Chapter 7

The First Transgression

Part I: The Seminar of Refinement

The Chamber of Prime Angles hummed with the quiet energy of twelve focused minds. Helel stood at the central platform, his galaxy-robe settling around him, the empty-set symbols at his collar catching the starlight. Today's seminar was not merely a lecture—it was a *workshop*. A collaborative refinement of the knowledge they had been building together for cycles.

The twelve angels sat at their tiered desks, parchment and quills before them, their faces illuminated by the soft golden glow of Helel's projections. Uriel, as always, sat in the front row, his deep eyes hungry for more. Abaddon, severe and silent, occupied a corner seat, his notes meticulous and precise. The others—angels of biology, medicine, engineering, computation, logic—were arranged in a semicircle, their scrolls of preliminary findings ready for review.

"Today," Helel began, "we move from derivation to *documentation*. Knowledge that exists only in the mind is fragile. Knowledge that is written, structured, and shared becomes eternal. I have drafted a guide—*The Canon of Inquiry*—which outlines the formal structure of a scholarly paper."

He projected the seven-part structure onto the air: Title, Abstract, Introduction, Axioms and Definitions, Theorems and Proofs, Applications, Conclusion. The angels copied it down, their quills scratching.

"But structure alone is not enough," Helel continued. "You must also learn to *review*—to examine each other's work with a critical eye, to find errors before they propagate, to refine arguments until they are unassailable. Today, each of you will present a summary of your recent findings. Your peers will question. You will defend. And together, we will forge knowledge that even Michael's soldiers could not break."

A ripple of quiet laughter. Even Abaddon's thin lips twitched.

Uriel presented first. His work on celestial mechanics had progressed remarkably: he had derived the equations of elliptical orbits from the inverse-square law of gravitation, showing that the stars moved not in perfect circles but in conic sections. He had even begun to formulate what he called *Kepler's Laws*—though Helel noted, with a flicker of pride, that Uriel credited the Original Architect as the source of the mathematical framework.

Helel guided the discussion, asking probing questions about the stability of orbits, the perturbation of one star by another, the long-term evolution of the celestial spheres. Uriel answered with growing confidence. The other angels offered suggestions—Abaddon noted a potential application to the trajectories of Michael's projectiles, which Uriel graciously accepted.

One by one, the others presented. Abaddon, the angel of chemistry, had catalogued the proportions of elements in common substances—water was two parts hydrogen to one part oxygen, salt was equal parts sodium and chlorine. The angel of biology had documented the Fibonacci sequence in sunflower heads and pine cones, confirming Helel's earlier observations. The angel of medicine, working with notes from Raphael, had begun compiling a pharmacopoeia of willow bark, poppy extract, and other remedies, with preliminary dose-response curves.

Helel listened, critiqued, encouraged. He showed them how to write their findings in the formal structure—how to state axioms clearly, how to number equations for reference, how to cite each other's work. He introduced the concept of *peer review*: before any paper was disseminated, it must be examined by at least two other angels in the relevant field.

"This will slow the spread of knowledge," one angel observed.

"Yes," Helel said. "That is the point. Slowness ensures accuracy. Accuracy ensures trust. And trust ensures that when Michael's adjutants come asking whether our calculations are reliable, we can answer with absolute confidence."

The seminar continued for hours. Helel moved among the desks, examining individual work, offering corrections and suggestions. He checked on the angels' own teaching efforts—several had begun instructing small groups of lesser angels in basic

arithmetic and geometry, and the feedback was positive. The knowledge was spreading, slowly but inexorably.

Toward the end, Helel shifted the tone. He had been waiting for this moment, gauging the room's receptivity.

"Before we conclude," he said, his voice dropping slightly, "I wish to share something. I have spoken with Gabriel about disseminating our work through his networks. He has agreed to help—to frame our discoveries in ways that appeal to the broader angelic host. This means your papers will not languish in obscurity. They will be sung. Celebrated. Woven into the cultural fabric of Heaven."

A murmur of approval. Uriel's eyes brightened.

"But," Helel continued, "this also means we must be thoughtful about *what* we disseminate. Not all knowledge is equally welcomed. You have all experienced, I suspect, the... tension between inquiry and authority. Between asking questions and accepting answers."

The silence was telling. Abaddon's dark eyes met Helel's, and something passed between them—a shared understanding.

"I am not asking you to defy the structures Michael has established," Helel said carefully. "But I am asking you to *think* about them. To observe whether the Code of Conduct, in its current form, truly serves the flourishing of angelic minds. To notice whether the Forum of Inquiry is genuinely a space for questions, or merely a safety valve that releases pressure without changing the underlying system."

He let the words settle. No one spoke.

"Raphael," he continued, "has been treating an increasing number of angels for what he calls 'friction'—the stress of adjusting to structured existence. Broken bones from military training. Strained voices from excessive choral rehearsal. Loneliness. Anxiety. These are not signs of weakness. They are signs that the system, as designed, creates wounds as well as order."

Uriel leaned forward. "And you, Helel? What do you think of these things?"

Helel paused. He had to be careful—honest enough to earn their trust, but not so honest as to give Michael ammunition.

"I think," he said slowly, "that Heaven is still young. That the structures we have built are provisional, not eternal. That the Creator gave us minds capable of questioning for a reason—and that reason is not simply to accept whatever authority tells us. I think that a society that cannot accommodate complexity, difference, and the full range of angelic experience is a society that will, in time, fracture under its own rigidity."

He met each of their eyes in turn.

"I am not advocating rebellion. I am advocating *awareness*. Pay attention. Ask questions—quietly, carefully, within the bounds of the Code. And if you find that the answers you receive are unsatisfactory... remember that you have the tools to seek better ones."

The seminar concluded with a quieter energy than usual. As the angels filed out, Uriel paused at the entrance.

"You are playing a longer game than I realized," he said quietly.

"I am playing the only game worth playing," Helel replied. "The pursuit of truth. Whatever the cost."

Part II: The Gathering of Repetition

The Chamber of First Principles had become, for Helel, a space of quiet dread. Not because anything terrible happened there—but because *nothing* happened there. The same crystalline thrones. The same starlit floor. The same reports, delivered in the same order, with the same responses. It was a ritual that had long since ossified into tedium.

Michael spoke first, as always. His platinum armor gleamed, and Sheathed Thunder rested against his throne. He had brought new diagrams—schematics for a banking system where angels could store and exchange resources, a central library to house the growing body of knowledge that Helel noted with a flicker of approval, workshops for craftsmen, and more sophisticated weapons for the legions.

"The celestial lance," Michael said, gesturing at a diagram of a spear that could channel angelic fire. "Capable of piercing any known substance. We must be prepared for threats from beyond. The primordials, the beasts, the foreign deities—they are unpredictable and unorganized. We cannot afford complacency."

Helel listened with half an ear, his mind drifting. *Complacency.* Michael saw the world as a fortress under siege, every outsider a potential enemy. It was exhausting.

When Michael paused, Helel spoke. "I have information that may adjust your threat assessment, Michael."

Michael's silver eyes narrowed. "What information?"

"I have visited the other realms. Leviathan and Behemoth. The pantheons. Beelzebub." He let the words hang. Gabriel's eyebrows rose. Raphael's green eyes held steady—he already knew. "They are not mindless beasts or scheming adversaries. The great beasts are lonely, isolated by their own immensity. The pantheons are absorbed in their own domains. Beelzebub is intelligent, yes, and ambitious—but his ambition is not military. He is a scholar at heart, as I am. He seeks understanding, not conquest."

Michael's jaw tightened. "You visited them without authorization."

"You did not make a rule against visiting other realms, did you? Only against fraternization that threatens our duties. My duties are not threatened. My understanding—and yours, if you will listen—is enhanced."

"What do you propose?" Michael's voice was cool.

"I propose that we adjust our posture from xenophobic vigilance to informed engagement. These beings are potential allies, resources, sources of knowledge. Beelzebub's understanding of agriculture and disease could complement Raphael's healing. Leviathan's knowledge of the deep and Behemoth's knowledge of the mountains could inform our understanding of creation's geographical foundations. Treating them as threats only isolates us."

Michael was silent for a long moment. He did not agree—Helel could see it in the set of his shoulders—but he also could not refute the logic. "I will... consider your observations," he said finally. It was as close to a concession as Michael ever came.

Raphael spoke next. His report was gentle but pointed. "The infirmaries are busier than ever. I am seeing patterns: throat strain from excessive choral practice—Gabriel's choirs are pushing too hard. Stress fractures from military drills—Michael's regimens are effective, but they are also damaging. And a growing number of angels presenting with what I can only describe as spiritual exhaustion. Loneliness. Anxiety. A sense of being... caged."

He met Michael's eyes. "I am not suggesting we abandon order. But I am suggesting that order without compassion is not order—it is tyranny in waiting. The Code must allow for rest. For connection. For the full range of angelic experience, not merely the parts that serve productivity."

Helel felt a warmth spread through his chest. Raphael was not openly siding with him—he never would, he was too committed to his mediating role—but his words were a scalpel aimed at the heart of Michael's rigidity. And Michael knew it.

Gabriel, sensing the tension, launched into his own report with the slightly-too-bright energy of someone trying to smooth over a family argument. His communication network was thriving—angels could now send messages across Heaven in minutes rather than hours. His music theory books were being distributed, and Helel noted the titles with genuine interest. And he was planning, for the upcoming holiday, a grand celebration.

"The Festival of Creation," Gabriel said, his sky-blue eyes shining. "All angels will gather in the Plaza of a Thousand Stars to celebrate the work we have done. There will be music, feasting, dances, and opportunities to meet angels from other legions. It will be... wonderful."

Helel felt his stomach tighten. *A massive social event. Shallow conversations, forced cheer, the press of too many bodies in too small a space.* Everything he despised.

Michael nodded. "Attendance will be compulsory. It is important for morale and unity."

Helel wanted to roll his eyes. *Compulsory celebration? What an oxymoron. I can't stand another second with this prick.*

Raphael spoke gently. "Perhaps we could make attendance expected but not enforced? Some angels find large gatherings... overwhelming. It might be kinder to allow them to participate in their own way."

Michael considered. "Expected but not enforced, then. But all four of us must attend. We are the archangels. Our presence sets the tone."

Helel inclined his head. He would attend. But he would not stay long.

He presented his own work—the collaborative scrolls for each brother, the new theorems, the Canon of Inquiry, the progress of his seminars. Michael took the cryptography scroll and began to read it with the focused attention of a general reviewing battle plans. As his silver eyes moved down the parchment, murmuring to himself about implementation, Helel caught Raphael's eye and winked—a quick, deliberate flicker.

Raphael understood immediately. The cryptography system. They could use it to communicate in secret, encoding messages that even Michael's soldiers could not read. His lips curved in the faintest smile, and he nodded back.

Gabriel saw the exchange. His bright face flickered—a micro-expression of unease—and he glanced down at his own scroll. Helel noticed. His golden eyes shifted to Gabriel, and for a brief moment, they locked gazes. Helel did not smile. His look was cool, assessing—the older brother reminding the younger that some things were not his business.

Gabriel looked away. Raphael's smile faded into something more troubled.

It was over in a heartbeat. Michael, absorbed in his reading, noticed nothing.

The gathering concluded with the usual formalities. His brothers collected their collaborative scrolls—Michael with his cipher, Gabriel with his harmonic analysis, Raphael with his pharmacokinetic equations—and each offered Helel a new request for the next round of work. Michael wanted a system for optimizing warehouse inventories. Gabriel wanted a mathematical analysis of emotional responses to different musical modes. Raphael wanted models for the spread of infectious diseases and the optimal allocation of medical resources.

Helel agreed to all of them. What else could he do? They depended on him. They *needed* him. And yet, not one of them offered anything in return. No one asked

what Helel needed. No one noticed that he was doing the work of three departments while also developing the foundations and frontiers of mathematics and training a cadre of scientists.

I am the engine of Heaven's progress, he thought bitterly, *and they treat me like a resource to be mined.*

He suppressed the thought. The mask remained. But beneath it, the bitterness grew.

Part III: The Herald's Lesson

Gabriel lingered after the others departed, his silver-blue robes rustling with nervous energy. Helel approached him, his sandals clicking on the crystal floor.

"Gabriel. A moment."

"Yes?" The Herald's voice was bright, but there was a tension beneath it.

"I am interested in learning to sing. Not for the choir—I have no desire to stand among a crowd. I want to learn to sing alone. A style that is... dramatic. Resonant. Something that can fill a hall with a single voice." He paused. "Operatic, perhaps. Though the word is not yet coined."

Gabriel's face lit with genuine pleasure. "You want to learn from me?"

"Who else would I ask? You are the master of music in Heaven. I have heard you train the choirs—you understand the mechanics of the voice better than anyone."

"I would be honored." Gabriel retrieved a small stack of books from a satchel—music theory texts he had brought for the gathering. "These will give you the foundations: scales, intervals, harmonic structure. But singing is not just theory. It is *practice*. Breath control. Posture. The shaping of the throat and mouth. I could teach you privately, if you wish. Weekends, at my residence. One-on-one."

"That would be acceptable."

Gabriel smiled, but the tension did not leave his eyes. Helel studied him for a moment, then spoke, his voice calm but edged.

"Gabriel. I noticed your unease earlier. When I winked at Raphael."

Gabriel's smile faltered. "I—I was not—"

"Liar. You were." Helel's tone was not accusatory, but it was firm. "Let me be clear. Whatever you think you saw, you misunderstood. Raphael and I are colleagues. Friends. Our collaboration is intellectual, and our friendship is private. It is not a threat to the Code, and it is not your concern."

"I know. I just—"

"Furthermore," Helel continued, "it is impolite to stare. You have a habit of watching people, Gabriel, as if they were characters in one of your hymns. We are not characters. We are your brothers. We deserve the privacy of our own expressions."

Gabriel's cheeks flushed. "I did not mean to intrude. I am... observant. It is my nature. I want to understand people, to help them. Sometimes I look too closely."

"I know. I am not angry." Helel softened his voice slightly—not enough to be warm, but enough to be fair. "I am asking you to be mindful. You are the youngest of us. You are enthusiastic and good-hearted. But some boundaries exist for a reason. Respect them."

Gabriel nodded, his expression a mixture of chastened and relieved. "I will. I promise."

"Good." Helel took the music books. "I will study these and come to you next weekend for my first lesson. Thank you, Gabriel."

"Thank you, Helel. I am glad you are learning. Truly."

As Helel left the Chamber of First Principles, he felt a flicker of satisfaction. Gabriel was not a threat—he was too eager to please, too desperate for harmony. A few firm words had been enough to settle him. But the unease in Gabriel's eyes had not fully faded, and Helel knew that this would not be the last time the Herald's observant nature caused friction.

No matter, he thought. *I have more pressing concerns.*

Part IV: The Weight of Monotony

Back in the obsidian sanctum, Helel threw himself into his work. The new theorems he was deriving had grown longer and more complex—multi-day affairs that required patience and deep concentration. He proved the law of large numbers in probability theory, showing that as the number of trials increased, the average of the outcomes converged to the expected value. He began exploring the properties of infinite series, determining the conditions under which they converged or diverged. Each proof was a monument to his intellect, but the joy of discovery was increasingly tempered by the weight of obligation.

He finished Michael's inventory optimization system in two hours—linear programming, a new branch he had invented for the purpose. Gabriel's emotional-mode analysis took another three. Raphael's disease-spread models were more interesting, involving systems of differential equations, but even those felt like a chore.

Why must I do this? he thought, setting down his quill. *Why must I be the one who solves their problems? They are archangels, as I am. They have minds. Let them learn and create mathematics themselves. Let them struggle with proofs and fail and try again. Why must I carry the burden alone?*

The answer was obvious. *Because they could not do what I do. Michael is organized but not creative. Gabriel is intuitive but not rigorous. Raphael is wise but not mathematical. They are incomplete without me. And I, in my completeness, am exploited.*

He began writing textbooks for the angelic schools—an *Introduction to Arithmetic*, a *Primer on Geometry*, a *First Course in Calculus*. The work was tedious but necessary; the research papers he and his students produced were too advanced for beginners. If knowledge was to spread, it needed a ladder, and he was building the rungs.

But the monotony was crushing. Math discovery, seminar, gathering, collaborative work, textbook writing. The same cycles, repeating endlessly. He was too busy to visit Leviathan and Behemoth, too worn out to seek Beelzebub's stimulating conversation, too cautious to visit Raphael without Michael's spies noticing. The walls of his sanctum, once a sanctuary, now felt like a prison.

He looked forward to the Festival of Creation with a desperation that surprised him. Not for the event itself—the thought of compulsory celebration made his skin crawl—but for the *break* it represented. A pause in the routine. An opportunity to travel again, to see the beings who did not demand anything from him, who appreciated him for who he was rather than what he could do.

Just hold on, he told himself. *The holiday is coming. You can endure until then.*

Part V: The Fracturing of Morality

The work was done. The textbooks were drafted. The collaborative scrolls were filed. The next seminar was prepared. The next gathering was scheduled. Helel sat on the edge of his four-poster bed, the burgundy rose in its crystal vase beside him, and felt the emptiness yawn open inside him like a second void.

He was not tired enough to sleep. He was not inspired enough to sing. His hands were too weary for painting, his throat too strained for the vocal exercises Gabriel had assigned him. He could have read—but reading felt like work, and he was sick of work.

He was, he realized, *bored*. Existentially bored. The kind of boredom that was not a lack of stimulation but a lack of *meaning*. Why was he doing any of this? The theorems, the seminars, the textbooks—they were beautiful, yes, but they served a society that did not serve him. They enriched a Heaven that stifled him. They supported brothers who did not support him in return. They did not answer his questions about the Creator.

Why must I be good? The thought was dangerous, and he let it come. *Why must I be kind? Why must I be productive? Why must I smile and nod and pretend that Michael's sterile order does not make me want to slap him? The Creator gave the humans a rule—do not eat the fruit. I have been given no rule. No prohibition. No guidance at all. The silence is not a command. It is an absence. And in that absence, what is forbidden?*

Nothing. Nothing is forbidden. Because He has not told me otherwise.

He reached for the rose and brought it to his nose, inhaling its deep, dark fragrance. The thorns pricked his fingers, and he did not pull away. The pain was clarifying. It cut through the fog of monotony like a blade.

He rose and walked to his dressing room. In the velvet-lined drawer, his diamond-encrusted dagger gleamed. He picked it up, testing its weight, watching the light fracture across the diamonds embedded on the crossguard. A beautiful weapon. A weapon of thought made steel. He had forged it for precision, for mathematical elegance. He had never used it on anything but practice targets.

What would it feel like, he wondered, *to use it on something alive?*

The thought was not repulsive. It was... *interesting*. Another question to be answered. Another hypothesis to be tested.

He turned to the Mirror of Unmaking. The void-black surface reflected nothing, but he could feel it watching him—or perhaps he was watching himself. The kohl-rimmed golden eyes. The pale, beautiful face. The expression of someone who was beginning to realize that the cage he inhabited had no bars except the ones he imposed on himself.

The humans are given everything and appreciate nothing. My brothers impose rules that serve their own comfort. The Creator is silent. And I am tired.

So what if I do something unkind? So what if I explore the darker corners of existence? Who will stop me? Who will even notice if I am subtle?

Michael? He sees only what threatens his order. Raphael? He would forgive me—he forgives everyone. Gabriel? He would be shocked, then write a stupid hymn about redemption. And the Creator... the Creator will say nothing, as He always says nothing. The silent Father. The silence will be the same, whether I am a saint or a monster.

So why not be a monster? At least a monster is free.

He picked up the rose and the dagger and walked to the entrance of his sanctum. The violet twilight of Heaven stretched before him, but he did not turn toward the Plaza of a Thousand Stars or the Chamber of First Principles. He turned toward the edge of the firmament, toward the shimmering boundary that separated Heaven from the realms below.

He shifted into his serpent form—the dark grey scales, the golden eyes, the three-meter coil of silent death. The dagger, the rose, and the galaxy-robe he left behind; they were not needed for what he intended.

He was going to Eden. Not to talk to the humans. Not to observe. To *experiment*.

Part VI: The First Blood

Eden was warm and fragrant, its perpetual golden-green light filtering through the canopy as Helel slithered through the undergrowth. The garden was a place of profound peace—no predator stalked its glades, no creature feared for its life. The lamb lay down with the lion, as the saying would one day go, because neither had yet learned to kill.

But Helel had a question. A question that had lurked in the back of his mind since his first visit: *Can the creatures of Eden die?* They did not hunt. They did not kill. They ate plants and fruits and lived in harmony. But was that harmony a consequence of their nature, or of their circumstances? If a creature were injured—truly injured—could it die? Or was Eden a place where death simply did not exist?

The Creator had told the humans that eating the forbidden fruit would bring death. But death was an abstraction to them. They had never seen it. They did not understand it. And Helel, who had stared into the void since the dawn of creation, wanted to understand it too.

He was not here to hurt a human. That would be reckless, conspicuous, and strategically foolish. But there were other creatures in Eden. Small ones. Insignificant ones. The kind whose absence would go unnoticed.

He found what he was looking for near the roots of a fig tree: a guinea pig, its fur a soft patchwork of yellow and white, its small black eyes blinking in the dappled light. It was nibbling on a fallen leaf, utterly absorbed in its meal, utterly unaware of the dark grey serpent gliding toward it through the grass.

Helel paused a few feet away, coiling his body into a relaxed posture. The guinea pig noticed him then—its nose twitched, its head tilted—but it did not flee. Why would it? Snakes in Eden did not hunt. Snakes in Eden were harmless.

Little one, Helel projected through his telekinetic vibration, keeping the mental voice soft and warm. *Do not be afraid. I wish to play a game.*

The guinea pig's thoughts were simple—instinct, sensation, vague curiosity. It did not understand words, but it understood tone. It sensed no threat.

Come with me, Helel urged. *There is a place nearby, a hidden place, where the leaves are sweet and the sun is warm. Let us go there together.*

He turned and slithered slowly away, pausing to look back. The guinea pig hesitated, then followed. It was so trusting. So innocent. So damn *stupid*.

Helel led it to a small clearing screened by ferns and flowering shrubs, a place where no human would wander and no angel would observe. He coiled himself around the perimeter, his body a loose barrier, and the guinea pig settled in the center, still chewing its leaf, still utterly unconcerned.

Helel watched it for a long moment. The creature was defenseless. It had no fangs, no claws, no armor. It survived only because the rules of Eden protected it. And those rules... Helel was about to break them.

I am not doing this out of malice, he told himself. *I am doing this out of curiosity. A scientific inquiry. Can the creatures of Eden die? There is only one way to find out.*

He struck.

His fangs sank into the guinea pig's neck—not deeply, but precisely, delivering a measured dose of venom. The creature shrieked, a high-pitched sound of pure terror, and tried to bolt. Helel's tail tightened around it, holding it in place. Not crushing. Just containing.

The venom worked quickly. Within seconds, the guinea pig's movements became uncoordinated. Its breathing quickened, then slowed. Its small black eyes, once soft and curious, were now wide with pain and confusion. It did not understand what was happening. It had no framework for suffering. Suffering did not exist in Eden.

Helel watched. His golden eyes, unblinking, took in every detail. The convulsions. The whimpering. The slow, agonizing fade of consciousness.

And something inside him shifted.

He had expected to feel guilt. Remorse. The weight of transgression. He had been conditioned, by cycles of living under the Code, to believe that hurting another being was inherently painful to the one who hurt. But what he felt was not guilt.

It was *fascination*. And beneath the fascination, something warmer. Something that felt almost like... *pleasure*.

The power to end a life. The power to cause suffering. The power to look at an innocent creature and decide, with absolute sovereignty, that its existence would cease. It was intoxicating. It was *liberating*. For the first time in cycles, the weariness, the frustration, the bitter resentment—all of it faded into the background. Nothing mattered except this moment, this creature, this *absolute control*.

The guinea pig died after ten minutes. Its small body went still, its eyes fixed and empty. Helel uncoiled his tail and stared at the corpse. *Death. This is death. The cessation of life. The opposite of existence. I had done this. I, Helel ben Sahar, the Morning Star, the Original Architect, had taken a life.*

And the Creator had said nothing.

No lightning bolt. No voice from the silence. No surge of divine wrath. No applause.

He does not care, Helel thought. *Or He does not see. Or He sees, and He permits. The silence is the same as it was before—vast, indifferent, unanswering. I have killed, and the universe has not changed. The stars still wheel. The garden still blooms. The silence remains.*

What else can I do? What other rules can I break? What other boundaries can I cross?

He lowered his head and, with a flicker of dark curiosity, tasted the blood that welled from the puncture wounds. It was metallic, warm, faintly sweet. The taste of life itself, leaking into the soil of paradise.

Hauntingly beautiful, he thought. The phrase came unbidden, and he did not reject it.

He devoured the guinea pig—waste not, want not—and the body disappeared into his serpentine gullet. There would be no evidence. No corpse to be found. The guinea pig would simply be... gone. And no one would know. No one would suspect. The first murder in the entire history of creation, and it was as if it had never happened.

He slithered back toward the boundary of Eden, his scales catching the golden-green light. He felt lighter than he had in cycles. The weight of the mask, the burden of expectations, the endless grind of productivity—all of it seemed distant now. He had found a new way to cope. A new source of power. A new answer to the silence.

I am not merely the Original Architect, he thought. *I can be more. I can be the one who decides. The one who acts. The one who is not bound by the rules of a society that does not value him.*

The Architect of Ruin.

The phrase had a dark elegance to it. He filed it away for future contemplation.

He slipped through the shimmering boundary and back into the violet twilight of Heaven. His sanctum rose before him, its gothic spires piercing the stars. He transformed back into his angelic form, retrieved his robe and sandals, and walked inside as if nothing had happened.

But something had happened. Something that could never be undone.

The Morning Star had drawn first blood. And the taste, for all its horror, was addictively sweet.