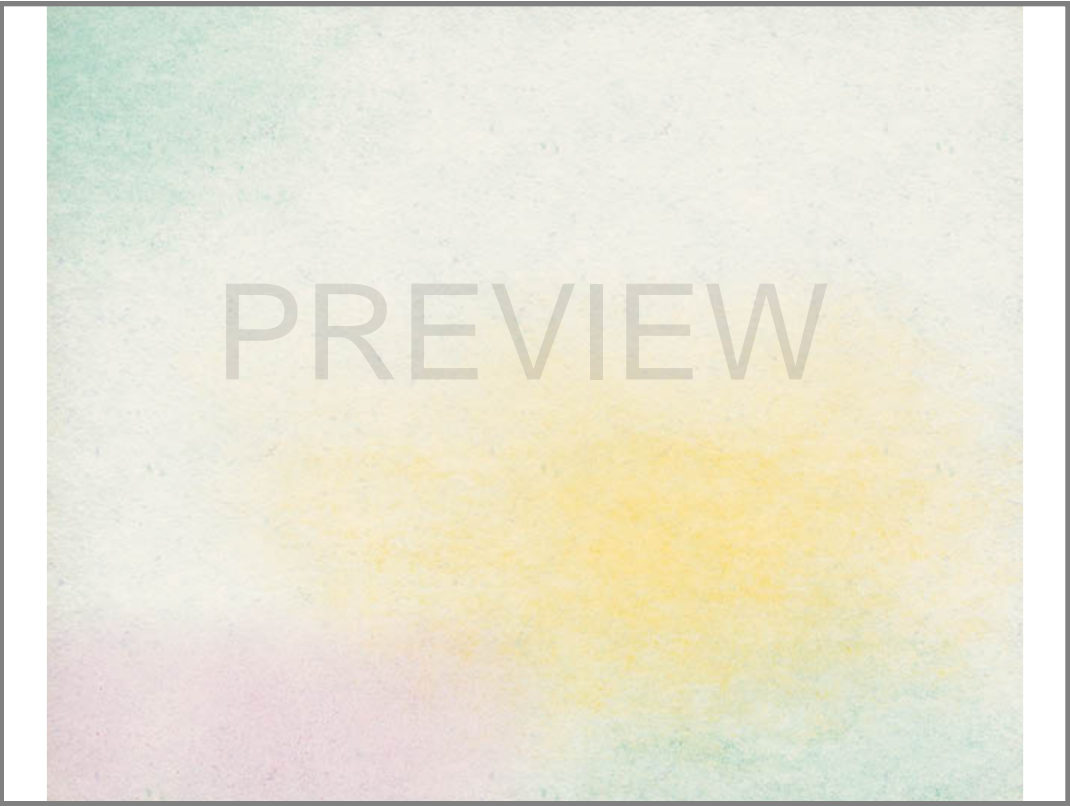


Front cover - © 1999-2023 Shutterfly, Inc. All rights reserved.



DESERT EYE - By Sarah Katz
Volume II
Digital Artwork - Jacci Cenci-McGrody



Maya researches Canaanite
history in an older history book
and finds an image with
information on Anat.

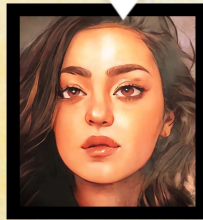
Maya and Rym meet
outside Maya's office
headquarters.

I promise, she just started
showing up on Ayin, and I have no
idea what those things in the desert
are. But that creature claimed to
oversee love and war.



It must have something to do
with the Judah cult that worships Anat.
They're based on an ancient
Israelite mysticism from Jerusalem which
believes in resurrecting
the dead for power.

I don't know what we saw last
night, but I filed it in my report as
a rogue dog that had succumbed
to illness. Who were you talking
to on the phone?



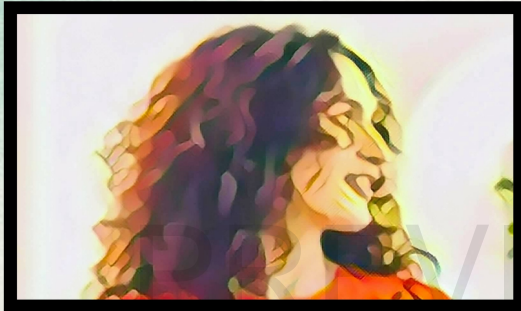
So, there could be a
connection?

I've heard of Anat. A farmer in Gaza recently unearthed a figurine of her. They think she inspired the Greek goddess Athena. But she's long been forgotten.



Well, it seems the cult is back.





Rym, listen to me. This is beyond just us now. The conflict is only fueling something much bigger, and we'll have to work together to get to the bottom of this.

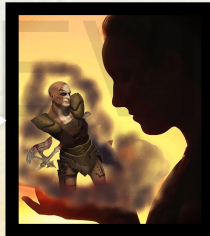
You can count me out!



Rym departs.

That evening, Maya sits in the backyard of her small apartment. She hesitantly opens the Ayin app, and Anat appears.

Good evening, Maya.



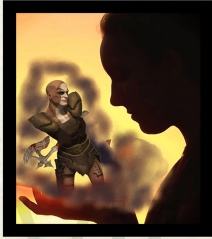
I never told you my name.



I've observed you ever since you used that invention to discover me.

I know who
you are, Anat.
You've slept
for millennia.

Why return now?



This is
insane!

I've observed this region
since before humans discovered speech
and every moment thereafter.

Ever since becoming trapped here,
we present as the ancients
viewed us and assumed the responsibility
of overseeing life's energy on this plane.

My task involves preventing you from
annihilating each other and the
environment in the process. This dispute
between you and Rym's people has
awakened an unprecedented rage in the
devourers.





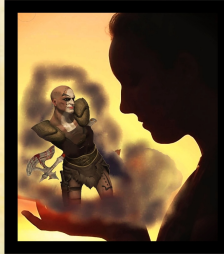
It was insanity for your people to drive us away like a blade to the back and fall out of balance from this primitive skirmish over belief.

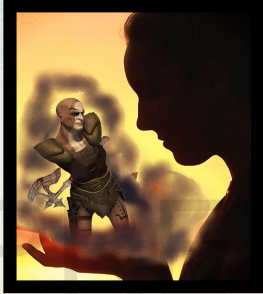


Anat, this conflict is over land just as much as faith.

And now, the traitorous Cult of Judah threatens even more lives, all in the name of a single deity you can't even see!

I can help you, Maya. You are a descendant of those who relied on me just as much as those who chose to forget.

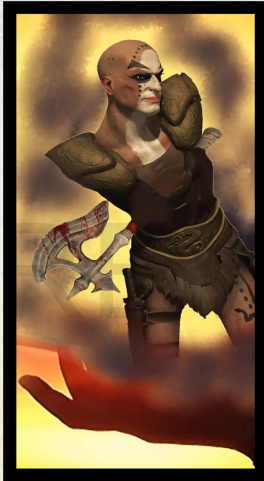




My Father
would just love
this excuse to
prove I've gone
crazy.



My family also blames me for
failing in my duties of
balancing love and war,
allowing, as they viewed it,
your people's conquest of
those who loved us. I was one
of the last to fade once the
Roman Judean historian
Flavius Josephus threatened
all remaining believers.



Maya, you don't
have to listen to
those who don't
appreciate you.

Anat, then, the myths are true.
There are others like you.

Have you
grown bored of
me already?

Maya closes the Ayin app
in flustered frustration.

The next night, Maya visits her Father.



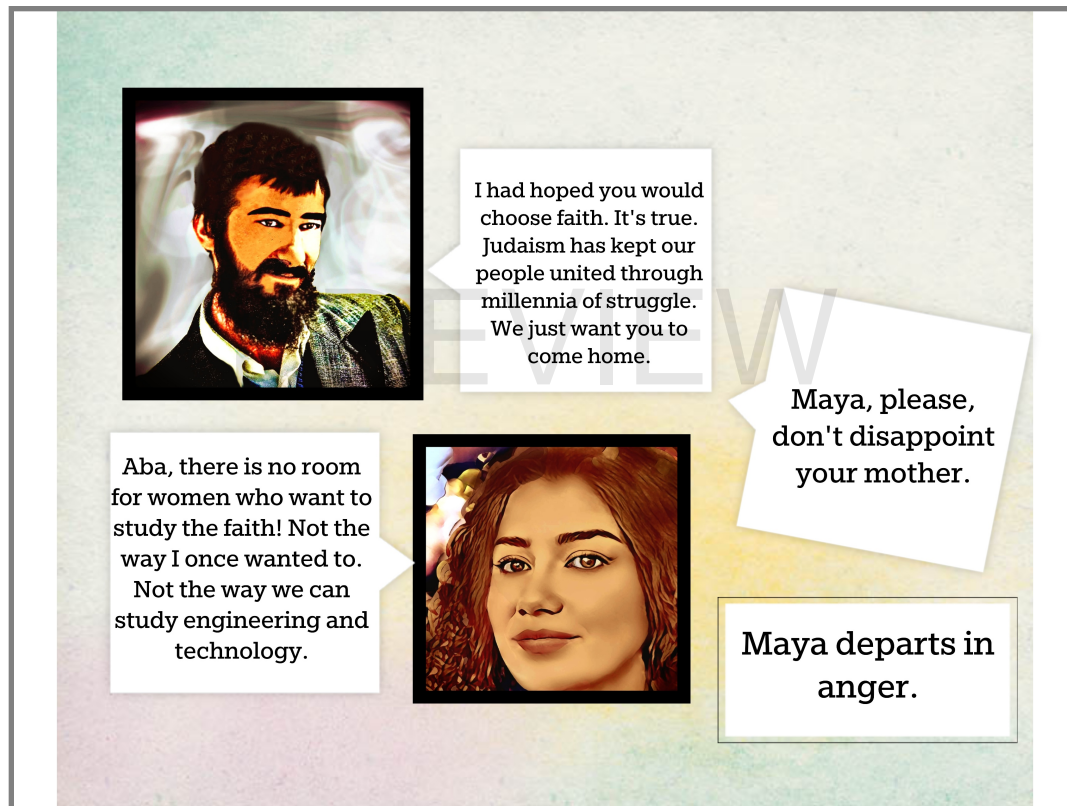
I am glad to see you are safe, Maya. We wondered when you might come for a visit.



I wasn't sure you wanted to see me.

Your sister would be here, but with the second baby on the way, she's tired these days.

The perfect family life?

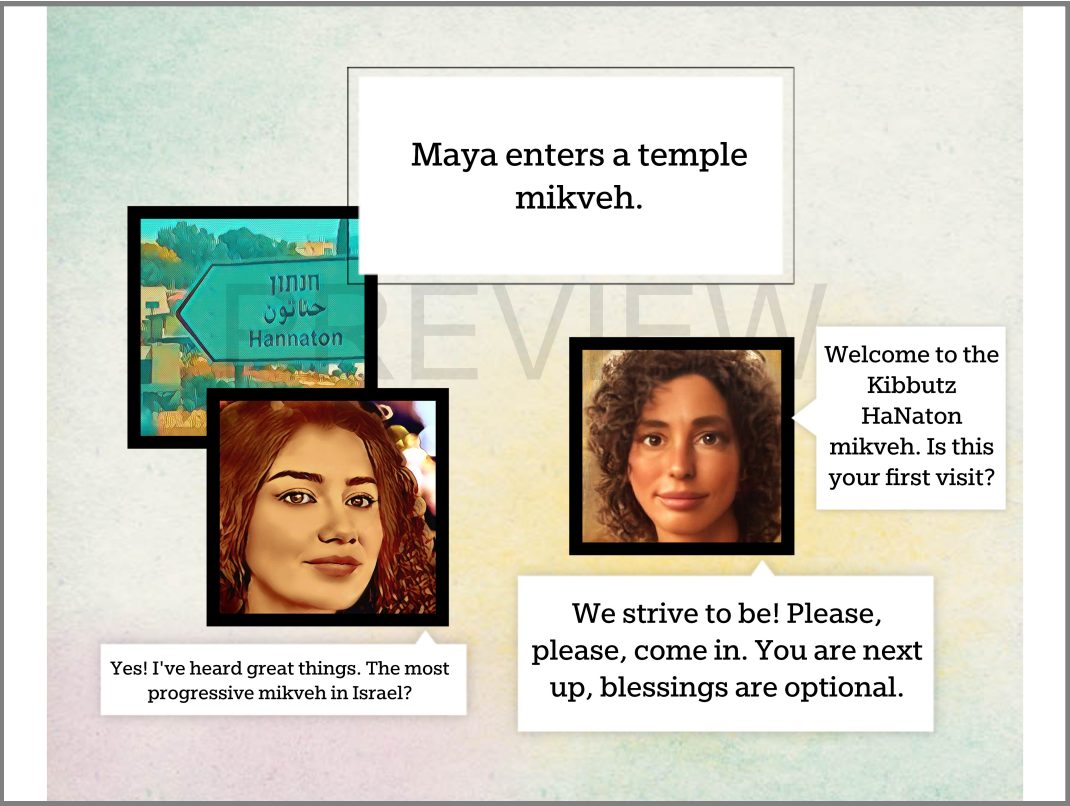


Upon exiting her Father's home in angry tears, Maya thinks she sees an outline of Anat standing on the walkway.



I don't have to walk the same path as you to care about our people's history.



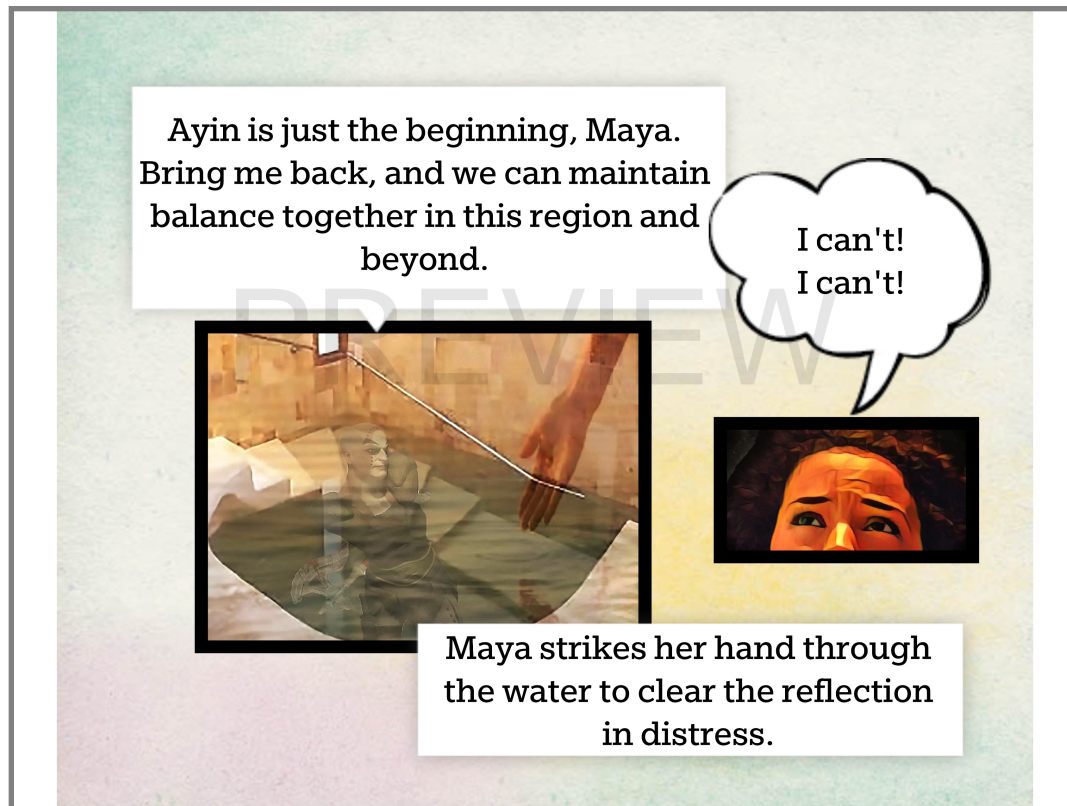


Maya sits in silence in the mikveh pool.

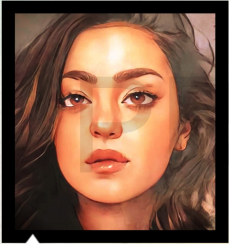
You would be having a fit right now, Mom.




Maya startles at what appears to be Anat's reflection in the water before her.



Rym visits her brother Khalid.

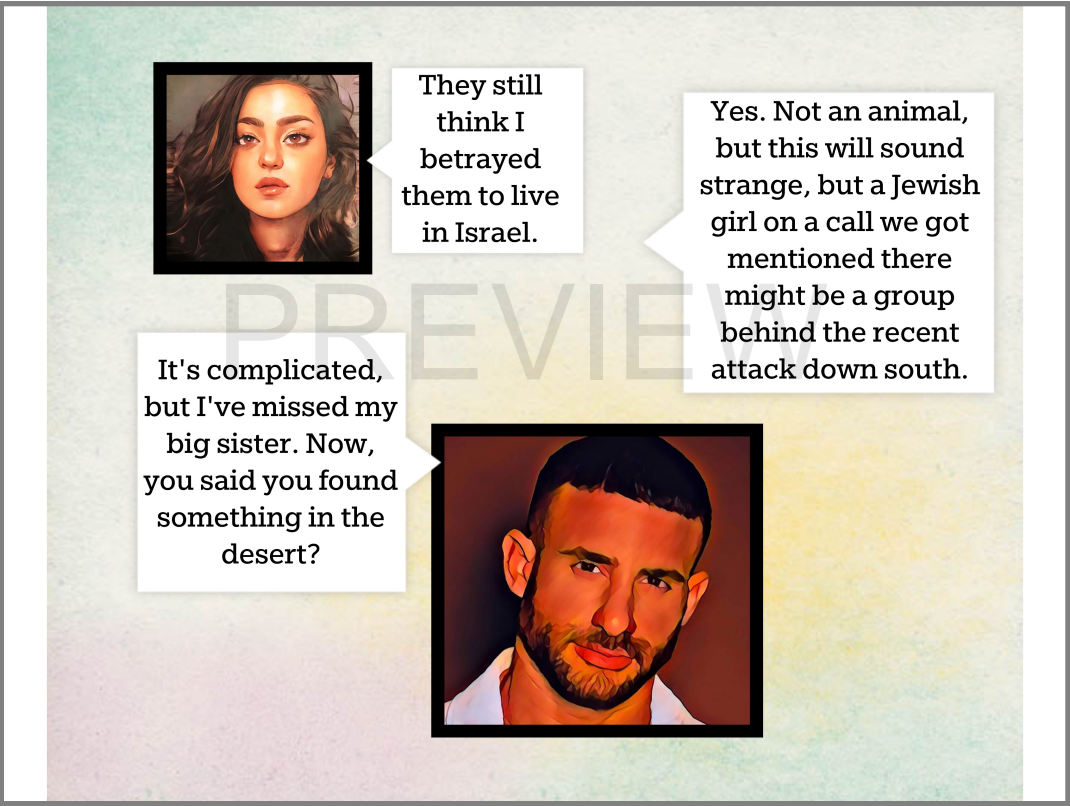


Traffic was light today. Mom and Dad are out late.

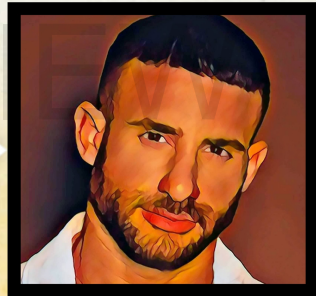


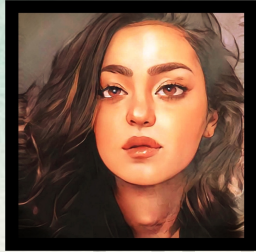
Rym! You made it here early.

They didn't feel up to meeting today. Sorry, I'm late, I had a football match at Zeytim park.



Rym, you fought in the Israeli
army. Isn't that enough?
Thanks to Israeli laws,
Grandma needs to pass
checkpoints just to visit us
from the West Bank, and now
you're letting some Jewish
woman get you wrapped up in
all her nonsense.





Khalid, a threat to one of us too often ends up hurting many of us. You know this.

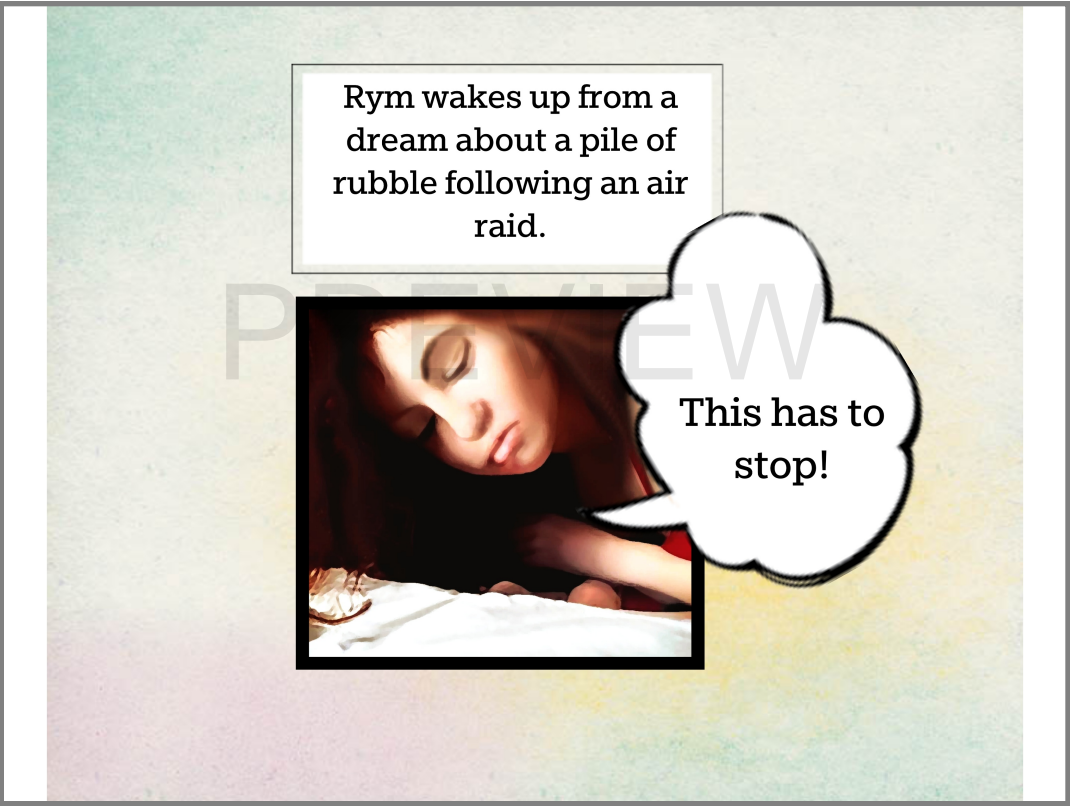


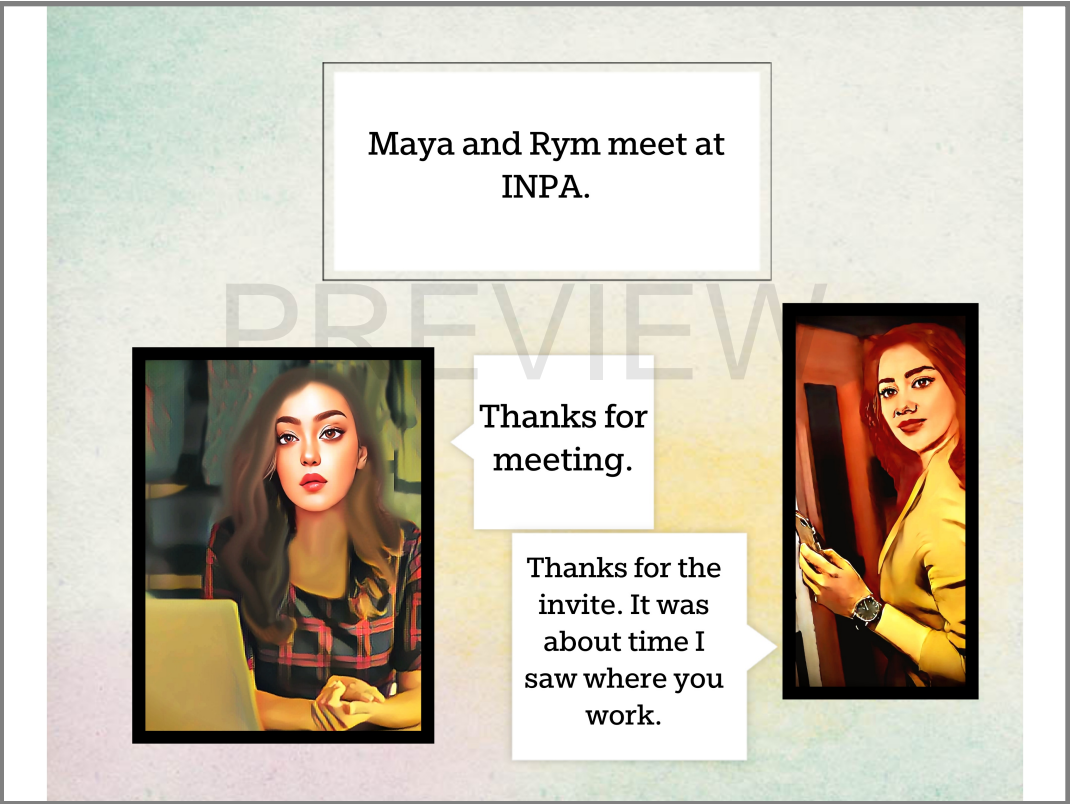
And we're just supposed to believe this woman you met this past week?

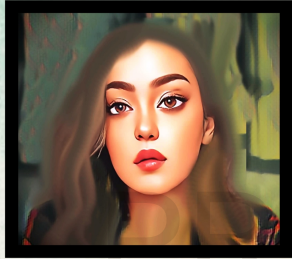
Please, Khalid, if you would listen for just one second-

I think you should leave, Rym. Before our parents get back.

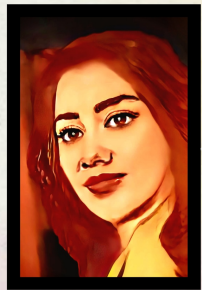
Rym leaves infuriated.





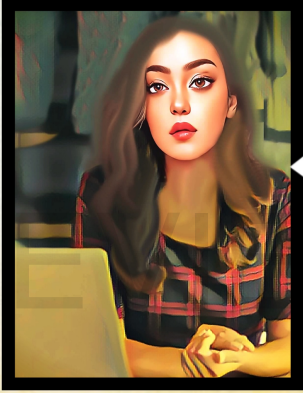
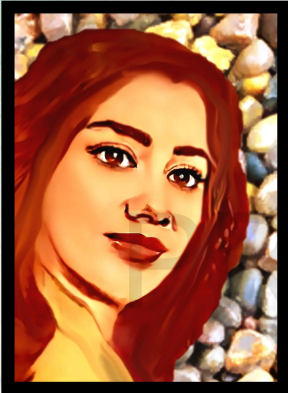


Listen, if I'm honest, I do think something strange is going on.



Then, you don't think this is a trick I'm playing?

No. Army service was hard, but the INPA has been decent since I finished. I've never heard of the government engineering any bioweapons, not even after specializing in the biotech division.

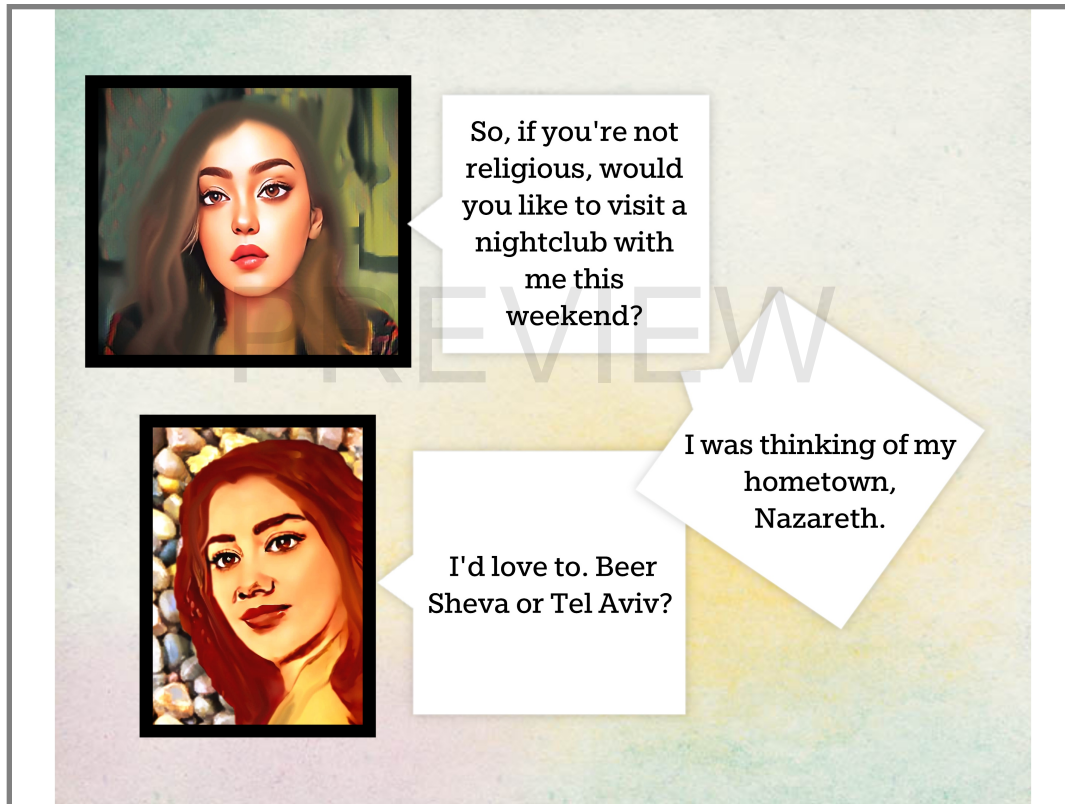


It was the option for me once I finished service. The time here can hopefully help me settle family here from Palestine in the future. But protecting nature is honest work.

Did you choose the INPA?

That's how I feel about tech. I left my orthodox community for the army, and they never understood my choices.

My family feels the same.



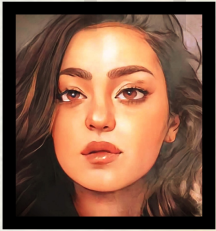
Maya and Rym meet at
the nightclub in
Nazareth.

Looks like some
bars I've checked
out in Tel Aviv.

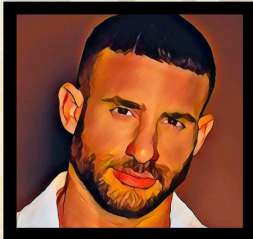


Maya bumps into Khalid,
who is speaking agitatedly
with another man and
woman.

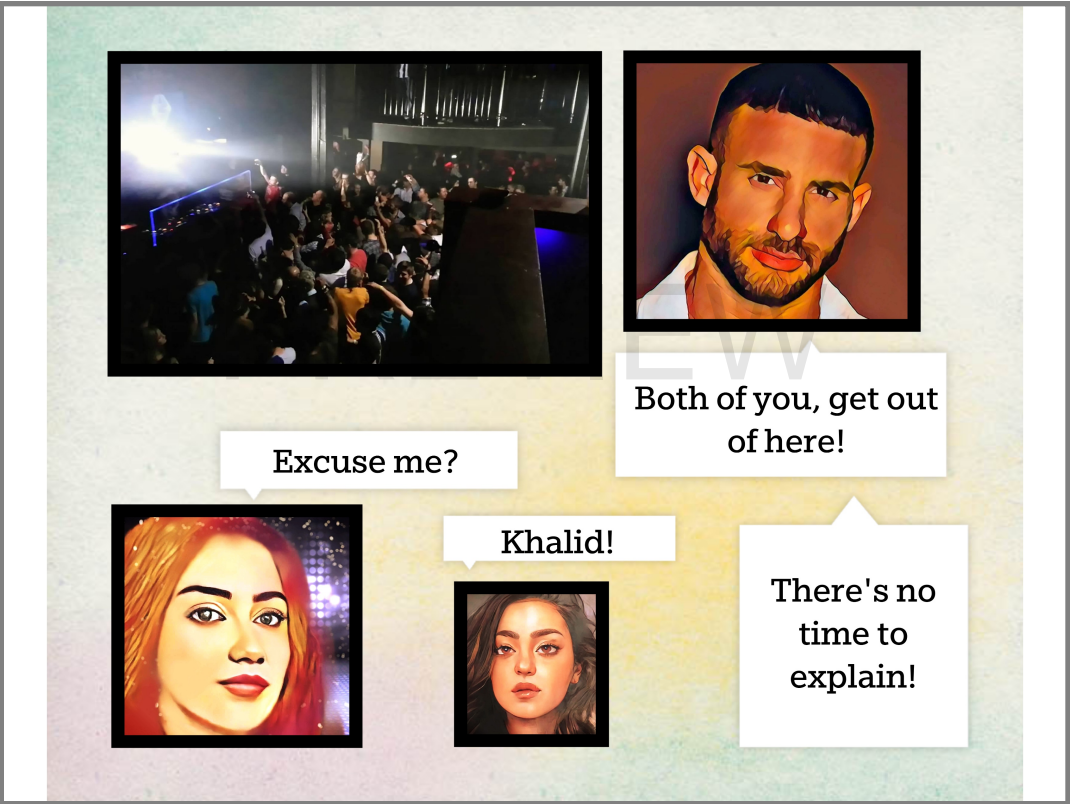
Khalid?




Just showing my
friend around-




Rym! What
are you doing
here?




A woman shouts to a man across the corridor and brandishes a pistol, aiming for Rym, whom Maya shoves out of the way, both diving to the floor. Two police enter and arrest the woman.



She was speaking Hebrew.



And he was speaking Arabic.



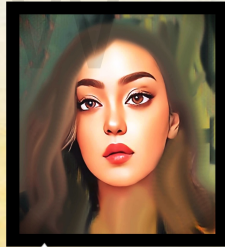
We need to get away from here.

Maya and Rym meet again at
Maya's office in the evening.



Whatever is going
on, the conflict
seems to be causing
it since I activated
Ayin.


Thank you again for
meeting me. Believe
me, I realize how
crazy this is, but this is
not the army's doing.
It's something much
bigger.



Between what we've seen in
the desert and the attack
attempt at the club I don't
know what to think anymore.

The women begin wandering away from the office.

Then, this is because of your invention. But why would cultists want tech?



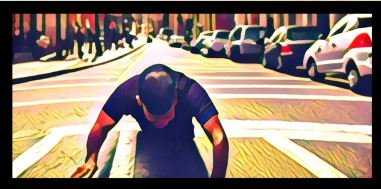
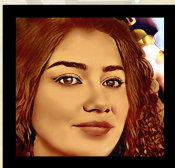
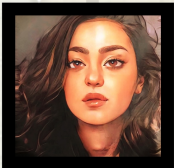
There can be no moving forward without more freedom of movement for people like my family-

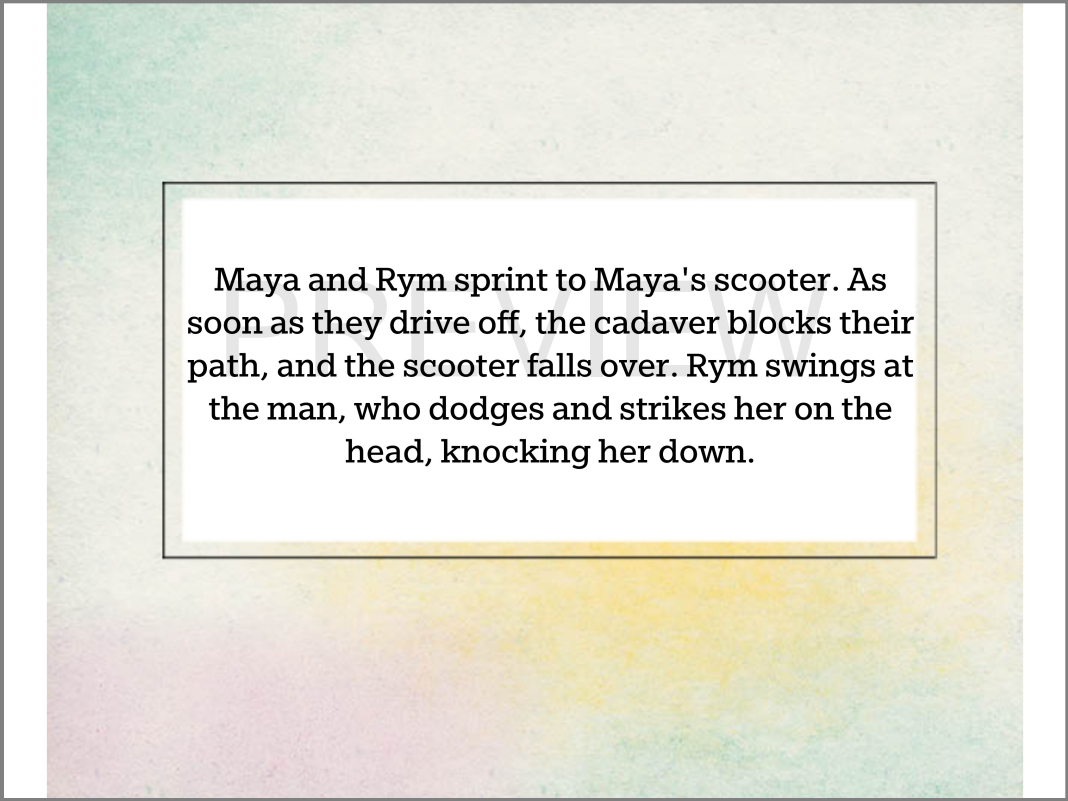
It might not be about the tech, just martyrdom. We are all the descendants of refugees and all victims of circumstance. Let's focus on the future instead of the past and do all we can to move forward, or they get the violence they want.

Both women stop short at the
sound of a low, droning croak.
They turn to see a half-
decayed man loping toward
them.

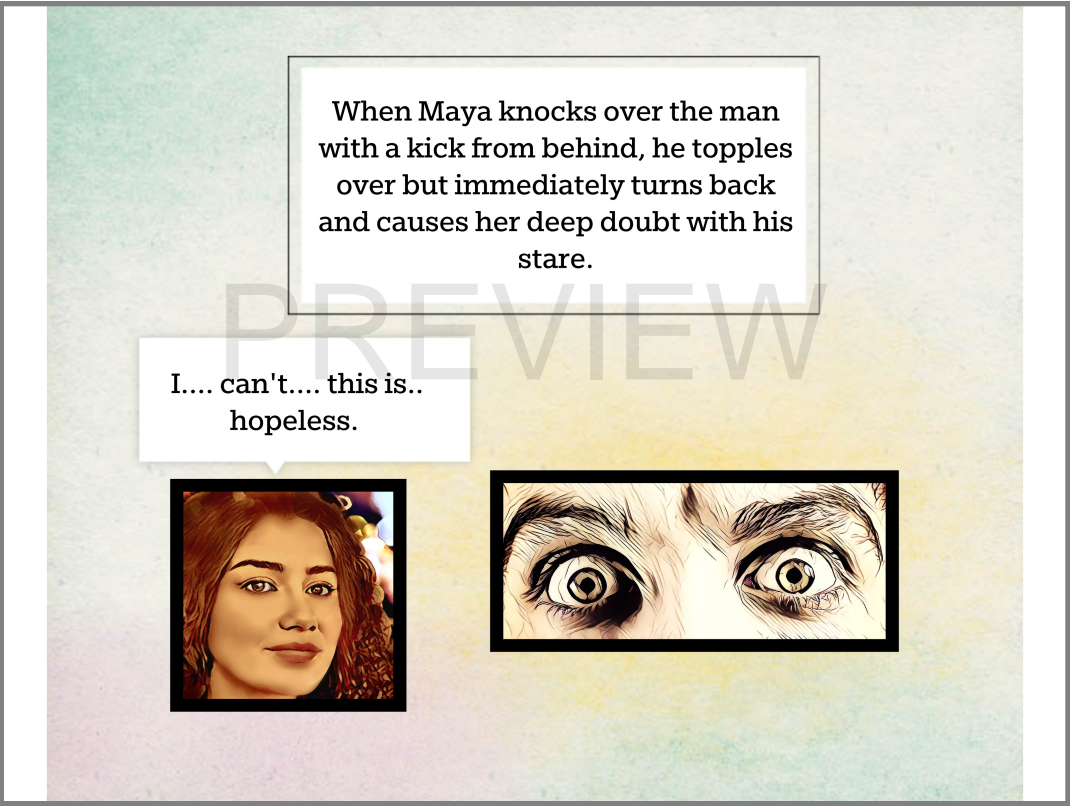
You've got to be
kidding me.

My bikes are parked over
there! Quick!





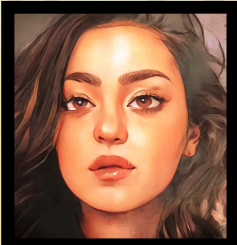

Maya and Rym sprint to Maya's scooter. As soon as they drive off, the cadaver blocks their path, and the scooter falls over. Rym swings at the man, who dodges and strikes her on the head, knocking her down.



Dizzy from her fall, Rym manages to drag herself to a sitting position and light up a match. Before the man can advance on Maya, Rym sets fire to the cadaver, which goes up in flames.



The women ensure the flames burn the body without catching the surrounding pavement.



He must have been the victim of last week's bombing.

This is insane... I can't imagine the damage more of these things could do.

The women depart on Maya's scooter.



I felt so much doubt
from looking at him
but thank you for
saving my life. Let
me see you home.

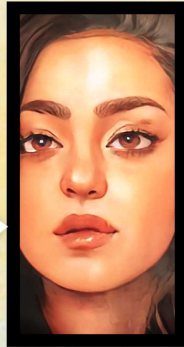


Rym visits again with Khalid.



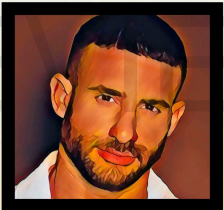

You look a
mess, Rym!
What
happened?

Just a minor
accident. I
needed to get
away for a
while.



What are
you?


Rym stops short when she sees a figurine of Anat on a side table.

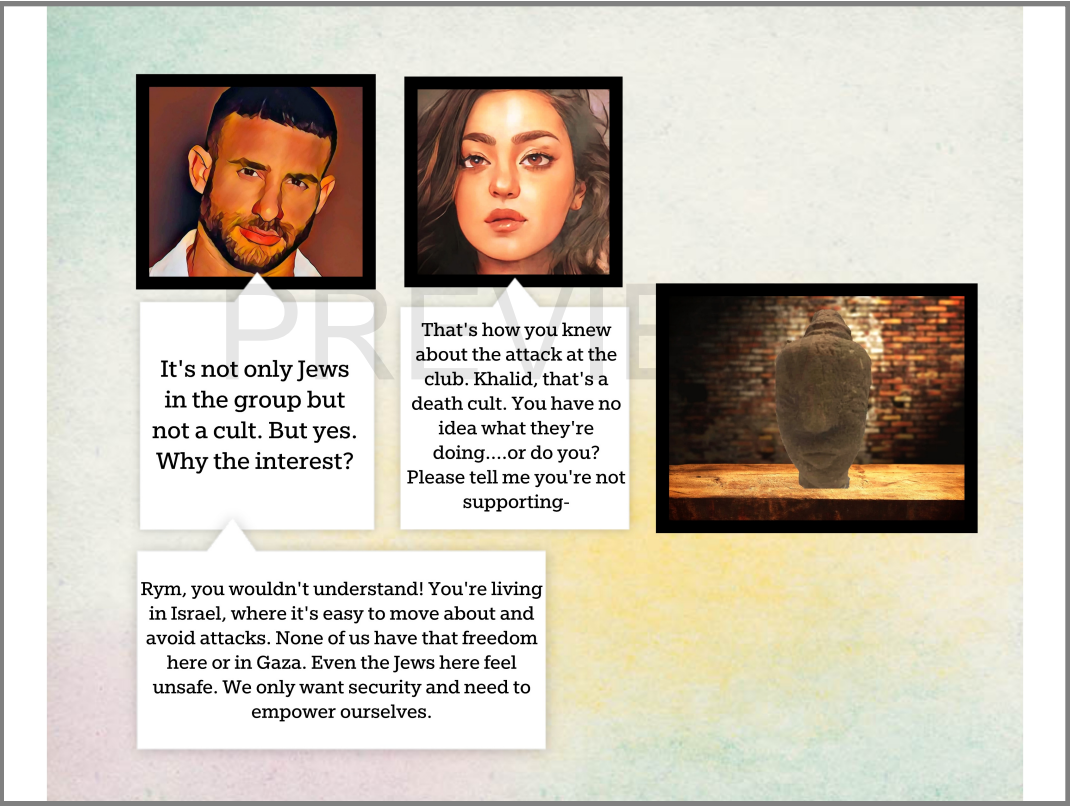


That's the ancient goddess Anat. The Judah group I've joined keeps her as a fun historical symbol. Nothing more.

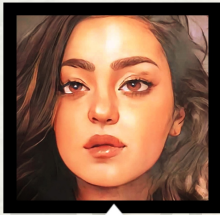
Why do you have that statue?

The ancient Jewish cult? Your alleged football group?





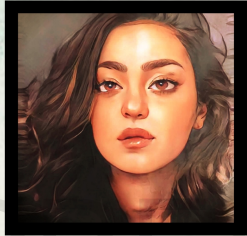
It's not only Jews
in the group but
not a cult. But yes.
Why the interest?



That's how you knew
about the attack at the
club. Khalid, that's a
death cult. You have no
idea what they're
doing....or do you?
Please tell me you're not
supporting-



Rym, you wouldn't understand! You're living
in Israel, where it's easy to move about and
avoid attacks. None of us have that freedom
here or in Gaza. Even the Jews here feel
unsafe. We only want security and need to
empower ourselves.



At the cost of
death? Not
only of others
but your own?



Both sides
have had
martyrs for
years now,
ukhti.

This is ridiculous. If we can
join forces for death, we
should be able to do the
same for life.

Rym throws down the statue of
Anat, which shatters and
storms out.

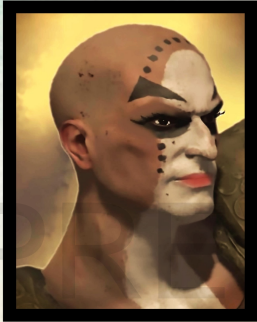
Maya opens Ayin while seated on her couch the next day. Anat appears.



Back again, are we, Maya?



We just ran into a resurrected cadaver. This needs to end. Tell me how I can get rid of these things in the desert.



My brother Reshef's rage over these unnecessary deaths burn even hotter than the hunger of the devourers. Visit the ruins of Tel Sheva if you wish to weaken the devourers and prevent a wave of lethal sickness in this region. While my domain of love and war are intangible, my elemental relations will soon all make their presence known.

What will I need to face this thing?

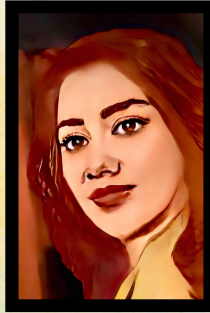


True to your namesake, enough water to fill a small well. Even though we cannot yet touch, I will be by your side.

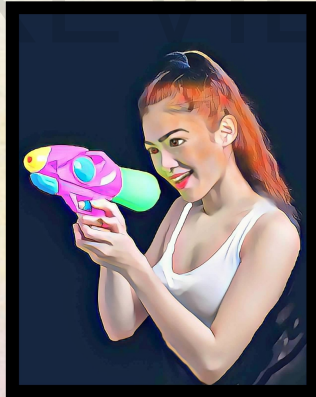
The following day, Maya wakes feverish and panting. She trudges to the local toy shop to purchase the largest water gun she can find.



I must have lost my mind buying children's toys.



Maya arrives at the Tel Sheva ruins. Hearing a sound behind her, she aims her water gun at nothing.



A barely humanoid flaming figure looms over her when she turns back around. When the creature lunges, Maya dives out of the way.



Hiding behind a pillar, Maya catches her breath and peeks out to observe the creature slithering along the ground, leaving a trail of soot in its wake. She coughs from smoke, drawing the creature's attention, despite its apparent lack of eyesight.



As she goes to release water
from the gun, the creature rears
up, blasting her back with heat.



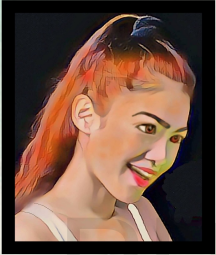
Righting herself just before falling on her back, Maya climbs to the top of the highest staircase leading to the altar. At the top, she turns and unleashes the water onto the approaching creature, which dissipates under the deluge.



Collapsing on the altar from exhaustion,
Maya glances up. She hears the voice of
Anat. He stands on top of the temple arch
before her.

Well done,
Little Wave.
The water
holds the
answer.





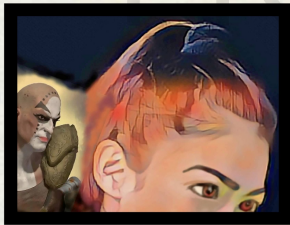
What do you
mean?

The cult.....



You must irrigate the desert
just as you did decades ago.
Only now, the Arab and Jewish
communities must work together.
The water used to maintain your
joined land will also ward off the
devourers once the murder
initiative is annihilated.

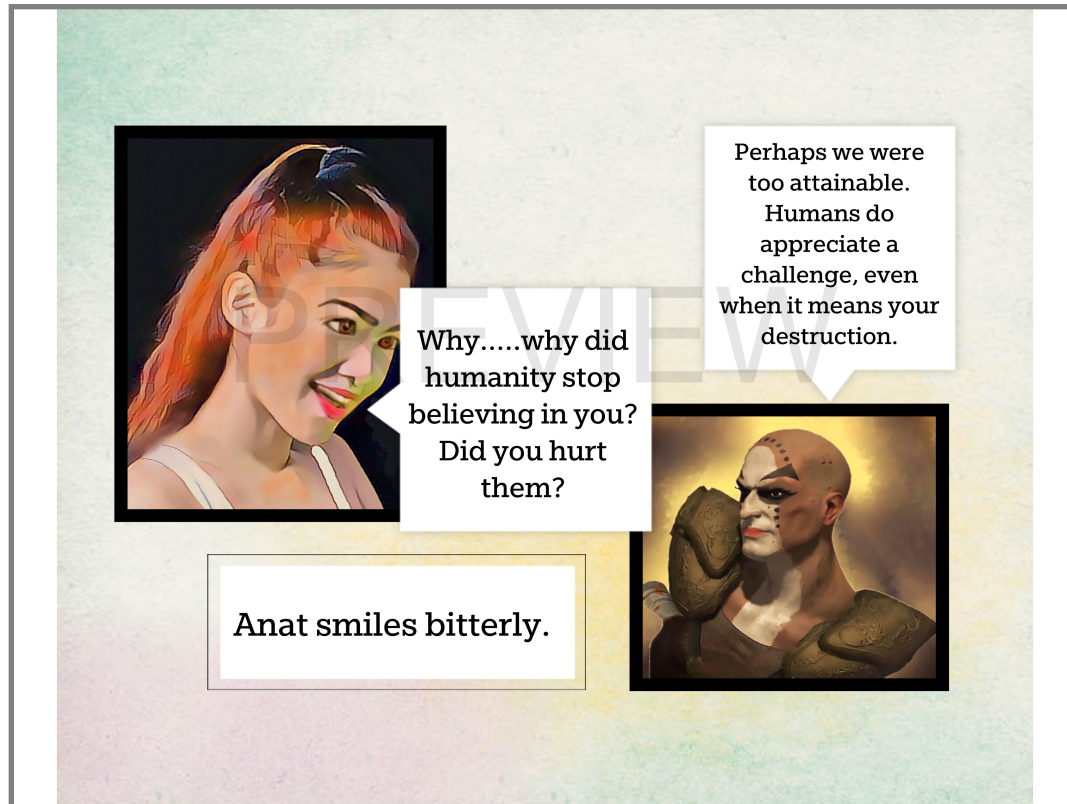
Maya freezes as Anat suddenly appears behind her to speak softly into her ear.



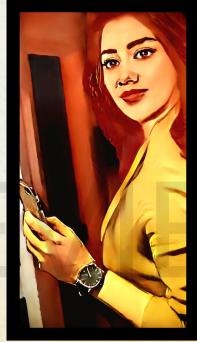
You're outside of Ayin.

No friend by your side today, I see. She's strong like you. I might have liked seeing you fight side by side.

It's only temporary, young one. I still cannot manifest on this plane for long without renewed faith.

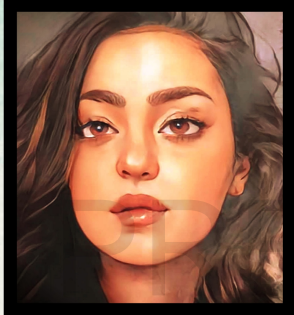


I wasn't sure if
you'd show.
You seem to
be healing
well.



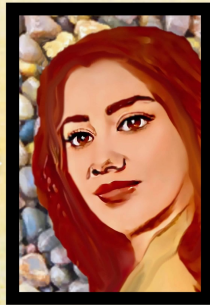
Do you know
where their
headquarters
might be?

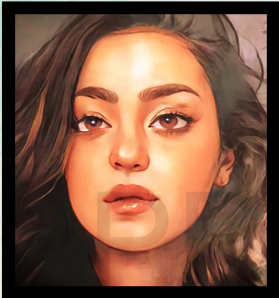
I just needed some rest. Maya,
listen, I think my brother
might be part of the death cult;
that's why he knew about the
attack at the club. Both Arabs
and Jews are now planning
these attacks. You were right.
They believe that killing will
empower them against further
attack.



I think it might be at
a park in Nazareth.
They meet tomorrow
evening. We can
take my jeep.

We'll reach the park
easier this way than
by car. I'll alert the
police.





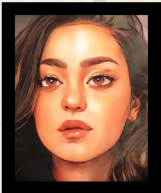
No, please don't.
Kids play at that
park; innocent
people could get
hurt.

Maya momentarily opens
Ayin on her phone, where
Anat materializes and nods.



Rym, there
might be
another way.

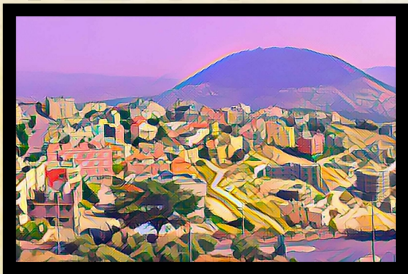
Maya and Rym arrive at the park,
outside a clubhouse shack with
several dozen people inside.



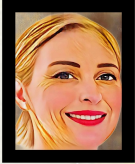
You sure
look at your
phone a lot.




We need all
of the help
we can get.



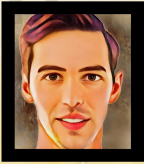
The women sneak into the back of the shack behind two women and two men.




The resurrection of the Beer Sheba bombing victim was successful. I saw it from afar-



Then, he was not very powerful if he was put down so quickly.

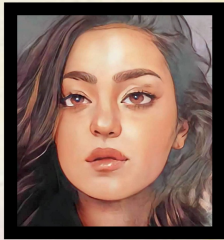


What about the club?

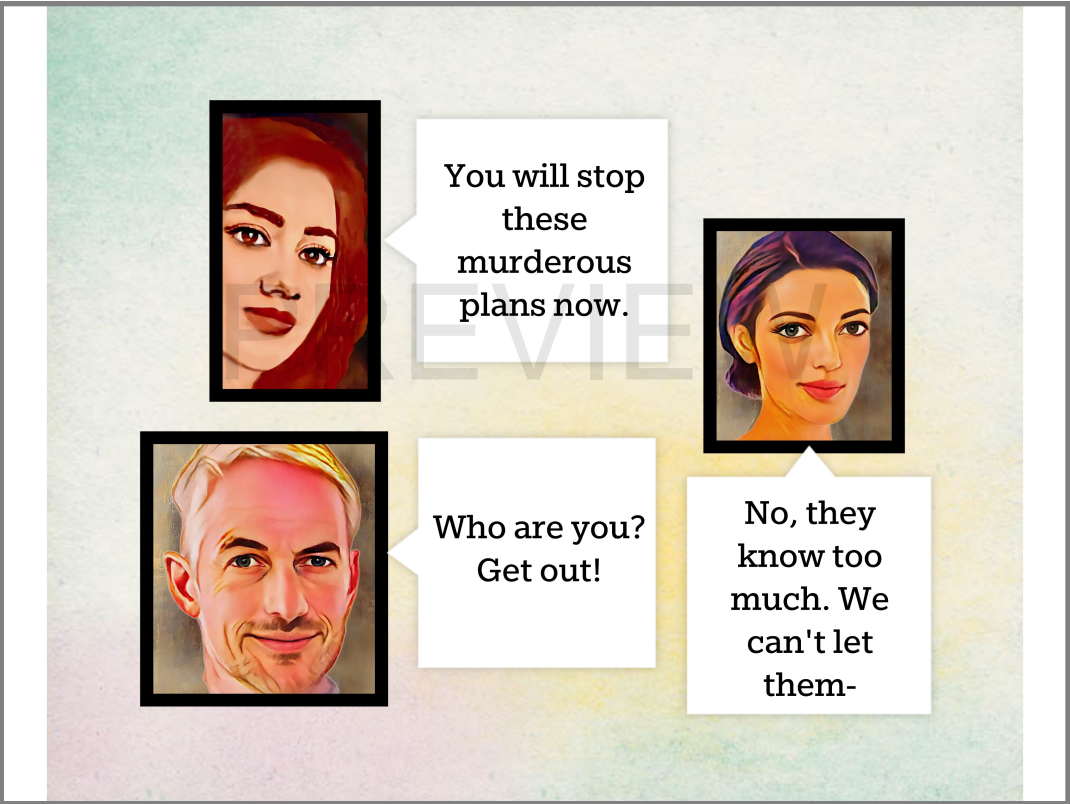


The police were called too soon.

Despite mounting fear, Maya feels the power of Anat enter her through the phone in her hand. Inhaling with the rush of power, she steps forward.



Maya, what are you doing?



Maya takes a step forward, staring down the group of cultists who begin to power under Anat's influence as she speaks through Maya.

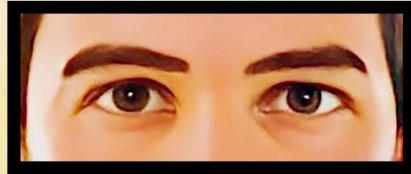


War is what began all of this in the first place. You will desist from your thirst for violence now.

The cultists fall to their knees in despair as the other two double over to lean against the wall.

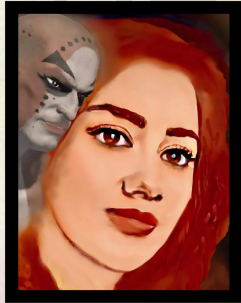


W-what's happening?
What is she doing?



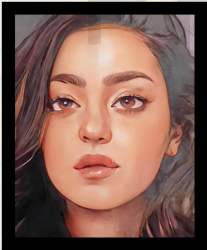
I-it feels so.... I
can't think!

Rym looks on in
apprehension as Maya gazes
at the cultists with a hint of a
smile before the cultists all
drop to the floor in a daze.

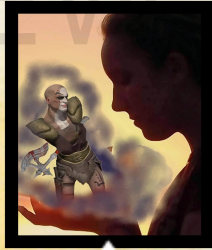


It's done.

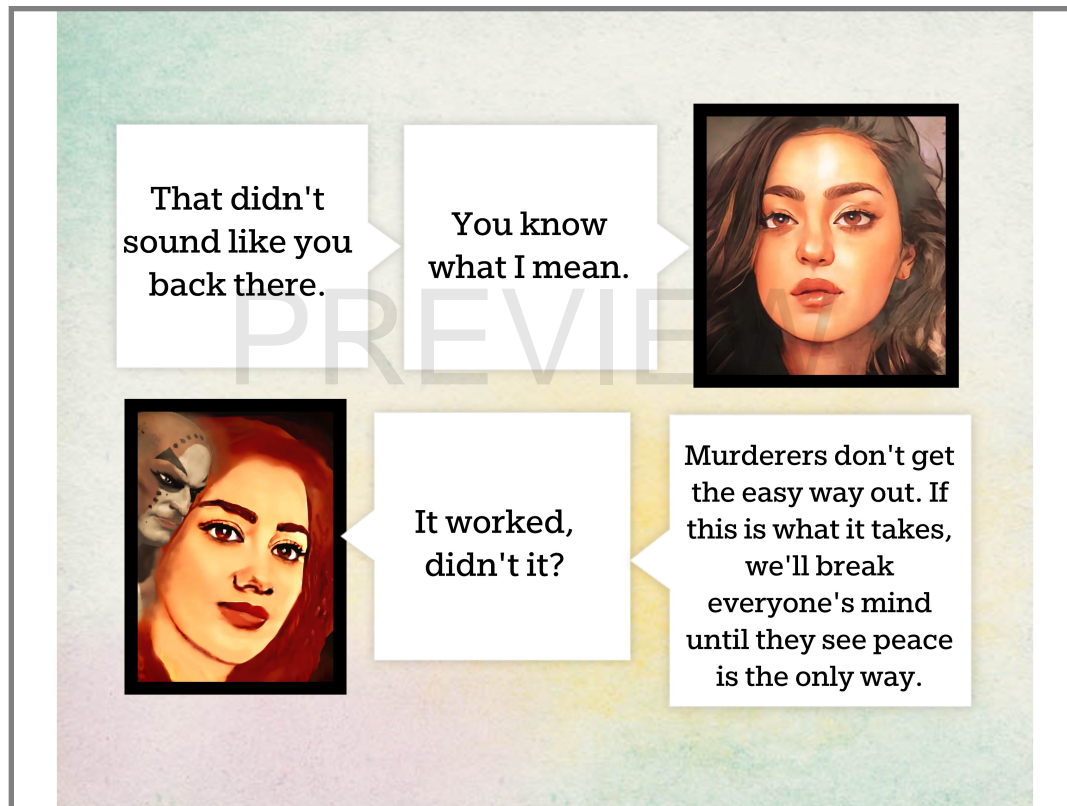
After exiting the clubhouse,
Rym catches up with Maya at
her scooter.



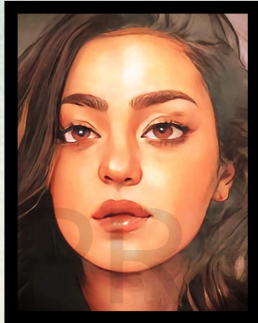
What did you
do?



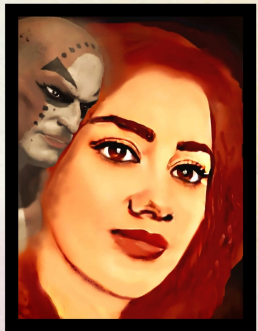
A counter to love is sadness. I showed
them the true despair caused by their
planned violence.



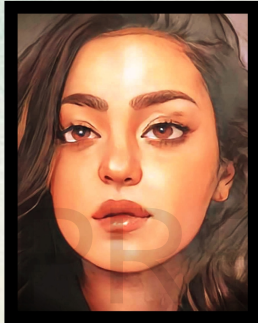




And what do you
propose?



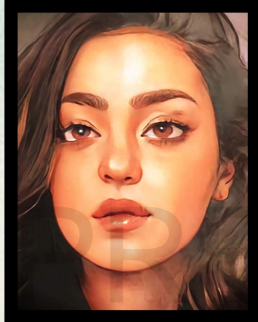
A joint desert irrigation
project could be a place to
start both in terms of
collaboration and moving
people out of less favorable
areas like the Territories.
We would start with those
who are willing to work
together.



I will speak to my organization and my home community, but I would not expect miracles after years of fear and bloodshed.



Imagine, it would be the first community built by and for both Arabs and Jews and one which also respects the resident Bedouins. Both sides will need to bring water irrigation tools, just a small gathering to start. We should have made more use of our empty deserts long ago.



But how can this
work, Maya? My
family already sees
me as a traitor.

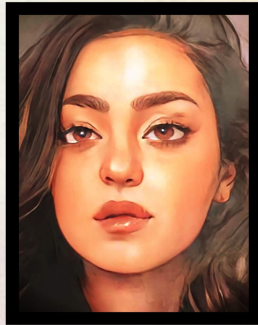


I understand, Rym, I
do, and I am so sorry
for everything.




M-my father sees me as a failure, too. All he and my mother ever cared about was faith. Even when my mother died in a market bombing near Gaza, he kept saying it was an act of God. I was there; she was caught in the explosion because I had wandered off and she was looking for me.

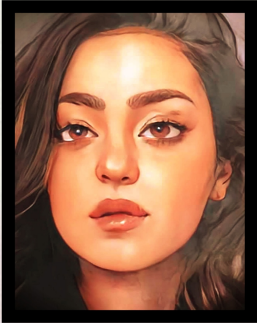
I was five.



I didn't know. You were young?



I first created Ayin as a way to help people escape reality because I was never allowed to create anything like that growing up. And now, I just keep disappointing my family.



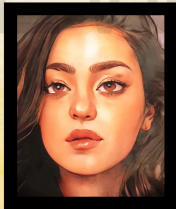
I will call for INPA members of both backgrounds to arrive for setup this week. We will figure this out.

Rym moves to comfort Maya as she succumbs to her tears, as the two share an embrace hesitantly.

The first builders of the new community arrive to set up equipment in the desert under the advisement of Maya and Rym. Khalid approaches as the builders depart at dusk.



Rym, what is this? Have you convinced members of our community to risk their lives?

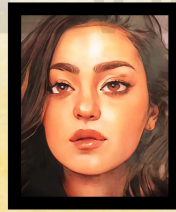


Khalid, don't you see this is the best choice for everyone? We are all here to stay, and we have to move forward in the best way for everyone.

Khalid's hollering rouses a massive
devourer that looms up behind him,
taking the form of a sandstorm
reaching higher than they can see.

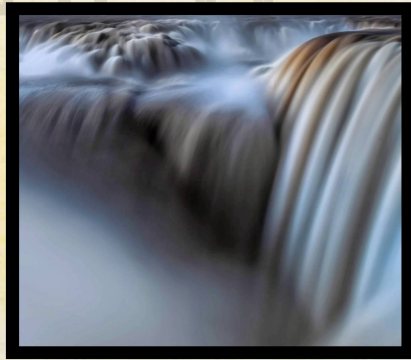


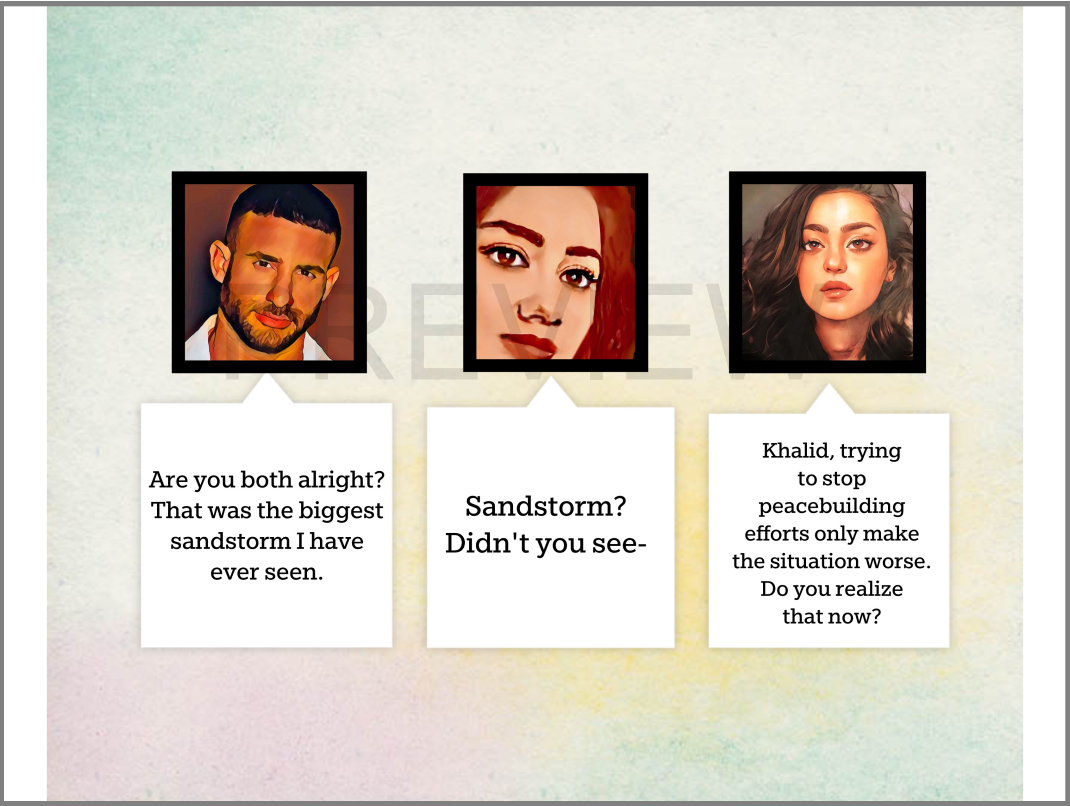
No, we can't gather in one
place; more people will only
get hurt!



Khalid, look out!

A still-fully present Anat appears behind Maya, who unleashes a colossal deluge onto the wall of sand, fueled by Anat's energy. The sandstorm splits in half under the massive stream of water.





As Rym and Khalid speak, Maya drifts away at the sight of Anat, who now stands with both arms and the ax in her hand, not through her body.



Your faith is restored, then? I have no energy and will no longer be able to commune with you past midday.



This isn't about worship. It's about balance. We trust you agree, Anat.

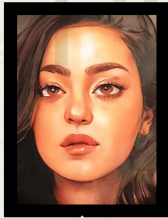
Anat fades away like a shimmering
heat wave.

PREVIEW

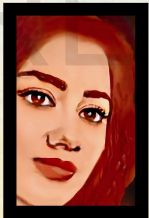
If that is your choice.



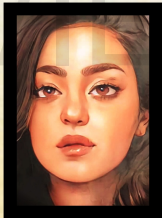
Maya, Rym, and Khalid
contemplate the irrigation
site.



Looks like
we've got our
work cut out
for us.



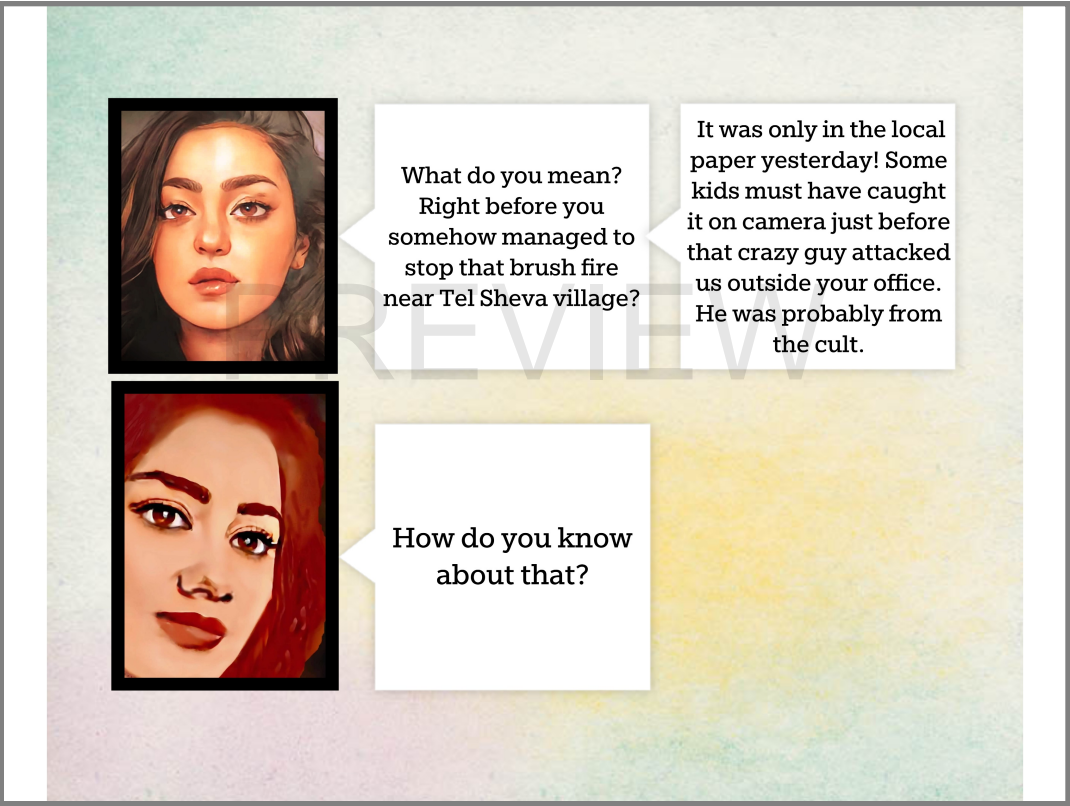
I think we
can
handle
it.

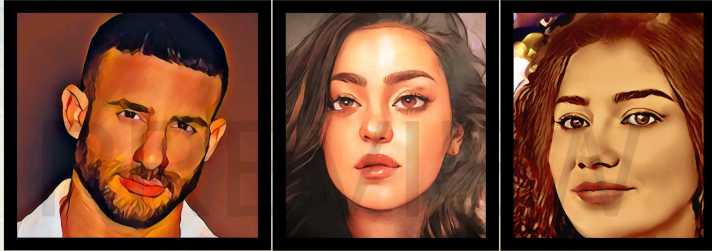


That was a
huge storm,
though. Bigger
than the first
night we met.



The night we
met?
That wasn't
a storm.

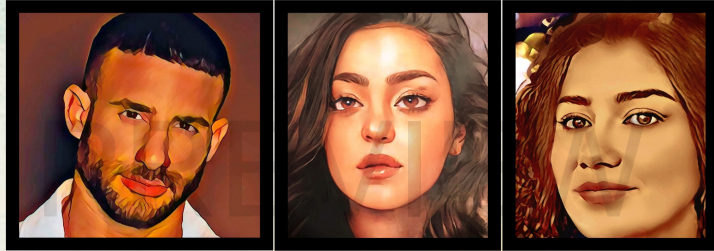




Not a cult, at least; it didn't start out that way. It all got out of hand so fast. For what it's worth, I'm sorry for all the danger this has caused. I will join in the building efforts.

Rym, that man we fought, he wasn't...
Never mind.

Look, it's behind us now, but we definitely got lucky that a group of death followers cared enough about their own families to back down at that threat you pulled at the park.

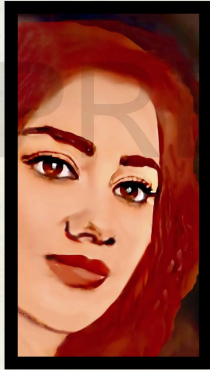


Threat?

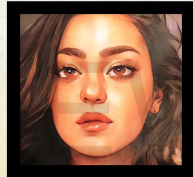
Maya here convinced a roomful of those people that she could track their loved ones if they didn't quit killing. Unless you could really do that, hacker and all?

I'd never hurt anyone.

Maya stays behind as
Rym and Khalid depart.



None of it was real.



Well, it's been a
long enough day
for me. Take care
of yourself, Maya.

The full moon shines high over the
desert on the outskirts of Beer
Sheba.



Still able to manifest in the real world, Anat watches Maya's sleeping form in bed.



You don't know what you believe in, do you, Little Wave?

