

jaebi

# The Alchemist

EPISODE 3



*Anything is Attainable*

*FROM EPISODE TWO*

They scurry across a vacant parking lot framed by shipping containers on the far end of the enclosed area. Their forms slip between the swaths of shadow cast by the large metal boxes until they reach the outer wall of the building. Cones of light shine over their heads every few feet as they comb the perimeter, the acrid smell of pharmaceuticals growing stronger.

Jasir stops in front of a recessed door with no handles. A hastily slapped on sticker reads the company's name in a blue italicized font: *STRATEGENE*. "I know this place."

Within the void, it is easy to become lost in the granular details of matter but every so often, a pattern hints at a framework as rigid and predictable as a peptide bond.

The fence rattles in the distance and section of fence directly behind Jasir and Calli wavers. Jasir extends his influence from the void and the locks on the other side of the door rip free. He envisions a fishing net in his hands and pulls a catch of air molecules toward him and Calli. Jasir pushes Calli inside when the door opens.

"Hold on," Jasir says, turning to the door. The door and its frame are crafted from the same copper alloy. Both beg to be one making Jasir's influence trivial. The edges of

the door take on the consistency of mercury, melding into the surround wall. In seconds the wall bleeds into smooth continuous surface as if an exit never existed. Jasir turns into a run, grabbing Calli's hand again. He wishes the void could show him where he needs to go next or how long he will have to run.

*AND NOW...*

"He grows stronger every moment," Taylon says, examining the Seers handiwork. The aura of Jasir's influence on the section of the wall before him and Grasp shines like a beacon. "But the fact that we still have air to breathe suggests that he is not yet half as powerful as Maestro."

"Nor as sharp. Yet he still manages to slip through our fingers!"

"A bigger lapse for you than I, friend. For certain, we dare not continue to act as catalyst to his maturity. If I deem we have past the point of capture, we must do what is necessary for containment."

"Gladly. The power cosmic in a Sapien is as dangerous in this world as in the next."

"Then let's end this old friend and return to our own world. Pray that it has not already fallen to Sapien

reign." Taylon steps away from the door and Grasp swings his arm back, aiming his mighty fist.

#

Jasir stops abruptly, turning in the direction of the echoing boom. Calli realizes she is running alone and stops, urging Jasir to hurry with frantic hands.

Time is not a dimension Jasir can influence. And while his mastery of the first three dimensions is theoretically limitless, the reigns of his power has always been the knowledge he contains.

Jasir signals Calli with an index finger--just one moment to think. He shuts his eyes, listening to the boom of a wall being bashed in; it must be the same door he and Calli entered--a moment to think, just one second. His thoughts carry his mind to a moment back at the motel, a small and trivial event--a snarl. Taylon's surprise and shock just when--

"He knew," Jasir whispers, opening his eyes. He releases the void.

"Wow," Calli gasps, as she watches colors swirl into Jasir's eyes. Magically, green eyes appear like nebulous mist inside a crystal ball.

"Like some, bloodhound, tracking me. Anytime I touch the void he can find me."

"What?" Jasir approaches Calli, grabs her by the shoulders and pours his eyes directly into hers.

"That's how they keep finding us, each and every time—my power," Jasir says, before pulling Calli closer. "Do you still trust me?" To Jasir, a second seems an eternity before Calli nods bravely. "Okay, then let's go."

Jasir streams down a bland corridor, his eyes clouding over to reveal the white haze of atomic vision. The fibrous wall panels of the hallway are composed of a man made abomination of calcium sulphates. The element is littered with a mangling of others that Jasir suspects are the cause of cancerous molecular mutations to life-carbon.

Jasir opens his arms as he traverses the hall, randomly twisting the sheet rock atoms within the wall every few strides. To the natural eye, the wall looks completely unchanged but Taylon will sense the taint of Jasir's tampering.

Jasir makes a sharp right turn down another corridor toward the source of the candy-striped smokestacks. He smirks at the odds of being brought to this facility.

STRATEGENE--A genetic play land of a laboratory. Gene splicing and experimentation is STRATAGENE's primary focus but through various acquisitions and mergers Jasir himself has advised on, the company is now one of the states

leading life sciences and chemical engineering groups. The hunted always has better odds on his own habitat. Here, surrounded by all forms of nature's elements and various human perversions, Jasir is big game.

Jasir stops at the door to the plant floor and grabs the handle. As he turns it, the locking mechanism spins and slips open under his influence. He goads Calli inside and closes the door behind them, consciously leaving the locks open. Machines hum across the football length plant floor.

"Hold still," Jasir says as he runs his hands up Calli's shoulders. Sparks dance between his fingers as electrons bounce between his hand and her arms. Jasir depolarizes the atoms in Calli's hair, pulling it flat again, his hands landing on her cheeks. "Do you see that large vat there," Jasir points. "There is a soft glow behind it—the light from another door. It leads to a case of stairs that take you to the top of the column, where technicians monitor the vats contents."

"What are the contents?"

"What ever I say," Jasir affirms, taking Calli's hand and starting across the plant floor. Far on the other end of the floor is another doorway. It leads to the smaller labs, where STRATAGENE holds some medicinal trials.

Though it seems he has always been able to control the atom, he does not know if it is true. And though it seems that only order of magnitude are the distinction between stars and atoms, Jasir cannot say that this is true either. What he does know is that once again, he is witnessing the stars align, like the glowing orbs of the atom within the void.

#

The looking pane in the door shatters to fragments before the entire panel implodes into the plant. It instantly rips from its hinges and shoots across the finished concrete floor. Grasp walks through the mangled doorway. "That was too easy," he snarls.

Taylon enters behind him silently agreeing. "This way," he begins moving toward the glow of the doorway behind the enormous vat. "Wait," Taylon says, just as Grasp begins to follow.

Taylon peers across the length of the plant floor. Light shines from the hallway behind another doorway leading out of the large space. "Can it be?"

"What it is it?"

"His power streams this way—and that," Taylon says, pointing from the door straight ahead to the one behind the vat.

"Impossible, even Maestro cannot do what you are suggesting."

"Theoretically, it is possible. And Maestro's ability on the matter has never been confirmed one way or the other, Grasp. But I will agree, it is highly unlikely that there are two of him."

"Then we should split up. I'll take this one," Grasp says as he heads toward the glow behind the vat. Taylon draws his weapon and begins stalking across the plant floor.

Grasp remembers that the last barrier had been too easy. Unlike the door into the building, its hinges had not been melded. He turns the latch handle to the doorway leading out of the plant floor and it opens without resistance.

Halfway down the neon-lit hall, Grasp sees a blue door, no glass pane like those that lead into the plant. He cocks his fist, opting for the comfort of his short range battering fist to the pulse cannon. As much as he would gladly kill the Seer, the fate of his entire species hinges on him capturing this Sapient. He cannot fail.

The ears on either side of his wide head perk as the power of a machine ignites like a car engine starting. This machine is much larger however.

Grasp continues, soon noticing a single door to his right twenty feet ahead. He throws his gorilla mass forward swiftly, angling toward the door. Graceful leaps give his body a moonwalk quality as he closes the distance like a silent predator.

Grasp ends a few feet from the door in a hop that places his back against the wall. He continues his approach sideways, cautiously sliding his back against the wall. He will not underestimate this prey again. Maestro could rip his body apart with a gesture and though it isn't likely that his carbon copy has grown his power to such a level, Grasp will not chance it.

Grasp stops at the door listening for a heartbeat or the rise and fall of a pair of lungs. There is only the hum of the massive engine. He turns to pull the door handle and notices the label: Compound Accelerator Operating Deck.

Inside the door, a flight of stairs ascends twenty steps to a level platform where a second flight of stairs leads to the right, out of Grasp's line of vision. He is uncomfortable with the unhealthy possibilities that exist out of view but not overly so. His Genien agility and synaptic impulses are far beyond that of normal Sapiens.

Grasp pounces onto the second step, building momentum. With the next step he hurtles over several stairs at a

time. He lands in the middle of the platform already having secured the second flight of stairs as safe. The clearing above the second staircase isn't high enough for him to leap to its top but Grasp wastes no time. He clears the phlegm from his lungs with a burst of air through his nostrils and stampedes silently; he drops his fists using them to pull his massive body forward with bone crushing power. In seconds, Grasp pummels through the opening, instinctively swinging his oversized fist at air and drawing his cannon. All clear.

Grasp discovers the source of the machine noise. The large vat he saw from the plant floor is now a dozen or so feet beneath him. The catwalk extends directly towards the vats wide-open mouth, large enough to swallow a helicopter whole. Angled slits in the metal walkway give it an invisible bridge quality, making everything beneath it visible. As a result the vats mouth looms with more impression as Grasp approaches. He stalks, scanning left and right, below and above.

The catwalk extends a third of the way over the opening of the vat. Near the walkways edge sits a flat-surfaced instrument panel. Grasp looks over the images, levers, bar graphs and sliders on the smooth surface. A number, 43%,

near a graph catches his attention because its digits increase steadily.

Another distinct hum begins in the dark vat belly below Grasp. The edge of the catwalk beneath the instrument panel lops downward like a dogs tongue. Grasps oversized hand snatches hold of the instrument panel. He dangles over the cavernous mouth as shards of broken glass sprinkle into the Compound Accelerator. A blue light illuminates below revealing a turbine of some sort. Metal arms sweep across the vat's diameter with increasing speed. Some manner of liquid pours into the belly of the Accelerator slowly, as if it is mixed with solids.

Steel moans as the dangling edge of the catwalk flaps upward and snaps Grasps body toward the vat. Grasp holds like a bull rider. Again, the catwalk flaps upward and down again like a wet towel. The bolts holding the instrument tower in place strip free of the catwalk bedding and Grasp jettisons into the vat along with the tower, his hand still wrapped around the top of the glass panel.

Luckily, Grasp flies past the sweeping arm inside the vat and splashes into the liquid, which has the consistency of pancake batter. The spinning arms crash into part of the panel sprinkling glass everywhere.

Overhead the catwalk smoothes into its more rigid orientation and the Seer walks to its edge. Grasp roars maniacally and presses his haunches against the bottom of the vat before leaping.

Balls of lightning sparkle in the Seer's eyes and the batter splashes upward around Grasp's boots. The odorless substance feels firmer suddenly and it yanks him to stillness. Grasp bounds again, this time pressing his weight against the hardened substance. His legs break free of the substance being manipulated by the Seer, which crumbles like stalactite.

Grasp reaches the rotating arms, grabbing hold with his smaller hand. He tugs sharply, pulling himself upward. His torso barely clears the sweep of the arm when it doubles in speed slamming into his hips. Grasp's head swings upside down and the other end of the arm crashes into his neck like a bat. The arm rounds the vats circumference once more for good measure and pops Grasp back into the oozing liquid. The batter splashes over his chest and back and he feels his armor mesh heat uncomfortably.

Grasp uses his forearm to wipe the sludge away and it responds by wrapping around his wrists. Grasp hears himself roar an empty threat against the Seer. He regrets

his splurge of emotion when the spinning arm bends and slams against his face.

Grasp retaliates, grabbing an end of the arm bar before it leeches around his neck. The other end of the arm acts as a strap, pinning Grasp's arm against his neck. Before he can react, the primary side of the iron bar warps like clay squeezing around the wrist of his smashing fist and pins it to his belly.

Grasp flexes every muscle in his torso, managing to widen his arms slightly but the iron rods resist, wrapping him up like a pretzel. Agony extends from the bars in the shape of metal spikes, which dig through the depth of Grasp's protective mesh. His resistance is reduced to disgruntled screaming.

It's quickly revealed that the Seer has a solution for this as well. The batter-liquid crawls into Grasp's mouth, chocking him into silence. Two tendrils of batter crawl away from the main slug slithering into his mouth and enter through his nostrils. Grasp barrels his body in desperation but this too, the batter compensates for by assuming the consistency of tar. Panic sets into his bones and he wishes he had saved more air in his lungs.

Grasp relinquishes control of his breath and his ribcage rattles as his lungs explode with volume. A drowning

wheeze fills his chest cavity as Grasp discovers life anew. Oxygen flows through the yellow substance Grasp believed was intended to choke the life out of him. Instead his lungs draw life from it, slurping oxygen like a tongue finding water in the desert. The batter-liquid stifles Grasp's will, he wants nothing more than room to live—another pull, one more drag of precious air.

Grasp opens his mouth wider to release the hate filling him but his lungs steal the chance to suck more air the moment his jaws part. The batter responds by ballooning, forcing his gag reflex while making it impossible to do so. The dry heave is suffocating and his eyes tear from exertion. Slowly, Grasp reclaims control of his body and lungs under the Seer's terms. He floats still in the yellow compound, thankful to be alive. Joyful in that each breath is one more moment to hate the Sapient's savior of his world and the carbon copy staring down at him.

The Seer disappears over the ledge of the catwalk.

#

Jasir eases through the doorway, gently stepping into the hall as he closes the door to the plant behind him without a sound. His plan has been somewhat successful in that it divided his hunters but he wishes the bloodhound had come for him first. In a classic case of never judging a book

by its cover, the less physically oppressive of the two has proved to be the most cunning and dangerous.

Jasir tip toes nervously through the hallway. He eases toward the door he and Calli parted ways. By now she should have reached safety far beyond STRATAGENE's enclosed fences.

Jasir watched from the exit as Calli ran for the barbed fence. When she reached it, he pushed his influence past her. His strength from the void laid the nickel gate flat across dirt like a knife smoothing butter over bread.

The fence of 10 feet was pulled into a sharp slope, still leaving ample space for a Mac Truck to pass. A second before the razor barbs had been capable of tearing flesh but after, they wiggled snugly into an upper layer of ground soot.

Calli crossed the path laid like a jacket over a puddle tenuously as if it could spring upright at any moment. She stopped at the edge of a barbed loop and turned to face Jasir--too close for his comfort. Once he lifted the fence she could have either gotten nicked or would certainly have found dirt in her eyes. He didn't have time to motion her backward so Jasir envisioned a rope in his clenched fists and pulled it toward him. The lowered section of fence slid from the edges of Calli's feet. Once it was far

enough Jasir pulled upward on an invisible tether and the nickel fence followed. Dirt billowed outward toward Calli and Jasir exhaled sharply through his nostrils. The cloud of dirt-dust fell to the ground like wet flour. Calli stood stationary on the far side of the tall fence, restored to its original function. She watched Jasir, unblinkingly and he shivered from a vibration in the center of the void-sphere--his moment at the motel room door with Calli tucked like the Earth's core--safe. Even two hundred feet away a look from her eyes made him feel it. Jasir backed into the building, swinging the door inward. His eyes stayed on Calli and it seemed as if he might never need her to leave. When the steel door closed, Jasir was left inside with two hunters and the feeling in his chest.

Bittersweet are the odds of 50/50. Jasir moves toward the lab where he hopes to stage his second trap hoping the odds are in his favor. The tri-symmetrical biohazard symbol blazes against the surface of the door, the wavelength of fire orange emblem strong and vibrant. The door pushes inward, squeaking slightly at its hinges.

The molecules in the room are calm and undisturbed--the odds, not on Jasir's side. Jasir releases the void, simultaneously flipping the light-switch.

Calli is so much braver than he is, even in Taylon's stifling chokehold. Taylon's face and demeanor are filled with a dark elation as he jockeys for position in the laboratory.

"Calli," Jasir whispers as fear fills him.

"I'm sorry," Calli snuffles. She squeaks as Taylon presses his forearm against her windpipe angrily.

"You think yourself clever with your childish tricks, hmm," Taylon snarls. "You do not know half as much about my power as I do about yours. Where is Grasp?"

"Let her go."

"Ah, but I've gone through so much trouble to bring her back here. All for you, Seer." Taylon rubs the nozzle of his weapon down Calli's cheek. "I know you. I even what you want to say now, that I should let this Sapien woman go. This isn't her fight."

"Then why don't you."

"Because it matters not who begins it, or even who it is that joins the fight. All that matters is who *wins* the fight. At this very moment war rains down on my people and though it is not your fight, you must win it."

"Your people?"

Taylon laughs and says, "You are spoiled in this world, your dominance over lesser species is uncontested—it is not so on mine, but with your ability, we can crush our enemy—"

"I won't be your weapon."

"We are all pawns in this cosmic game, is that not what you see from your precious void?" Taylon shoves Calli to his right, extending the barrel of his gun against her head. "Do not doubt for an instant that I am uncommitted to this win."

"How do you know so much about me?"

"All will be answered soon, Seer." Taylon reveals the dense cube from behind his trench coat, tossing it directly behind him and Calli. Electrons bolt from the core, initiating the matter eating sequence that destroyed the rear of Jasir's house.

The sequence hiccups and random sparks bounce throughout the room like static on tendrils. Blinding streaks of lightning bounce between Calli and Taylon.

Taylon squints, near reeling as the sparks bolt outward repeatedly like an engine cranking. Seeing him distracted, Calli swings blindly, aiming for Taylon's gun hand.

Jasir's heart skips a beat as he moves to stop the impending backlash. He isn't as fast as Taylon though. The gun hand connects with Calli's jaw and she slides

across the lab floor. Jasir releases his fury in a calculated roundhouse and hook combination. Taylon parries the kick and absorbs the blow to his midsection for the payoff of his own counter. Jasir folds as a solid fist sinks into his abdomen. A head crushing head butt stumbles him backwards and Jasir falls to his knees, tasting his blood. He looks up, staring down the barrel of Taylon's gun.

"You changed it didn't you," Taylon sneers. "You have learned to mask your power. Change it back!" Taylon grabs Jasir's collar and yanks him close." Change. It. Back."

"I can't." Jasir feels the brute force of the man as his body is hurled across a lab table. Glass and water shatter beneath Jasir as he slams into the floor.

Taylon menaces toward him, more glass grinding to bits beneath his feet. He lifts Jasir with one arm and jettisons him against a wall of cabinets; beakers and rubber gloves spill around Jasir's shoulders.

"Change it back," Taylon orders, his weapon menacing.

Jasir laughs. "I thought you knew how this worked. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't." Jasir screams as a particle beam bores into his right shoulder.

"Do not toy with me, Seer, your life is not as valuable to me as all that. Change the transports' metal back to its original state."

"I told you, I can't. I've seen that element once, and that in passing. I could spend ten lifetimes and never obtain the correct atomic structure."

Taylon stares, as if considering the validity of Jasir's statement. His growl slowly turns into amusement and he erupts in laughter, the sound guttural and maniacal. "So, I am doomed to a Sapien rule after all—on this pathetic rock." Taylon's gun lowers as he becomes lost in his words.

Jasir begins to look for an opportunity to ease away. No sooner than he thinks it possible, Taylon's focus sharpens again.

"Goodbye, Seer."

Even as the particles leave the gun, the void is already there, omnipresent with Jasir's consciousness. Everything slips from relevance except the beam of matter ripping through time and space, swimming through air.

Air. A soufflé of earth's basic elements though Jasir only extends his influence over two. Everyday air begs to become water, a natural transformation that is the basis of life on Earth. Jasir reaches for the destiny of every

alchemist; commanding the philosophy of matter means more than knowledge of a stone, it means understanding the vision of the almighty design.

Jasir slams hydrogen and oxygen molecules together, grouping them in front of his chest like a bag of stardust. Taylon's malevolent particles inch closer and shatter through a pure arrangement of water, a wall too thin to be useful. It needs something else. A small halo ignites throughout the water in front of Jasir as protons slam into the nucleus of the hydrogen atoms: deuterium

Jasir pushes his feet back, falling under the weight of the heavy water as his influence stabs the surface of the molecules like an asteroid shower on the moon. The  ${}^2\text{H}^2\text{O}$  atoms pull apart until the thermodynamics between the particles are perfect. Time is constant. Anything is attainable.

Jasir falls backwards, the sound of cracking glass raining over him. The beams rip through a thin layer of icy heavy water before they encounter slightly more rigid molecules. As in a chemical reactor, the heavy water absorbs energy from the beams radiation. The ice becomes strong as Taylon's beam nears Jasir's chest.

The slab of ice slams into Jasir's breastplate and he crashes to the ground, a messy pile of icy heavy water spilling around him.

Calli calls out to Jasir, seeing only the murderous Taylon holding his smoldering weapon. Taylon squeezes the trigger and it is silent. He squeezes again and dark liquid splatters from the barrel.

Fear drowns from Calli's face as Taylon spins around. Jasir brings down an ice block square atop Taylon's head. His fedora gives way to a split skull though he barely staggers.

Jasir tightens his fingers in the icy grips forged around his fingers and swings with all the power in his torso. Taylon wavers to one side, his legs finally showing signs of falter. Jasir doesn't let up, spinning at his waist to swing the ice block across the other side of Taylon's face. Taylon grunts as he slams against a wall.

Jasir roars, rage filling him as the void captures every atom of muscle fiber and weaves it to the edge of human performance—he becomes more than man. The block of ice hardens before it makes contact with Taylon's head. The off world hunter finally collapses lifelessly.

Jasir's arms hang heavy from the weight of the ice block as he waits for Taylon to move again. When he doesn't,

Jasir releases the ice block, squeezing his fingers through the grips as his influence melts the handles. He finds his back to the wall and slides to his haunches, exhausted. Calli rushes into his arms and his shoulders fall into comfort around hers. She feels right there, just as in the void. Her head falls in the cove of Jasir's neck, face wet with tears.

Taylon's pulse weapon lays an arms length away, partially melded. Jasir marvels at its simplicity as he reaches for it. "Had I known this was made from lead, I would have done something much sooner."

The gun surges like a hot ember in Jasir's palm as he bombards it with spare protons, an often-pursued goal of alchemy. The weapon stabilizes as its matter slows into a golden shine.

#

*Really, Uatu, that was quite uneventful.*

*We have watched but a moment.*

*Yes, but there is a supernova imminent in the Chandra galaxy—I hate to miss such a delightful spectacle. It doesn't appear 616 and 494E9C will collide beyond this point at any rate.*

*I am not so sure. But I think I will join you—it has been some time since I watched a star perish.*

*That's the spirit.*

The End

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