is smitten by her.

"I mean it," he pressed a chaste kiss on her forehead, then held her so that she could see his sincerity in his eyes.

She blushed, staring at the ground as if it were the most interesting thing on earth.

He led her to the table and two chairs he had set up for their date. He'd picked the sweetest, juiciest fruit and filled the bowl he'd made with them.

Her eyes widened when she bit into the fruit he offered her. It's a new species that popped up after Jesus transformed the earth's climate.

"Wow." She took another bite. Juice dripping down her chin, she asked, "What is it?"

“Something new I discovered so I get to name it,” Boris replied. “I call it Ava.”

She chuckled. “So, I’m some fruit?”

“You are sweet, juicy and irresistible,” Boris dabbed her chin with a napkin. “Need a bib?” He asked, earning a playful smack on his hand.

“Do you ever think of them?” Ava tilted her head.

“Now and then. They reign with Jesus now,” he smiled. “Natasha asked me to move on. We treasure what we had but it’s time to start afresh.” He gazed at the stars. Somewhere out there, Natasha and Natalie are chilling in their mansions.

“We’ll meet up at every festival when Jesus and His Church come down to visit,” he shrugged.

“Jayden’s here so it’s harder to forget him,” Ava’s eyes watered. “He asked me to move on, and has given us his blessings, but seeing him around, I find it hard to forget.”

“Treasure those memories,” Boris dabbed away her tears with a napkin. “You and Jayden had something special. But that season has ended.”

Ava looked even more beautiful when her eyes glistened with unshed tears. He took her hand and held her gaze. “Celebrate this new season with me. I’ll make every moment worth your while.”

Her gaze wavered. Unsure.

“Think about it,” he whispered, his heart racing, fearing rejection.

“Give me time,” came her soft reply. “Please.”

He had time. Her wounds were still raw. What’s a few years out of a millennium?

“Take as much time as you need,” he pressed a chaste kiss on her cheek.



Leonard - A Lion, A Boy and A Bundle Of Nerves

Leonard

Haunting melodies wafted from the tree under the full moon. Leonard's mane bristled. Sitting through horror movies that tiny human insisted on watching messed with a lion's sanity. But that was the only way to keep the little cub out of mischief.

He'd proven his worth to the paranoid human female Mei. The five humans - two adult males, two adult females and a tiny male cub stayed in the cluster of wooden huts with him. He got a manmade stone dome that resembled a cave, built between the huts occupied by the two human males. The cub had his own hut between Ava's hut and Boris's hut.

The adults took turns cub-sitting and for the first time ever, they trusted him to babysit Billy, that precocious human cub.

He wasn't going to betray their trust. He'd be the best babysitter in the house, succeeding where all humans failed.

Every one of them had lost the little cub in their care. They'd find him in his bed the next morning but all felt uneasy about the cub's nightly disappearance.

The little human refused to stay in his hut even though it was past his bedtime. When Leonard checked on him, the hut was empty. He knew the cub's scent and followed it.

"Boo!" A white fluttering thing dropped down from a tree and landed on Leonard's back, pulling clumps of the lion's mane in tiny hands!

A ghost!

“Raargh!” Leonard screamed, running in circles like a headless chicken, knocking over the chicken coop, sending its occupants clucking and squawking in frenzied circles.

Leonard was too scared to care. If only he could speak human.

Growl Rumble Roar!

That was lion speak for “Help! There’s a ghost in our village!” Leo’s translator should pick it up.

The human backup was taking his time.

“What do you mean a ghost in our village?” Leo finally arrived in his hovercraft. Mei, sat in the passenger seat.

“There,” he raised his paw and pointed at the ghost, who turned out to be Billy under a white cloth, rolling on the floor, clutching his sides, laughing.

“I’m going to eat you!” he threatened, his roars translated accurately through Leo’s translator.

“No eating humans,” Mei warned. “It’s a different world with different rules now.”

“The cub doesn’t have to know,” he huffed. “How else can I scare him.” Leonard tossed his head.

“No videos, games or music until you apologise to Leonard and every single chicken is back in its coop,” Leo held up a remote and clicked a button.

The music stopped.

“Apologise to Leonard,” Mei pointed at Leonard.

“Sorry Leonard.” Dewy-eyed Billy looked so sad, Leonard felt sorry for the child.

“Apology accepted,” Leonard rubbed his head against the child, as a show of affection.

“The chickens?” Mei pointed at the frenzied fowl.

Billy leaped at a rooster. It pecked his head and flew away. Changing target, Billy chased a hen, cornering it in the coop, shutting the door. “One down. Five more to go.” He huffed.

Leonard wanted to help but they wouldn't let him for fear that he might accidentally hurt the poultry with his strength.

Leo and Mei crept up on the rooster, closing in from opposite directions.

They leaped.

The rooster flew away.

They crashed into each other, their arms grabbing each other in an awkward hug.

Mei's face turned pink as did Leo's.

As a lion, Leonard could smell their physical attraction towards each other. The female's in heat around the male, and the male's scent shows his eager response.

Leonard sprawled out to watch their mating dance. Instead of nuzzling Mei, Leo stepped back, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Sorry." He looked sheepish.

Silly humans!

Those two were clearly attracted to each other but neither is taking action. They should have mated by now but their scents say they haven't.

Stalking up to the pair, he herded them together with his body and purred.

"What are you doing Leonard?" Leo barked.

"Getting you two to mate," Leonard replied through the translator.

"What?" Mei blushed. "M-mate?"

"I can smell your arousal around him," Leonard replied.

"Leonard!" Mei looked outraged, her scent intensified even as her face turned crimson.

"She's attracted to me?" Leo whispered.

"And you to her," Leonard huffed. "So what are you waiting for?" He pushed them into a hug, keeping them in place with his powerful body.

“Weren’t you humans ordered to be fruitful and multiply?” Leonard reminded them through Leo’s translator.

“That’s enough.” Crimson-faced, Leo switched off the translator.

Purrr.

Leonard nudged them. He locked eyes with Leo, then with Mei, his expressive eyes conveying exactly what he thought they should do.

He’d seen enough mating behaviours among other humans. They would lock lips as a precursor to actual mating, so he manoeuvred his humans so that their lips met.

Mei looked away as did Leo. Their scents were so strong, Leonard couldn’t understand why they still wouldn’t claim each other as mates.

“Help us,” Leo pleaded as Jayden flew over them on his nightly patrol. “Lion attack.”

Jayden laughed so hard he dropped from the sky. “Leonard, go easy on them.”

The immortal humans could speak all languages, including animal languages.

“They aren’t mating even though they desperately want to,” Leonard replied.

“Leonard,” Jayden ruffled his mane. “Let them go. I’ve got this.”

“I’ll leave their happiness in your hands,” Leonard purred. Releasing the awkward pair, Leonard headed back to his cave.



Mei

MEI WANTED TO DIG A hole and hide in it. How could she ever face Leo again. Leonard just announced to the whole world her physical attraction to Leo. What would he think of her now?

She retreated to her home. Leo didn’t bother to follow. Did he think she’s a slut?

Years of friendship down the drain because of a lion’s expose?

She had tremendous respect for Leo's genius. For years, they bounced ideas off each other, building in each other's discoveries. The intellectual connection had grown into a strong friendship where they confided in each other their hopes. Their insecurities. Somewhere along the way, she found herself falling for her fellow geek.

A quick rap on the door broke her rumination.

She opened the door.

Leo stood at the doorway holding an enormous bunch of her favourite flowers, a sheepish grin on his face. He was dressed in a fitted plain shirt and jeans that showed off his slim, sinewy physique. Leo wore sleek leather gloves and leather boots. He looked amazing.

"Mei, would you consider going on an actual date with me?" Her heart raced. Her cheeks burned. Did she hear correctly?

Leo looked down. "Sorry, I guess that's a bad idea."

She grabbed his hand before he could withdraw into himself once more. "Leo, I think it's a brilliant idea."

His grin lit her room, bringing joy to her heart. "Put these in water. I'll wait while you get ready."

She slipped into the olive and mustard pantsuit that brought out the colour in her hair and her eyes. Then met him at the door.

"Wow," his eyes took her in, making her feel special the way only he could.

His hand guided the small of her back, something he'd never done before, leading her into his latest invention – the first flying car in the Millennial kingdom.

He opened the door for her and helped her in, secured her seatbelt, then closed the door for her, like a proper date, she noted.

"Comfortable?" His shy glance made her smile. She nodded.

He started the engine. The car took off, reaching a hundred miles an hour in under a second yet the ride was smooth.

In minutes, they were in another part of the earth, under Logan's jurisdiction.

“Ready for an amazing fruit feast?”

She looked up at the forest of trees with thorny fruit. “Are those durians?”

“Yep,” he laughed. He remembered how she reminisced about the king of fruit which had gone extinct during the Great Tribulation.

“That’s the Musang King Durian tree,” he manoeuvred the car so that he could pluck the heavy fruit.

“We’ll try Black Thorn Durian too,” he drove to another tree laden with thorny fruit and picked a few.

They drove deeper into the forest and found trees laden with purple fruit with green calyx.

Mangosteens! Queen of fruit.

Mei often waxed lyrical about the sweet fruit that paired beautifully with durians.

From their flying vehicle, Leo and Mei picked Mangosteens off the trees with ease, filling boxes in their vehicle with the sweet fruit.

Their ride took them to the river bank where the meadow was covered with wildflowers.

Mei took in the gorgeous sight, her cheeks heating up when she sensed Leo’s eyes on her.

Leo spread out a mat and brought out the fruit and drinks for their picnic date.

Seated cross legged on the mat, Leo pried open the base of a durian with his pen knife, separating the segments to expose the creamy yellow fruit. It’s potent aroma had her mouth-watering in anticipation.

“Musang Wang,” he picked a creamy seed and fed it to her.

“I can feed myself,” she laughed.

“It’s a date. Let me feed you. I think that’s what guys do on dates,” Leo protested.

“You mean you don’t know?” Mei almost choked on her durian in amusement.

“I never had time to date,” Leo shrugged. Embarrassed.

"I haven't either," she whispered conspiratorially. "But we'll figure this out."

"I thought you were dating Boris back in the day," Leo blurted.

"Boris?!?" Mei laughed. "He's not my type. I know a lot of girls in my camp fancied him but he's not that bright."

"You prefer brains," Leo grinned.

"Brains beat brawn anytime," she chuckled.

Mei picked another seed and ate the creamy flesh, licking her fingers when she'd finished it. "It's so good."

"I know, yeah," Leo pried open another fruit. "This one's Black Thorn." He offered her the yellow fruit still in its shell.

She could get drunk on the fruit. Black Thorn was sweet, fruity with a slight bitter bite to it and a faint alcoholic aftertaste.

He poured cold coconut water from a flask into two cups and offered one to Mei. The refreshing liquid cleansed her palate. Alternating rich durians with sweet, refreshing mangosteens, the pair ate their fill, keeping the leftovers for their friends back home.

Falling back to their familiar banter, Leo held her waist while she snuggled against his chest, relishing in his warm, comforting scent, watching the sun set over the river.



Leo

HE'D BEEN ON SEVERAL real dates with Mei already. She's his soulmate – always has been. They're more than best friends. This is the woman he wants to spend the rest of his mortal life with.

"Mei," Leo's stomach somersaulted. Reduced to a bundle of nerves as he took her hand, he asked.

"Will you marry me?"

Mei broke into a beautiful smile that outshone the rising sun. "Yes!"



Ava & Boris – Love Triangle

Ava

One of the first buildings constructed after the wreckage had been cleared, was the Millennial Temple in Jerusalem. With the help of the immortals, it was completed on the first day, built on a rock foundation, constructed of marble and of hardwood.

The majestic building was large enough to accommodate the entire community of all surviving mortals and all immortals.

The service had ended.

Ava spotted Mei in the balcony of the ezrat nashim. The newlywed's eyes shone as she watched her husband chatter animatedly with Jayden, Ethan and Liam in the men's section.

A bittersweet longing rose in Ava heart when her eyes met Jayden's. As one, Jayden, Liam and Ethan looked up and waved at her.

"Still got feelings for Jayden," Mei observed.

"What makes you think?" Ava forced her eyes away from her former fiancé.

Mei tilted her head, a knowing look in her eyes.

"He's moved on. It's time you do too," Mei patted her arm. "His mortal body is gone."

"Yeah. He's a zombie now," Ava rolled her eyes.

"I wouldn't use that word, but in a sense, yeah," Mei laughed. "The politically correct term is immortal."

"I know. His mortal season is over, so the command to be fruitful and multiply doesn't apply to him," Ava sighed. "Speaking of multiplying, how are you and Leo doing?"

"Working on it," Mei laughed. "Jayden is quite a looker," she admitted, "but your shadow is attracting more female attention than Jayden did back in the day."

"What shadow? You mean Boris?" Her heart warmed at the thought of the gentle giant who had been her constant companion since she and Leo joined Jewish camp in the mountain range.

"Boris has been smitten by you from the time we extracted you and Leo from Beast's clutches.

"No he hasn't," Ava laughed, hating how her cheeks heated up. From the balcony, the pair could see Boris emerge from the crowd to talk to Leo. She never really noticed it before but Boris was an Adonis. "He just wants someone to replace of his wife who is now part of the Bride of Christ."

"That's not what I heard," Mei replied. "He could pick from scores of women, but it's you he's waiting for."

Ava watched the men from the balcony. Boris held her in a smouldering gaze that made her heart race.

"Hurry before he gives up on you," Mei smirked. "There's a long queue of women too happy to take your place."

Ava smacked Mei's head playfully. "It's not like that. They can have him."

"So you say," Mei laughed as she sauntered off.

Ava lingered in Jerusalem for another week after Pentecost to catch up with Emunah and Penelope before they return to heaven with Jesus.

On the way home, Ava stopped by the farmer's market to buy eggs, fresh vegetables and fruit.

"Did you see the new girl who's staying with Boris?" Ava's ears pricked at her shadow's name. There's a new girl staying in his hut? Maybe it's a little girl around Billy's age. It'll good for the child to have another kid his age to play with.

"I'd kill for a figure like hers," chirped another woman.

"They look so good together," remarked the first woman. "It's like they were made for each other. He's an Adonis and she a Venus.

Ava's stomach knotted up. Resentment entwined with fear knotted her stomach.

"He must have given up waiting for Ava," snarked a third. "Silly girl lost her chance."

Had Boris given up waiting for her?

What happened while she was away in Jerusalem?

Did he meet someone else?

Her chest constricted. She lost interest in the myriad of goods around her. Dejected, she headed home.

The friends shared a makeshift village while waiting for the construction of their permanent housing to complete. Each individual was assigned a three-room hut for daily living and to house a few guests when the need arises.

As she walked into the courtyard, a statuesque woman with flowing hair spun of gold breezed past her. She was as beautiful as an immortal but unmistakably mortal.

Mesmerised by the woman's beauty, Ava watched her pick up a basket, then walk through the door of Boris's hut.

Ava lost her appetite. Compared to that woman, she was insignificant. Painfully plain.

"Why so tense?" Mei tapped her arm.

"Who's that?" Ava pointed at the woman as she closed the door.

"Boris's guest," Mei shrugged. "She's from Lydia's kingdom. They met in Jerusalem."

"Oh," dejected, Ava dragged her feet towards her hut. "Good for him."

"Are you jealous," Mei raised an eyebrow.

"Who me?" Ava crossed her arms. "Over Boris?" She feigned nonchalance.

"Quit lying to yourself," Mei smirked. "He can't wait for you forever." With that, she stalked away to the family hut she and Leo now occupied. Upon marriage, they combined their individual huts into a family hut, turning the space between the original huts into a large room with a conversation pit.

Ava loved that concept having spent many happy hours there with Mei and their mutual friends.

Holding her head high, Ava walked into her hut and unpacked. Try as she might, she could not get her mind off Boris and that beautiful girl.

A sense of loss consumed her. Sometimes, you don't realise what you really want is right in front of you... until it's too late.

There was a knock on the door.

Ava opened it.

Boris stood before her, his eyes sparkling with joy, his arm around that beautiful blonde.



Boris

AVA'S RETURNED FROM Jerusalem!

Boris couldn't wait to introduce her to Victoria, his long lost sister.

Separated at birth, his family had given her up for dead. Then came the war when the rest of his birth family perished. He'd started life anew with Natasha but The Rapture separated him from his wife and daughter.

She was found and adopted by a fisherman and his wife. When they were Raptured and she was left behind, she hid under the protection of a Jewish Evangelist during the Great Tribulation.

They met through Lydia when everyone returned to Jerusalem for the Pentecost.

Ava opened the door, only to slam it on his face.

What gives?

"Ava? It's me, Boris!" He knocked on the door again.

The door remained locked. He heard snuffles on the other side.

"Ava, are you okay?" Worry replaced joy. "Did anything happen? Who hurt you?"

"You said you'd wait," came the soft, tearful answer.

"I said I'll wait as long as you need me to," Boris assured her. "We've got to talk."

"There's nothing to talk about. I can understand your decision," Ava replied. "Good luck."

"Ava, what are you talking about?" Boris knocked the door. "I'm not leaving until we talk."

"Okay, talk," she replied. The door remained closed.

It hit him like a brick. Joy bubbled in his heart. "Ava, are you jealous?" He suppressed his laughter.

"Who wouldn't be jealous of her? Go ahead. Marry that beautiful blonde goddess. I don't care," she sobbed.

"Ava, please open the door," he pleaded.

"Fine!" the door flung open. "Happy?"

"Ava, meet my long lost sister, Victoria," beamed Boris.



Boris, Mei & Ava - A Thousand Years

Boris

“I trust that you will take good care of her,” Jayden clapped Boris’ shoulder.

Breathing a relieved sigh, Boris grinned with a flamboyant bow. “Of course, your Majesty,” knowing how much Jayden hated regal formality.

“Jayden,” he smirked. “Among bros, use my name.”

He didn’t need the king’s permission to marry his love, Ava. But knowing Jayden’s history with Ava, he felt it only appropriate to tell Jayden their intentions.

“And, yes. I’ll be your best man,” smirked Jayden.

They planned to hold it right after the Sukkot, when Jesus and His Bride would return to Jerusalem for the festival and linger for a few weeks. During these visits, Jesus would be there to receive worship, to teach and to heal all ailments and injuries presented to him. In spite of His busy schedule, he would also be physically present at the wedding.

Ava’s late parents, now resurrected saints who are part of the Bride of Christ would walk her down the aisle. Their close friends from heaven and from earth would be able to attend. It’s everything he knew Ava longed for. He was going to ensure it would be the dream wedding his beloved deserved.

He could feel Ava’s sorrow when they planned their wedding. Her best friend whom she’d once assumed would be her maid of honour should she ever marry, was burning in hell. Emma fell during the Great Tribulation.

The Tisch comprised of mortals and immortals- the translated and the resurrected. Dean, Henry, Wesley, Oliver, Liam, Jayden, Ethan and Leo gathered around him, singing and laughing as they awaited the badeken.

His heart thumping so hard, he was so sure everyone could hear, he made his way to the bride. Surrounded by angelic voices singing hauntingly beautiful melodies, he sees his radiant Ava on her throne. Time stood still as their eyes met, her beauty mesmerising him. “Wow.”

“Boris?” she whispered, snapping him out of his trance.

Unable to speak with any coherence, Boris gently lowered the veil over her face, confirming that this is the right woman he’s marrying.

The wedding ceremony under the canopy seemed like a dream. He’d almost given up hope of ever winning her heart. This very moment, he felt like the luckiest guy alive. She chose *him*.

Then she circled him in a delicate dance, her sweet yet seductive smile entranced him. He was ecstatic.

Boris slipped the golden ring he had made onto Ava’s index finger. “Behold, you are consecrated to me with this ring according to the law of Moses and Israel.”

Sweet red wine that he shared with Ava was the most magnificent nectar he’d ever tasted.

Jesus Christ Himself was physically present to bless their union. What more could anyone ask?

Boris stepped on a glass, breaking it to the chorus of “Mazal Tov!” from the crowd.

Head swirling with joy, he swept his bride off her feet with a passionate kiss.



Mei

“IT’S MINE!” A TINY girl with pig tails pulled a figurine from a six-year-old boy.

"I want!" another girl in a purple dress grabbed the figurine from her.

"Momma gave it to me," the first girl pulled it back.

"She didn't give only to you," a four-year-old boy pouted. "She said to share with me."

"I claimed it so it's mine now," the biggest boy pulled the figurine away and held it over his head where none of the smaller kids could reach. "I'm stronger so I take what I want," he huffed.

Mei ran her hands through her hair. Babysitting her youngest son, three grandchildren and oldest great granddaughter while the other kids were in school was tougher than deciphering the human genome.

When Jesus said to go forth, be fruitful and multiply, Leo and Mei were only too glad to obey. At eighty, she looked and felt no older than twenty-five, the age she was at the start of the Millennial kingdom. She and Leo had twenty kids. The oldest kid was already a grandmother with more than thirty grandchildren. To be honest, she'd lost track of the size of their tribe.

"Isaac, taking something that does not belong to you is stealing," Mei separated the children. "Now return the toy to Ariel."

"Thou shalt not steal!" Ariel wagged her tongue at Isaac.

"What's going on?" Leo walked into the room.

"Daddy!"

"Grandpa!"

"Great grandpa!"

The kids ran to Leo.

"He took my toy."

"It's mine. I claimed it."

Leo stared down the kids. "Listen to great grandma/grandma/ma or you're grounded."

"Isaac?!" Mei stared down the rebellious kid who squeezed the figurine in his little fist.

“Isaac!” Leo glared at the boy, his face turning red as he lost his patience.

The child relented.

“Okay,” Isaac returned the figurine to Ariel.

“Apologise to Ariel,” Leo ordered.

“Sorry Ariel,” the petulant boy pouted.

“Do not covet. Do not steal,” Leo reminded the children.

“Yes daddy!”

“Yes Grandpa!”

“Yes Great Grandpa!”

The kids chorused.

Now go to the library. Each of you choose a book to read.

When you’ve finished, tell me what you learnt and I’ll show you my new invention.

Excited, the kids scurried off.

“By the way, the gang’s coming over next Saturday to spend the weekend with the kids so that we can have a break,” Leo leaned behind Mei, whispering into her ear. His breath sent her heart racing.

“Where are we going?” Mei turned, her eyes met his. Her cheeks burned.

“Somewhere no one knows of yet,” he winked.



Ava

THE WHOLE GANG’S HERE for the festivities! It felt like the old days again.

Henry insisted on cooking for them with, even though he reigned alongside the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, Jesus Christ.

“Jesus is the Servant King. Whenever he comes to earth, he serves. He heals, restores, comforts and teaches,” Henry shrugged. “We follow his example.”

Standing behind the coal filled pit, music pulsating in the background, he began his performance.

Spinning around with an iron griddle in one hand and a jug of batter in the other, he filled the griddle with batter.

Cymbals clashed.

He breathed fire beneath the griddle, cooking the pancake to the pulsating beat.

In a blink of an eye, the jug was on the table, his hand held dried fruit and edible flowers which he sprinkled on the griddle.

Dancing to the music, he tossed the pancake, too engrossed in his own performance to notice a child swing from the tree above him on a vine.

"Aaaah-eeh-ah-eeh-aaaah-eeh-ah-eeh-aah!" cried the child, snatching the pancake mid-air, to the applause of the laughing audience.

"Hey!" Henry looked up at the smirking child, who was swinging headfirst into a looming tree trunk.

"Got you!" Emunah flew between the boy and the tree, catching him before he could go splat. "Watch where you are going."

"Tobey," Ava recognised the kid as one of her descendants - her nine-greats grandson. "Come here now," she glared at the errant boy.

The boy paled and scooted off, into the arms of his mother. "Sorry eight-G grandma," the woman panted. The kids heard about your gathering and planned to crash it. We caught most of them but Tobey and a few others got away.

More kids dropped down from the trees. "Tada!" they chorused as a group of men and women chased after them.

"Sorry about my tribe," Ava flustered.

"It's alright. They're welcome to join," laughed Henry. "I have enough for everyone."

Henry continued his performance, filling and decorating two dozen griddles at a go, then blasting them with fire.

With incredible speed, he tossed his creations and caught them in their griddles without missing a beat, making full use of his new powers in his performance.

With another spin, he tossed the pancakes, landing each delicacy on the empty plates in front of each member of the audience.

He must have gotten tips from the angels in heaven. Before the rapture, he was already an amazing cook.

Ava bit into the stunning work of art on her platter. Juices spurted, tantalizing her tastebuds in an intoxicating blend of flavours.

“Out of the world!” she remarked.

“How did you know?” Henry’s eyes widened. Chuckling, he pulled a packet of spices from his pocket and tossed it at Ava. “You can’t get these on earth.” He grinned. “I got them from heaven’s kitchens. Been bugging the angels in charge of the banquets there.”



Jayden, Billy & Ariel - The Dragon Unleashed

Prompted by the Holy Spirit, these words echoed in Jayden's mind.
And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison

It dawned on him that the thousand years are up. Peering into space, at the bottomless pit, his heart dropped. The seal was broken. The dragon released.

From his throne, Jayden scanned his kingdom, searching for signs of the Devil, knowing too well that having served his sentence, Satan could not be arrested unless he is caught in rebellion against God.

"Your Majesty, Berg and Friedman are here to see you over a property dispute," said the bailiff.

"Send them in," he replied, pushing thoughts of the Devil's schemes aside so that he could focus in his job at hand.

After Jayden judged the last case for the day, he set out for his daily patrol.

Soaring through the clouds, feeling the wind against his cheeks. The power of flight was among the God-given gifts he relished most.

A long time ago, he promised to look out for Ava's descendants. She and Boris had been so fruitful that their descendants could fill an entire town. Over the centuries, their descendants had migrated all over the planet. He remembered every one of them by name. With the speed and vision God had blessed him with, he circled the globe, scanning the planet checking on each and every one of them.

Satisfied with their current wellbeing, he patrolled his kingdom to ensure the safety of his own citizens.

An explosion.

Screams.

A skyscraper had become a towering inferno.

Pouring on his speed, he cleared the building, carrying its residents out through the windows to safety. Fellow immortals who happened to be in the vicinity, flew in to help with the evacuation.

“All clear!” One of them informed him.

Visualising the burning tower as a birthday cake alight with candles, Jayden blew out the flames, putting out the fire.



“THANK YOU, YOUR MAJESTY,” his subjects bowed before him. Pride welled in his chest. He’s the king. He’s powerful. He’s better than all of them.

Catching those thoughts before they could spiral, he peered through the darkness, into the spiritual realm.

The Dragon!

Locking eyes with the whisperer, he said, “The Lord rebuke you, Satan!”

The disturbing thoughts vanished as he resisted the devil. The Dragon fled.

Billy

As a mortal in the Millennium kingdom, Billy wished he’d died with his parents. They’re back on earth in resurrected bodies as Tribulation Saints, living as priests in God’s temple.

He met them in one of his visits to Jerusalem. His father offered his thanksgiving sacrifice to God that day. He looked different yet their souls recognised each other.

“Billy?” His father looked incredulous. “You’ve grown!” A grown man by then Billy looked a lot like his father did before his death.

“Ruth! Come meet our son,” his father urged his mother.

Tears soaked their clothes as Billy hugged his resurrected parents.

“Son, our place is here,” his mother caressed his cheek. “Live life to the fullest as a mortal in this new world. Marry your soulmate. Be fruitful and multiply.”

“Continue our family line in this new world,” his father held his shoulders. “Lead our family in The Lord so that none fall astray when the dragon is released.”

The thousand years are up. Word is out that Satan has been released and is prowling the earth.

He watched the immortals who soared over him, flying effortlessly. He envied them. Their power. Their strength. He hated the clear divide between mortals and immortals in this new world.

Resentment grew in his heart.

“It’s not fair. They are kings and princes and lord over you,” an insidious voice whispered.

“God rewarded them for their faithfulness unto death during the Great Tribulation,” Billy replied, although he felt bitterness begin to take root in his heart.

“Look at them fly. See how powerful they are. The things they can do. You are faithful to God yet have none of that power,” the mesmerising voice persisted.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Those words from James 4:7 echoed in his heart. The Holy Spirit gave him wisdom to spot the source of the whisperings.

“In Jesus name, God rebuke you Satan,” Billy turned his eyes to Jesus, resisting the devil’s wiles.

The whisperings vanished as the devil fled.

Ariel

Walking through the gates of Jerusalem with Isaac, Ariel spotted a man more beautiful than any mortal or immortal she had ever seen.

He spoke to the bustling crowd, his voice rich and melodious tugged at her heartstrings. Mortals and immortals alike ignored him. The older folks shot him suspicious looks. A few curious bystanders gravitated towards him.

“Who is that?” She asked Isaac.

“The dragon. He’s just been released from the bottomless pit,” he shrugged.

“Why?” She couldn’t fathom why God would sentence someone so beautiful to the pit.

“Haven’t you been paying attention during our history lessons?” Isaac scowled. “That’s the guy who got Adam and Eve to sin which led to death and all the awful things on earth. He steals, kills and destroys.”

“He’s Satan? Then why release him?” Ariel asked.

The beautiful man looked her in the eye, his gaze bore through her, mesmerising her.

“I served my sentence and learned my lesson,” the dragon’s voice, smooth as velvet, caressed her senses. “I have much to contribute to humanity.” His smile dazzled her.

“Get away from him. Don’t trust him,” Isaac grabbed her arm and dragged her away before she could fall deeper into the dragon’s spell.



Jayden, Billy & Tobey - Web of Deceit

Jayden

Sitting on the throne, listening to the plaintiff, something struck his forehead, bouncing off with a zing.

“What?” Startled, Jayden spotted a man in dressed completely in black, wearing a black ski mask, crouched on a beam, pointing a gun with a silencer at him.

The gun went off.

Another bullet struck his temple. A third hit the back of his head.

Incredulous, Jayden picked the crushed slugs from the ground and stared at his would-be assassin.

He hovered before his assailant grabbed his arm, preventing the man’s flight. Tearing off the mask he revealed the would-be-murderer as one who had voiced violent objections to an earlier ruling that he had made.

“You are not fit to rule,” the man spat in Jayden’s face as he lowered the shooter to the ground.

“Were you trying to kill me or get my attention?” Jayden waved the bullets in his face.

“You are better off dead, so that one more worthy to rule could replace you,” he replied.

“And who might that be?” Jayden held the man in a vice grip.

“The dragon,” proclaimed the man.

For attempted murder with the intention to kill, the punishment would be severe, however Jayden sensed something amiss. He knew this guy. Thomas is not a murderer. Someone or something had been messing with his mind.

“Lock him up,” Jayden ordered his guards. “I’ll interrogate him later.”

Billy

Had centuries of peace made everyone soft and complacent? No one seemed to take the dragon as a serious threat. Most regarded him to be a benign entertainer who dispensed nuggets of ancient wisdom, mesmerised through music and told fables from the ancient times. Had they forgotten he's the great deceiver who steals, kills and destroys?

As the youngest survivor of the Great Tribulation, Billy held a special place in the hearts of the first citizens in Jayden's kingdom.

Leo's technology took care of the physical labour required to run the city, freeing humans to explore and discover the world and to teach the next generation to be men and women after God's own heart. King David who ruled Jerusalem was often upheld as an example for all to learn from.

In public eyes, Billy's role in the kingdom was as an explorer who taught the children about the world around them and who led excursions where his charges could experience God's love and power through His Creation. It was a role which he relished in, day after day.

His other role, known only to Jayden, Leo and Mei, was in the secret service of his Majesty, King Jayden. He serves in preparation of the dragon's release, to protect as many citizens as possible from falling for the dragon's wiles. A tall order by any account, only possible by God's grace and mercy.

As Billy's a powerless mortal, Leonard was to be Billy's partner and bodyguard when he had to infiltrate the enemy's territory. They trained together. Over the centuries, he gained fluency in lionspeak while Leonard learned human mannerisms.

"Do I really have to wear this?" Leonard tugged at the collar of his shirt.

"This place has a strict dress code," Billy replied as the pair, in matching tuxedos walked towards the doorman. "Up on hind legs," he whispered.

Sighing, Leonard balanced on his hind legs like a circus animal, trying to look as human as possible to get through the door.

“Our tickets,” Billy handed a pair of VVIP tickets to the doorman.

Quirking an eyebrow, gesturing at Leonard, the bouncer said, “No animals allowed.”

“Is that how you refer to your VVIP customers?” Billy glared at the doorman as Leonard stood upright, tossing his head in disdain at the doorman as they breezed past the bouncer.

They made their way to their seats for the performance. Heavy pulsating thumps on the drums, undergirded the sharp metallic twang of the electric guitar. The soulful, hypnotic voice of the dragon awakened buried desires long forgotten in the Millennium Kingdom.

“Let’s get out of here”, Leonard growled at Billy, who flailed, mesmerised by the hypnotic song. A desire to break free, to rebel against imposed law and order beat in the breasts of the listeners.

“Enough,” the lion rumbled. Picking Billy by his collar like a rebellious cub, Leonard stalked out of the building, away from the dragon’s insidious influence.

Tobey

“Are you an immortal?” Tobey asked the beautiful man lounging under the sprawling tree. “You look immortal, yet you are different from the kings, princes or priests.”

“I’m immortal, but I’m not like them,” the man’s dazzling charisma drew Tobey in like a moth into fire. “I’m one of you.”

He wasn’t alone. Other curious youths gathered around, enraptured by the fascinating conversation.

“How are you like us,” Tobey asked as he watched the man hover above them, flaunting his power of flight.

“I’m an ordinary citizen like any of you,” he smiled. “I’m not the high and mighty holier than thou type that lords over the common folks.”

"Kings, princes and priests were appointed by God. They protect us," Tobey retorted, annoyed that anyone would speak badly of Uncle Jayden who ruled the kingdom.

"That's what they'd have you believe," the dragon snorted. "Then again, it's better for you not to know...." He trailed off, looking into the distance with a loud sigh.

"Know what?" The suspense was killing him.

"Yeah! Tell us!" The gathering crowd chorused.

"Alright," the dragon lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper that was strangely loud enough for the entire crowd to hear. So, he began his dramatic retelling of history from his unique point of view.

"Enough of that nonsense," Joseph, who chanced upon the performance, dragged Tobey away.

"What if he's telling the truth?" Tobey protested.

"The devil is the king of lies," Joseph retorted.

"Look at the poor guy," Tobey's heart broke for the immortal outcast.

"Let's go talk to people who have seen him in action okay?" Joseph proposed.



Jayden, Ava & Boris - Temptation's Triangle

Jayden

Patrolling his kingdom, Jayden flew over Ava's estate. His eyes fell on his former love as she strolled through her orchard. She carried herself with regal beauty. The few strands of silver hair highlighted her luminous skin that flowed in the moonlight.

"She should be yours," a voice whispered.

"My mortal life is over. Like the angels, I cannot marry," he replied. The devil hid from sight. Jayden scouted his surroundings but could not detect him.

"Angels have taken brides from among mortal women," that voice whispered.

"And look where they are now," Jayden replied, his eyes following the sound of the voice, trying to nail down the tempter.

"That's because God was in charge. If I were in charge, everyone would be encouraged to follow their hearts," the seductive voice wrapped around him. "I believe in free love. Immortals have every right to be with their soul mates."

The dragon materialised in front of him. "If you truly love her, join me."

For the briefest of moments, Jayden wavered. He remembered her breath against his skin. He yearned for her touch.

Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.

Those words written by the apostle Paul came forefront in his mind.

Jayden fled.

Ava

"The kind dragon rescued snowball today," Tobey hugged his kitten. "She climbed to the top of the tree and was too scared to climb down. It's too high for any of us to climb and no one could help us. Then the dragon swooped from the sky and saved her."

"That's nice Tobey," Ava replied. Maybe they had all misjudged the dragon after all. He seemed busy helping out wherever he could.

"He cares more about us mortals than any of the immortals," Tobey frowned. "I'm beginning to think he's right after all."

"What about King Jayden? He's protected all of us for this entire thousand years," Ava replied.

"He was nowhere to be found. Priest Ethan too. The Dragon says they put on a show each day so that we think they care when all they want is to lord over us," he bit his lip.

"They have jobs to do. Duties to fulfil to keep the kingdom running," Ava explained.

"The dragon says it's bullshit. Lies," Tobey frowned. "Like all the lies you have been teaching us." Tobey's accusing eyes terrified Ava. Her worst nightmares were coming true.

"I got to go," Tobey got up, his eyes shining with excitement. The dragon has something special to show us tonight.

Ava's gut turned. Something is very wrong. She had to find Boris. Together, they could deal with it.

Boris and his pals worked at the construction site, helping Leo build a new apartment complex to house the growing population.

Boris' vehicle was hard to miss. It looked like a massive flying platform with guard rails. Straining her eyes, she spotted it hovering at the top of the building.

"Boris!" She yelled as she ran towards it.

Something's wrong. The guy driving the vehicle was not Boris. His shoulders were not as broad, his arms less bulky.

"He lied to you. He didn't go to work," a voice whispered into her ear.

"Who's that?" Startled, Ava looked around but saw no one.

"Remember that hot babe who was ogling him yesterday? She gave him her name card. He's gone to see her," the insidious voice whispered.

"No he did not!" She yelled. "Boris would never cheat on me!"

"You silly woman," the smooth voice chuckled. "Wives are the last to know when husbands go astray."

Insecurity gripped Ava. Covering her mouth, she smothered a sob.

"Are you alright?" Jayden who had been putting prefabricated buildings in place landed in front of her.

She couldn't speak with any coherence. Distraught, she hugged him.

"It's okay," Jayden whispered as he rubbed her back, comforting her. Her heart raced at his touch. The old attraction she once had towards him burst aflame as lust consumed her.

Jayden's eyes narrowed. "Leave her alone," he ordered an invisible being.



Boris

BORIS RETURNED TO THE site, grateful for his colleague, who offered to cover for him, while he dealt with an upset stomach.

The sight that greeted him sickened him to the core - his wife in the arms of her former lover Jayden, now an immortal king.

"She loves him, not you," a voice whispered, sending his emotions spinning in turmoil. "She never loved you. You're the rebound guy."

"No, I'm not," Boris retorted. "We've been married for a thousand years. Our tribe is proof of that."

"Then what is she doing in his arms?" The seductive voice wrapped itself around him. "She's cheating on you."

Boris' mouth went dry. "No she wouldn't. She came here to look for me."

“Or... she knew he’s helping out today,” the voice taunted. “She can’t have him so you’re her second choice.”

Those words cut deep into his heart.

“He’s perfect. An immortal. Powerful. But you?” The hypnotic voice broke through his defences.

“I can give you power,” the voice offered. “I can make you the man she wants.”



Emunah, Leo & Ava – Feast of Tabernacles

Emunah

Emunah gazed at the sea of sukkahs blanketing the earth in preparation for the Feast of Tabernacles. She loved these trips to earth with Jesus to celebrate major festivals.

As her feet touched the ground, tangy citrusy scent of etrog wafted up her nose, evoking fond memories of her childhood.

The priests were the first to welcome them. Kings and princes bowed before them, paying homage to Christ and His Bride. Her best friend Jayden would be part of the welcoming party. He'd have lots of stories to tell. They'd catch up later.

Scanning the crowd, she sensed a subtle difference in their attitude. Envy hid behind fake smiles. She knew the dragon had been released and was working mischief.

She watched Ava walk out of a tabernacle with a child in tow. Was that her kid or one of her descendants' countless kids. There was a certain tension about her when she spoke to Boris. The gentle bear of a man seemed uncharacteristically angry. He glared at Jayden while smiling at him. "Hypocrite," he muttered beneath his breath.

Jayden shuddered, masking his discomfort with his signature smile.

This festival was meant to be filled with joy, gratitude and unity, yet she could sense a clear divide forming, with pride, envy and bitterness taking root.

Together with the rest of the church, she took her place of honour beside Jesus when worship began. He knew what was in her heart and encouraged her to see to her friends after the day's duties were fulfilled.

"Jayden!" She leaped onto her best friend from the old days, squishing him in a big hug.

“Hey!” He paled. Worry lined his face. “What if your husband gets jealous.”

Emunah laughed so hard her sides split. Wiping the tears away with the back of her hand, she replied, “My beloved sent me here to check on you guys.”

“What’s with this jealous husband thing?” She nudged Jayden.

“Boris is jealous. He believes Ava and I are having an affair,” he wrung his hands. “Nothing I say convinces him otherwise.”

“Well, once upon a time, you two were madly in love,” Emunah smirked. “I watched from up there.”

Jayden’s cheeks reddened.

“But you know that’s not possible,” Jayden sighed. “It’s different now.”

“I know. I’ll have a word with them,” she frowned.

* Leo *

The s’chach rustled in the wind on flat roof of his family apartment complex in Israel, meant to house future generations of his tribe who choose to settle in the Holy Land.

Leo had the Sukkot in mind when he designed this home. Starlight twinkled through palm leaves in their makeshift hut that’s big enough to house himself, Mei and their still single children. That said, it was large enough to house an entire village.

He didn’t cheat. It was built by hand, entirely of natural materials. Wooden beams formed the structure of the large hut. The walls and room dividers were made of cloth, hand painted by their children. The glow of candles gave the entire sukkah an intimate vibe. Droids kept the floor clean but other than that, it was akin to what the Israelites lived in during the forty years in the wilderness.

Mei told the children stories of how God led His people through the wilderness, providing for them manna from heaven and water from the rock. Their eyes widened as she recounted the miracles God did to protect his people throughout their forty years, living in tabernacles such as these.

“Where were they going?” Maria asked.

“To the land God promised to give to their ancestor Abraham,” Mei explained. She went on to tell them about Abraham and Isaac. How God provided a sacrifice to take Isaac’s place.

“We give thanksgiving sacrifices. But why don’t we have sin sacrifices in the temple anymore,” little Maria asked.

“Because Jesus died for our sins. His death on the cross is the sin sacrifice,” Mei explained. “The lambs and other sin sacrifices were temporary measures until that once and for all gift Jesus gave to buy forgiveness for all of us.”

Leo led the family in prayer, expressing gratitude and seeking God’s protection for the night.

“Papa, the dragon said he was there too. He turned the magician’s rods to snakes in front of Pharoah,” a little one piped up.

“Yes, Papa. Why doesn’t anyone tell us about the Dragon’s miracles,” another child asked.

Leo’s heart sank. The devil had influenced his children. “The dragon is not what he claims to be. He turned people against God. He is the father of lies. You cannot believe what he says.”

“But that’s what he says about you,” an older teen replied. “He says you are telling us lies about the past. He says all this Bible study is brainwashing us and we must deconstruct our faith. That we must break free.”

“Deconstruct? Break free of what? To do what?” Mei asked.

“Break free of rules. Do what we want. Follow our hearts,” the teen replied.

“And where does your heart lead you?” Leo quirked an eyebrow.

"To be better than everyone. To be the best," he replied.

"Best of what?" Mei asked.

"I don't know. I'll figure it out when the time comes," he replied.

"Anyway the dragon said he can make us immortal."

Mei paled. Leo took over.

"Son," he wrapped his arm the teen's shoulders. "Let me tell you about my friend Ben."



Ava

EVERY YEAR, THE GANG would spend a night in Ethan's rooftop sukkah here in Jerusalem, catching up with one another's lives.

The soft ambient glow of candles illuminated the tabernacle as Oliver strummed the guitar, singing a heavenly duet with Penelope, of God's grace and his everlasting love. Sitting on the scattered cushions, Jayden, Ethan, Emunah, Abigail and Liam joined in the chorus, their voices blending in a beautiful melody that's not of this world.

Those who have yet to see heaven could only imagine the joys awaiting the saints past the pearly gates. Ava snuggled up to Boris in wonder while Leo took Mei's hand, a soft smile on his once cynical face.

The air is heady with the aroma of roasting vegetables, baking bread and fruit pastries. Henry walks in with a platter of delicacies while Jayden opens a bottle of wine.

Leo leaned forward. "Was it just me or did the dragon approach any of you to cut a deal?"

"What deal?" Liam's brow furrowed in worry.

"I was stuck, trying to crack a problem. Mei couldn't solve it either," Leo frowned. "A voice whispered into my ear that it had the solution. I was intrigued."

The room fell silent.

"I was too frustrated to think straight. He said he'd give me the answer in return for a small favour," Leo continued. "I asked what favour?"

"I'll tell you later, he said," Leo shuddered. "The Holy Spirit prompted me. Warned me. I knew then who it was - The dragon."

"Then what did you do?" Emunah asked.

"I told him to get lost. I belong to Jesus," Leo replied. "Then I prayed to God for deliverance."

Jayden, Ava and Boris looked at one another. Emunah had sat them down together and through honest discussion, they realised that the dragon had been playing them.

"Me too," Boris raised his hand. "This is a safe place, right?" Ava patted his hand, encouraging him.

His cheeks red with embarrassment, Boris related their tale.

"I have to admit. I'm jealous. Of all you immortals," Mei confessed. She gestured at Emunah and Penelope, "You are all so beautiful and forever young. I've always been plain. Now I'm greying."

Leo took her hand, pecking her gently on her cheek, he said, "to me you are still the most beautiful woman. Even more beautiful than any immortal."

Mei laughed, pressing her forehead against his. "That's because you have weird taste."

"As do you," Leo replied.

"Get them a room," Penelope chortled as both Leo and Mei turned crimson.

"Now, the worrying thing is this," Ethan announced. "There's a new religion growing exponentially in popularity with each passing day. Dragon worship."

All eyes were on him.

“By worshipping the dragon, mortals attain strength rivalling immortals and are able to levitate to some extent. Immortals gain forbidden knowledge,” Ethan explained. “That is a huge draw to growing numbers of people who have abandoned God to follow the dragon.”

“I know of a number of kings and priests who turn to the dragon for advice,” Liam added. “He’s been around long before any of us and has accumulated much knowledge from the ancient times until today. He’s gaining influence over the nations.”



Leo, Mei & Emunah - The Last Stand

Leo

The first rays of the golden sun filtered through the gaps of the palm leaves, even as the songs of birds roused Leo from his dreams. Mei lay with her head on his chest, her soft breath rising and falling with his own. Her warmth a sweet contrast against the morning chill.

“Leo?” she murmured, half asleep.

He caressed her cheek, cherishing their tranquil intimacy, delighting in the beauty of nature around them.

“Wake up, everyone!” Jayden’s voice resounded through the cluster of sukkahs where the friends slept. “Jerusalem is under attack!”

Leo jolted awake. Running up the stairs, two steps at a time, he stood behind the railing at the edge of the roof.

Dust, soot grey in appearance, covered the entire horizon.

Eerie chants to the beating of war drums, hypnotic and chilling, faint at first, crescendoed to fever pitch as the enemies approached.

As with every battle, he could sense the chilling presence of the grim reaper, waiting to rip souls from their bodies. Hell followed behind the hooded figure.

Black specks grew into planes, tanks and soldiers. With his binoculars, he could make out the twisted faces of some of them. His heart sank as recognition hit.

“Leo?” Mei wrapped her arms around him. “You know Jesus will save us.”

“It’s not that,” he wiped cold sweat from his brow. “Ariel’s great grand kids who never came home.”

“No,” Mei paled.

“They’ve joined Satan’s rebellion.”

The armies approached, covering the entire plain. The sheer magnitude of the armies, of Gog, Magog and the nations from all four corners of the earth seemed insurmountable. Like locusts, the approaching enemy seemed innumerable. They covered the entire breadth of the earth. Strategic bombers led the charge. Leo spotted sufficient nuclear artillery to level the entire planet, aimed at Israel.

The Lord's soldiers stood ready to defend their city. Their captains looked at Jesus.

The Lord's eyes blazed with fire. Dazzling. Terrifying. He raised his hand, telling his captains and soldiers to stay put.

With bated breath, the entire city waited as the massive armies gathered to destroy them.

Jesus looked up to the heavens.

He spoke.

Fire rained from heaven, devouring the enemy.

The dragon who hid behind his armies fled, but with a word, Jesus cast the devil into the lake of fire and brimstone to join Beast and Prophet in eternal torment.



Mei

WAY BACK WHEN SHE WORKED in Beast Corp, the subatomic world fascinated Mei. Through the electron microscope, she'd study detailed images of atoms, pondering at the strong nuclear force that bound protons and neutrons together in the nucleus.

How did that force come about that holds our very atoms together?

Can that force be withdrawn. If so, what happens?

As a Christian and having studied the Bible in depth, she realised that Jesus is responsible for that strong nuclear force binding all matter together.

*For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and **by him all things consist** – Colossians 1:16-17*

As she watched armies turn to ashes, it dawned on her what she was about to witness.

All eyes were on Jesus as he withdrew his power holding every atom together.

Splitting atoms release a massive amount of energy. When all atoms in existence split...



Emunah

AWE OVERWHELMED EMUNAH when

the earth exploded, releasing the fiery molten core within it.

By now, everyone had been resurrected or translated into their immortal bodies – spiritual bodies that are immune from destruction.

Wonder intertwined with terror gripped Emunah as she witnessed all matter and space disintegrate - releasing incredible energy, burning up all of creation.

Times stops.

Eternity remains.

God in Heaven, seated on a great white throne reigns supreme. Before Him stood all her friends who were mortal during the Millennial rule and who had accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. Their names were in the book of life.

Awash with relief, she grinned from ear to ear, knowing how idiotic she probably looked. Mei, Leo, Ava, Boris, Billy, Joseph and so many friends close to her heart received eternal rewards from Jesus.

Then came the Second Resurrection. Unlike the first that was so full of joy, dread undergirded the second, meant for judgement and condemnation to the Lake of Fire for all eternity.

“Lord, Lord, I served you in the Youth Ministry,” pleaded Ben. “I saved lives as a first aider. I did much good in my lifetime.”

His name was not in the book of life because he did not accept Jesus as his Lord and Saviour while he had the chance.

The Lord opened the books that recorded all Ben’s works and judged him based on what was written, sending him to the lake of fire.

The sea gave up its dead. Stella stood before Jesus. “I served in Church. I was the chief Prophetess’ right-hand woman,” she protested when Jesus sent her to the lake of fire together with Ben, Emma, Jezebel and everyone whose name was not in the book of life.

Mei’s eyes watered when she saw her beloved great grandson Julian, who refused to believe Jesus as his Messiah, burn in the lake of fire with Ariel’s great grand kids who had rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Tearing her eyes away from the gut-wrenching scene, Emunah turned her eyes upon Jesus. She felt His heart break when He sentenced these who rejected Him to eternal damnation.



Leo

ENTHRALLED, LEO WATCHED Jesus call fire down from heaven, incinerating fearsome armies that covered the entire breadth of the earth, for as far as his eyes could see.

Leo found himself in a new, immortal body, thrumming with power, full of life.

The earth exploded; the heavens fled.

Leo stood in a void. There’s no earth nor is there heaven. All he could see was The Lord on a Great White Throne, eyes blazing with fire, his appearance terrifying to behold. He’s judging every soul on earth.

Trembling, Leo knelt before The Lord, who cocooned him with love, bestowing upon him rewards Leo never felt he deserved.

In the midst of the joy emanating from the saved and the horror from the unsaved, he sensed the chilling presence of death. The grim reaper that plagued his entire life stood in the sidelines.

Where once death was terrifying to behold, now, death was terrified beyond measure.

The Lord's eyes fell upon the hooded figure. The apparition tried to flee, but Jesus, in His absolute power held both death and hades in his hand. With careless ease, The Lord threw them both into the lake of fire, the permanent prison for Beast, Prophet, Satan, all unholy fallen angels and fallen unredeemed humanity.

Henceforth tears, death, sorrow and pain will no longer torment God's people in the new heaven and new earth He would create.



Ava - Eternity

Ava

In her now immortal body, Ava wept over the fate of her best friend Emma, over the eternal damnation of so many of her descendants. She regretted her lack of vigilance. She should have mentored them all, even though in the final century, they seemed too numerous to keep track of.

Jesus wiped the tears from her eyes. His gentle smile comforted her.

Everyone had lost someone dear to the eternal fire. Their beautiful world was gone, old though it may have been.

In the midst of the mourning, Jesus spoke. A new heaven and a new earth formed, more beautiful than the old that had passed away. There was no more sea.

“Behold, I make all things new,” The Lord said as he sat on the throne.

Around her, the crowd gasped.

Excited.

Her new vision’s vastly more powerful than the largest telescope on earth. She spotted a city from the third heaven, advancing towards Earth with velocities surpassing that of light.

Her heart leaped when she realised that’s new Jerusalem, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. That’s where the church lived. The mansions of each and every member of the true church are in that city.

Decelerating, the new city took its place on the new Earth. It had twelve foundations, each foundation made of a different precious stone without any imperfections. The city was gold so pure it was as clear as glass.

“Wow,” Ava’s jaw gaped open.

The gates to the magnificent city opened. All the nations who were saved were invited to walk in its glorious light.

Overflowing with wonder and gratitude, she stepped through the massive gates made of pearl, on the streets paved with pure gold.

The spectacular Millennial temple was the primary landmark in the Jerusalem. Ava searched for its counterpart in new Jerusalem. There was no temple for God Himself lived in the city, shining so bright there were no more shadows.

There was so much to explore beyond the beautiful city. The new earth's astounding. Now that she could fly, the heavens beckoned.

Soaked in God's love, soaring through the cotton candy clouds in exhilaration, Ava laughed.

John 3:16

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

[1] Psalms 17:8-9

[2] Revelation 13

[3] Psalms 23:4

[4] Escathology & How This World Will End by Dr Peter H L Wee

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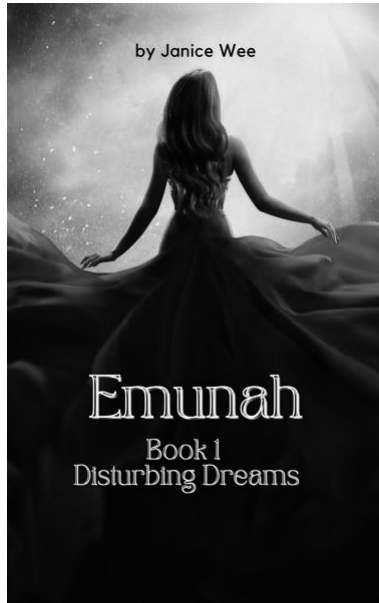
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About the Author

Janice Wee is Straits Born Chinese from Singapore.

She is a sixth generation Singaporean, the daughter of two English teachers and who spent her childhood in libraries.

Learn more about the worlds and characters in her stories in her website janicewee.com

Read more at www.janicewee.com.

