

Ascension

The Rising Son

Part Two

The End Game

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Chapter *One*

The intense sunlight blinds him as Apollo forces open the door to the surface from the Chamber. He has to shield his face from the bright light as it takes a moment for his eyes to adjust. The boy has no idea how long he was held prisoner by the Corsair but it feels like a month.

A refreshingly warm breeze, along with remnants of Antonia's voice, fight for his attention as the scene slowly comes into focus around him. He's instantly awestruck by what he sees, *endless water*. It's everywhere, rolling in hundreds of waves just like the ones he created back at the pond. It stretches to the left and right, as far as he can see. Apollo gazes out at the ocean as Antonia's voice resonates through his head once again, *Acropolis Resident Integrated Eugenic Supercomputer*.

The phrase had caught Apollo's attention the first time she said it. It was painfully obvious to him that it formed the acronym of Alcazar's main computer, ARIES. But now for some reason, each word also seemed like a clue.

He runs each word through his mind, *Acropolis, Resident, Integrated, Eugenic, Supercomputer*. The last one, *Supercomputer*, seems pretty self-explanatory to him so he separates it in his mind as he pairs the other four words together.

Acropolis Resident, seems to refer to Oriah or the current prime resident of the Acropolis. It also must be why Brutalius wants it so badly. Then the second pair of words, *Integrated Eugenic*, send revelations rocketing through Apollo's mind. Oriah must somehow be genetically *connected* to ARIES, which also must mean Apollo is as well. It's immediately clear now that that computer back in the library must hold the key to Alcazar's liberation and Apollo knows must find his way back there.

He wanders down the coast for what seems like hours with absolutely no sense of direction. He gazes out at the wide, dark-gray buildings that now line the shore. Everything that has happened to him, his imprisonment, his deal with the Kaine brothers, even Misery, the fake girl behind the glass, torture his mind. But even that pales in comparison to the one gut-wrenching thought that pulls him even deeper down into desperation. *Grace*. It kills him not to know what happened to her. And even though he knows Antonia's injection suppressed his telepathic abilities, his desperate cries for her come through the darkness anyway, *Grace, are you out there? Oriah... Father? Sabrina? Will someone please help me!*

Then as the moments creep by, morose laughter begins to tremble between his tears and Apollo curses his futility. The emotional outburst is short-lived however and is promptly silenced as a silvery female voice surprisingly slithers through, *Greetings Nephilim, How can I be of service?*

Instantly, Apollo's eyes flutter as the mental program embedded in him by his father takes over once again. His head jerks straight as images bombard his vision; pictures of a charcoal brick building with several motorcycles out front. An old woman with long white hair emerging, greeting Apollo and ushering him inside. She speaks to him but strangely, it's ARIES' voice that fills Apollo's ears, "Follow me, Nephilim. Welcome to our home."

When he enters, he is immediately belted by the extreme heat that boils out from the enormous fireplace across the room. The only thing the boy can mutter is, "What is this?" And ARIES voice quickly rings through, answering him, *You are home Nephilim, where you finally belong*. Then just as fast, the voice fades, leaving the crackling blaze as the only sound in the room.

Apollo stares into the brilliant firelight. He's astonished by the familiar feelings rising within him. It's almost like he can sense the flames burn. As he takes in the sensation, ARIES speaks to him once more, *Nephilim, come home and reclaim what is yours*. Surprisingly, her words are accompanied by the heat that baked his skin just moments ago. But now, the energy reaches further in, flowing throughout his entire body. Its intensity grows beyond anything Apollo's felt before and the fire in the hearth gradually dies, filling him. He can sense, beyond any doubt, it's him who caused it. But before he can begin to understand what it all might mean, everything around him explodes with an intense white light, and Apollo finds himself back on the beach in the hot sun.

Immediately, he begins a conversation with ARIES, *what is my location?* And her reply is almost instantaneous; *you are in Sector Four of Corsair Territory.* Apollo then asks his next question, *what is the status of my father?* And ARIES responds. *The Doyen is in Sector One of Corsair Territory. His vital signs are normal, but diagnostics show damage to both optical nerves and the periorbital epidermis.* The boy's spirits lift at the realization that his father is still alive, but yet he's still puzzled why he won't respond, *ARIES, why can't I reach him?*

ARIES explains how nanobots flow throughout Apollo's bloodstream, transmitting the matching frequency of his brainwaves. And how they jam the signals that allow his thoughts to manipulate his surroundings. ARIES also explains how the link to the Doyen is blocked by the same technology, but only it's applied to the walls of the structure that houses him.

So what about Grace, Solomon and Viceroy? ARIES' seemingly ignores Apollo's latest question, only replying with a phrase that is both strange and now familiar to him, *come find me.*

The boy's anxiety grows as he repeats his inquiry, *ARIES, what is the status of Solomon Jon, Grace Matthew and Nathan Lex.* This time Apollo's met with only silence. He yells out in frustration at what seems like more mind games. It doesn't take long though, before desperation wins out and convinces him what it is his father wants him to do. He closes his eyes and holds out his arms, embracing the warm breeze that's comes off the ocean as if it was his father's promise. Apollo bellows out into the wind, "Okay! I finally give in! I give you all the benefit of my doubt!"

He marches forward now with a renewed sense of purpose which motivates him. He speaks out to his father even though he knows he cannot hear him, "I'm with you now, Oriah." Apollo's not even sure he understands it all yet, but still he continues straight ahead, pulling the black cap over his eyes and taking surefooted steps toward the Corsair house that's now clearly laid out in his mind.

Chapter *Two*

Furious and Paulus sit and wait for their father in the interrogation room that's adjacent from the cell holding their adversary and former neighbor, Oriah Lex. Paulus has been distant ever since he learned that Solomon and Grace had escaped from the guards he ordered to take them into custody. Paulus knows that between his girlfriend's treachery and his failure to secure the Alcazarians, his status in the family and his city is precariously hanging by the proverbial thread.

The change in his demeanor has not escaped the attention of his brother, "Paulus, what is wrong with you? You need to focus, brother. We've waited a long time for this." Paulus responds quickly, "I'm with you. I'm just worried about her." Furious shrugs off his brother's excuses, "I've already said you need to rid yourself of that one."

Vitus enters the room and immediately begins directing his two sons. The brief conversation ends with a simple plan; two deaths. One is for the prisoner across the hall, the other for their kinsmen and current leader, Brutalius Kaine. Vitus knows his sons will do what is asked of them, "Once it's done, come back here."

As they get up to leave, the oldest one, Furious, stops just before the door and turns, "You just make sure you deal with that old man the way we discussed." Vitus immediately counters, "You don't worry about me boy, just worry about your cousin." When Furious finally leaves, Vitus closes the door behind him. Alone, Vitus speaks out as if he's talking to someone, "We are playing a dangerous game, my friend."

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Paulus is the first to confirm Brutalius' location. He speaks into his communicator sending word to his brother, "He's still at the Acropolis so I'll meet you there." After a few seconds, a voice emanates back, "Good deal bro, be ready." Paulus pauses for a moment before holding the device up, pressing a few keys on its touch screen. He holds it to his ear, "Antonia, it's me. Message me back as soon as you get this. I'm headed to Alcazar with Furious. If you can, meet me at the breach in the wall. I love you, see you soon" He quickly puts the device back in his pocket and mounts his bike, racing off across the barren landscape toward Alcazar.

After only a few kilometers, Paulus spots a figure moving in the distance. It doesn't take long for it to become clear it's a Corsair soldier. But their rigid posture and slow methodical steps seem so bizarre to him, that Paulus comes to a stop just a few meters away. He dismounts his motorcycle. The closer he gets the more familiar the person becomes and before long, feelings of incredulity and heartache surge through him as Paulus' realizes it's his girlfriend.

He races to her, "Antonia! Where are you going?" But she doesn't acknowledge him, only keeps her pace steady. "Hey! What's wrong with you?" He pleads with her as he grabs her arm. She finally stops and slowly turns to him. Paulus smiles thinking he's gotten through to her, "I'm glad I finally found you." He goes in to hug her but suddenly, she makes a quick lunge and intense pain explodes through his left side. Paulus quickly looks down to see the dull shine of a knife handle protruding out of his ribs. He falls to his knees, partially from the pain, but mostly from the shock of Antonia's betrayal as she doesn't even look back and resumes her way back toward the southwest.

It isn't long before Furious rolls up on the man crawling across the dirt. He leaps from his bike, letting it slam on the ground as he realizes who it is. He quickly spots the knife sticking out, dripping with blood, "What happened? Who did this?" Paulus tries to answer but struggles for air while trying to resist choking on the blood that is rapidly filling his lung, "It was... Antonia... but... it wasn't... her." The effort brings even more coughing and blood now runs down the man's chin. Furious cringes, "I'll send a message for someone to come for you, just hang in there." With communicator in hand, Furious

presses a button on its side and speaks, "Father, are you there? Paulus needs help, he's been injured." Vitus' voice immediately responds, "I'm sending someone to your coordinates, how bad is it?"

"Bad enough," is all Furious responds with as he takes the device away from his face. He leans down and whispers into his brother's ear, "This has got to be Oriah's doing, I swear dear brother, I'm going to kill ever Alcazarian left. Now where did she go?" Paulus can only utter one brief phrase that comes in such a declining whisper that it can barely escape his lips; "to *Him*." Furious stands, snorting loudly, trying to draw in his tears. He looks back down at his diminishing brother, "Say hello to Mother for me unless I see you soon." In that moment, he almost decides to stay with Paulus but the need for revenge is just too great. Furious picks up his motorcycle and as the engine rumbles over the wind, one phrase escapes his lips,

"First things first, kill the traitor."

Chapter *Three*

Brutalius is sitting in Oriah's study at the conquered Acropolis when the report of Paulus' injury reaches him. Only one thought rushes into his mind as he turns his head to the side, towards a Corsair guard posted at the door, "Find the whereabouts of Antonia Blasio. Her orders are to report here immediately." The guard crosses his right arm against his chest in obedience and swiftly steps down the hallway as a crooked grin breaks through Brutalius' ink-blackened face, *it's all mine now.*

Nearly a half hour passes before the soldier returns, "We have searched everywhere, Sire, she's nowhere to be found." Brutalius quickly rises from his chair and walks over, "What do you mean she's nowhere to be found? What kind of imbecile are you?" Brutalius shoves the guard as he pulls the man's communicator out, attempting to contact Antonia himself. After several tries with no results, Brutalius hurls the device, "If she's not found, I'm holding you personally responsible!" He then gives the man another violent shove as he heads down the hallway to the grounds below.

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A wake of dust churns from his rear tire as Brutalius heads towards Corsair Territory to personally search for the one person in the world that means anything to him. It doesn't take long for him to find her, walking somberly across the dry terrain. He parks his bike and walks to her as Antonia greets him with a warm smile, "Everything is in place, Sire."

They embrace and Brutalius begins kissing her neck, cherishing the inevitable victory in both his ambitions and his heart, "You have done well, my dear." Suddenly a rumble roars around them and their reunion is short-lived. They release just in time to see Furious dismount his bike.

He sneers at the couple as the orange tips of his mohawk begin to glimmer. He steps toward the pair with enthusiasm, "I knew today would be a good day. Which one of you wants it first?"

Brutalius replies to his cousin like the superior he believes to be, "Your orders are to remain in Alcazar until otherwise instructed, *Soldier.*" Furious scowls and a brief flash of fiery shimmering light streaks down the tips of his hair, "I don't take orders from you Cousin, never have, never will. And after today, *no one* will." Instantly, Furious' mohawk bursts into red flames as trails of a fire-like essence flow down his forearms, twisting over each other like braids of red flame. Then in a shimmering ring, Furious flings his arms outwards and two long golden blades spring from each hand. The intertwining fire from his arms quickly spreads to each weapon. Furious leaps into the air, twisting his body toward Brutalius and Antonia. He slices the air with both swords and the action sends rippling waves of fire lashing across their bodies.

"Arrrggghh!" Antonia screams as the burns lacerate her side. She turns to run and Furious readies another strike. He's about to send the hurling blaze toward the fleeing woman but he's thrown to the ground. Brutalius is quickly on top of him, "I am the rightful ruler of our Clan and you *will* succumb!" Brutalius slams a small dagger into Furious' side and immediately, a pale mass spreads from the wound, bringing horrific screams deep from within the man's lungs.

Furious finally manages to send his right elbow into Brutalius temple, dislodging his grip, allowing him to reach his feet. He quickly summons two more fiery swords, sending them crossing over each other in front with ever-increasing-speed. Cackling, Furious slowly charges his target, sending ever-increasingly intense swells of flaming plasma, pummeling Brutalius' body with repetitive ferocity. The relentless assault knocks the man back until he is nothing but a defeated smoldering heap, lying lifeless on the ground.

"I'm glad you finally *crossed* me, Brute." Furious chuckles, "And now, I'm going to kill your *girlfriend*. Remember that as you take your last breath." Furious examines the man's horrid condition, stopping

just long enough to send his boot into Brutalius' side. As he returns to his bike, the flaming hue of his mohawk returns to normal and he rumbles toward Antonia.

Furious ignores the pain raging from the wound that was inflicted by the man left dying behind him. He's is too occupied with locating his new prey. After a while though, Furious begins to question if he went in the right direction because Antonia is nowhere in sight. Coming to a stop, Furious takes a puzzled look around. The land is so flat, he's certain he couldn't have missed anything. With too much time and fuel already wasted Furious turns back, yelling out, "I'll find you soon enough, traitor!"

He arrives back at the place where Brutalius fell, and his bewilderment grows even stronger as it seems Brutalius has also disappeared. Nothing about the area says there was even a fight. As he tries to figure out what happened, a wide grin beams across he face as he notices a woman frantically running up ahead of him. Furious' mohawk is again engulfed in flames as he races toward Antonia, leaving a blazing comet-like trail behind him.

The deep sound of his motorcycle cuts through the wind as Furious veers his bike toward the scrambling girl. Antonia turns back at her pursuer. Her grimace and wide eyes illustrate the terror pervading from her as she loses ground to him. "Pleeease!" She screams out as Furious bears down, his front tire ready to clip her legs. Then in an sudden shrilling stop, an explosive sound of clamoring metal rings out as Furious' chopper is suddenly compressed into a mound of mangled steel. He is flung through the air and his body smashes against solid stone. What was an open path a moment ago is now a group of towering boulders. Bloody and broken, Furious lays motionless on the ground as Brutalius and Antonia approach.

Brutalius revels in his victory, "That mind control serum you extracted from the Nephilim worked better than I could have imagined. He was completely taken by it." Brutalius examines the burned whelp across Antonia's back as she turns to him, planting a kiss on his cheek, "I'm fine my love, it didn't penetrate the armor. And did you ever doubt me?" Brutalius faces her now, gazing into her brown eyes, stroking her curly hair as he wraps a lock around the back of her ear, "Not for a second my dear, come now, help me bound him." The two pick up the unconscious man and carry him to an awaiting black truck, "We'll take him back to the Acropolis; I know the perfect place to hide him for now. I want him to see me before he dies. I want him to know who did it."

They pitch him in the back and shackle his arms and legs together. Brutalius take Furious' communicator out of his pocket, drops it to the ground and smashes it with his boot. While up in front, Antonia turns the key, bringing the engine roaring to life. Brutalius joins her and as she leans back, she places her hand on Brutalius' jaw, turning his face toward hers, "That's one down, two to go, my love."

Chapter *Four*

"Where are we going?" Grace yells as she runs trying to catch up with Solomon, but he just looks straight ahead, marching down the dark damp passage that leads back to the Acropolis. The two have been sleeping in the tunnel ever since they escaped from their Corsair captives, "My mother's not dead, Grace. I can feel it."

"I know, Solomon and we'll find her." Grace still doesn't understand what Solomon did to those guards, but she learned that day not to let him get too emotional. Those soldiers had the grave misfortune of learning the hard way and they paid for it with their lives. The appalling way their bodies disintegrated still haunts her, like pieces of broken stone, crumbling in a landslide.

Even at night, their screams rule her sleep. Her dream always start the same, the scene of their escape. Just like in the actual event, the soldiers are mocking Solomon with names like, "Crybaby" and "Momma's Boy". Then taking turns, they kick and shove him around until the teasing ultimately breaks him down. Solomon falls to his knees with pitiful cries of torment as if announcing the fierce tremors suddenly surrounding everyone, resonating in their bones.

The soldiers' skin instantly pales to the color of the surrounding dust as their wails of agony mingle in with the deafening noise of the roaring quake. Their bodies, now apparently solid as stone, crack and crumble apart in gruesome, ghastly pieces.

Then in a flash, the dream changes and Grace finds herself at the alcove. She's overjoyed when she sees Apollo walking toward the mouth of the tunnel. She runs to embrace him but strangely he doesn't respond to her, just pushing her out of the way, murmuring something incoherent.

Refusing to leave him again, Grace continues pleading but still goes unanswered. Apollo repeatedly shoves her back but his words are clearer now, "You were *not* part of the plan."

It's in this moment Grace wakes up. Her eyes full of tears and her heart stinging with the pain of betrayal. And then actual reality sets in, reminding her that Apollo is truly not with her, maybe not even *alive*, and her heart breaks all over again.

They finally reach the source of the passage to find it leads to a lowly lit, damp room with walls of solid granite. As Solomon steps into the space, Grace grabs him by the shoulder, "How do you know where to go?" And he replies without looking at her, only staring straight ahead, "I don't."

Grace definitely doesn't want to upset him, but she knows she has to try and reason with him, "Maybe we should find Apollo first, he could help us." Solomon quickly turns and growls, "We don't know if he's even alive, Grace!" But Grace courageously swallows down her nerves and returns his grim stare with an empathetic smile, "He's alive Solomon, I can feel it. I can feel him in my heart, just like you can feel your mother in yours. We will find them both, together."

Solomon suddenly stoops down with his head in his hands. When he finally looks up at her, it's with a miserable expression, "You can't possibly feel what I do, Grace, because to tell you the truth, I don't feel *anything*." His head droops back down, as his tears begin making small craters in the dirt, " But I can't let her go." Grace kneels down beside her friend and puts her arm around his shoulders, "Then don't. We shouldn't give up hope, neither of us."

After a long moment, Solomon finally stands, stepping through the hole in the wall, looking back at Grace, "I'm going to find out where this place leads and maybe find the others. I want you to join me, but if you decide to go look for Apollo, I'll understand." Grace looks at him and Solomon holds his hand out to her. She isn't sure what she should do, but she definitely doesn't want to be alone. So in the end, she takes it and steps through as well.

They search around for a while before Grace speaks up, "What is this place?" And Solomon quips, "I'm guessing a basement." Laughs come from both as Solomon points at a stone staircase. He runs for it but Grace hesitates, "What do we do when we run into Corsair guards?"

Solomon replies, "We'll just be careful. I know my way around." But Grace still stands undecided. Even though the thought of facing the Corsair alone completely terrifies her, she still has to find her way back to Apollo. He's the guy who risked his life for her and the one she fell in love with, "I can't do it Solomon, I'm sorry but I just can't. Apollo needs me." She cringes at the hurt in Solomon's eyes, "Grace, I..."

His words are interrupted by voices coming from above, "Bring him down here! I found this place soon after we arrived!" The shocked teenagers scramble to make it back through the hole as Solomon whispers in Grace's ear, "I know *that* voice." Suddenly, the thought of what happened to the guards from before jumps in Grace's head, making her shiver as she puts her hand on Solomon's shoulder.

The two watch as Brutalius and Antonia drag a prisoner down the stairs, chains draped from the prisoner's hands and feet ringing out a dull chime against the stone floor. His mohawk is instantly recognizable to Solomon as it's the person who, in his mind, saved him from certain death. When Brutalius slaps Furious' face, he speaks to him in a sarcastic tone, "Wake up, *dear*, time to wake up!"

Furious jerks back, dragging his body, trying to find something to lean against. He finds the wall just as Antonia takes a large pistol-like tool and presses it against the granite above his head. With a dull thud the device discharges, leaving a black metallic ring protruding from the wall. They pull Furious' arms up and connect his handcuffs to the ring. "We'll come back for you later. Right now, we have some details to attend to. You know, killing Alcazarians and all."

Antonia injects something into Furious' arm and they both stand up, making their way back up the steps. Grace looks at Solomon, trying to read his face and waits for a reaction. The boy peers through the opening and sees Furious slumped over with his arms raised above his head. He can tell the man is unconscious and looks back at Grace, "It's okay let's go, he's out cold."

Grace pokes her head out as Solomon walks up to the man, "We need to help him." Grace quickly responds, "Are you crazy? He's Corsair! He'll kill us!" Solomon implores to her, "No he won't. He could have already watched me die if he wanted to, but he didn't. He's different, I'm telling you."

She finally creeps out of the hole and slowly approaches the man chained to the wall. Kneeling down to look at him, Grace runs her fingers over the edge of his stiff, spiked hair. She is intrigued at his unique appearance. Most of the Corsair men she's seen have at least been partly covered in tattoos, but she can't find a single one on him.

Suddenly, Furious jumps, "Rawr!" Grace shrieks out loud and scrambling on her knees, hiding behind Solomon. Solomon yells at the man, "Hey! Don't do that!" Furious erupts in maniacal laughter, "I'm apologize, Miss. I didn't mean to scare you." More laughs come now as Grace remains cowering behind Solomon. Solomon isn't as easily intimidated as the girl, so he counters, "I guess you don't want our help." Furious responds immediately, "Who said I *needed* it?" Solomon calmly takes Grace's hand and leads her toward the staircase, "Fine then, rot here until they come back to kill you." They almost get halfway up the staircase before Furious finally replies,

"Okay, you got me. I'll help you."

Chapter *Five*

Apollo's apprehension grows as he walks further into Corsair Territory. Neon signs tower over the gray, stone-like buildings now that sit along the narrow streets that are littered with trash. It's not what Apollo imagined and it's definitely a stark contrast to the spacious farms he's used to. But to some relief though, the people he has come across have largely ignored him. Mostly, he sees women and children with the occasional elderly man. He's stunned at how poor they look with their mismatched clothes and dirty faces.

Eventually Apollo spots something that is familiar to him. It's the structure from his dream. He's not really surprised at anything that comes his way anymore and as he almost expected, an old woman emerges from the door, ready to greet him.

"Hello there, my name is Julia; I've been expecting you. Come inside, quickly!"

Apollo doesn't hesitate, following behind the lady and entering the building. The interior is the same as the dream as well, except this time, the fireplace is dark and empty. Apollo wonders what it could mean as Julia breaks the silence, "I'm still waiting for my granddaughter to bring wood for the fire. Come and sit." Julia gestures toward a set of chairs next the fireplace, "Oria told me long ago this day would come and here you are! He's a peculiar one, your father."

Apollo looks at the old woman with intrigue, "How do you know him? What else did he tell you?" Julia speaks again, "I've known your father his entire life. You know, he came here once, years ago, and told me there would be another upheaval, and when that day comes, *you* would come here, seeking my help." Then their conversation is abruptly interrupted by a roaring sound outside and then by the front door bursting open. Apollo is almost knocked to the floor by the astounding sight before him.

"I found plenty of firewood, Grandma." The pale-skinned girl in the door smiles at the old lady then at Apollo, "I see we have company!" Apollo stands up, gawking at her. He can't help but stare into those familiar gray eyes, "Misery?" The young girl gives him a puzzled look before erupting into the sweet smile Apollo had remembered, "Um, no. I'm quite happy at the moment, thank you, I guess." Apollo shakes his head, "No, I mean, that's your name, isn't it?" The girl smirks, "No, it's Luna. So are you gonna help me with this or not?" Apollo stammers something awkward as he grabs her armful of timber, bringing it into the house. He can't help but look back at her, she's a perfect match for the girl from the Chamber.

Soon, the three sit comfortably by a fire that is now glowing in the hearth. Apollo feels better than he has in a long time. Julia's cooking rivals even the Acropolis cafeteria and he can't remember when the last time he felt this content. Julia entertains them with her stories, giving a colorful description of the first days of Alcazar.

"So you and my grandmother helped start Alcazar?"

"Yes."

"And I guess there was a rebellion and those people became the Corsair?"

"That's right."

"So what happened to her, my grandmother?"

Julia turns her head toward the fire, staring out at its blaze, "I don't know if your father wants me to go into that." She turns back to Apollo, the reflection of the fire glowing in her eyes, "But I can tell you this, you will soon find the answers you seek. Luna will take you back home tomorrow."

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"So how did you guys end up being Corsair?" Apollo couldn't bring himself to ask the old lady that, but now that it's the next morning and he's finally alone with Luna, it's the first thing out of his mouth. Luna straps a satchel onto the back of one of the motorcycles as she answers him, "My grandfather was Corsair but he died when I was young. We just stayed here I guess." Apollo has to keep

reminding himself that she's not the girl he thinks she is. But every so often though, he catches himself wishing she was. Then guilt reaches up, painfully reminding him of his love for Grace. He's way too comfortable with this girl.

Luna fastens the last buckle on the bag and turns to him, "Do you ride?" Apollo can just hang his head in embarrassment and slightly shake it before Luna grabs the boy's hand, "It's okay, you can ride with me. I want to show you something, come on!" Luna straddles the motorcycle, slaps the seat and motions for Apollo to join her. When he clammers on, Luna immediately grabs his arms and pulls them around her, resting his hands on her hips. The girl's sweet scent tingles his senses and he can barely breathe being this close to her. Then Apollo has to brace himself as Luna cackles and they rocket off down the beach, "Hold on!"

They ride along the ocean for at least half an hour. Every so often, Luna turns back and peers at Apollo. Her cheek touches his chin as tips of her black hair sting his face, sending waves of excitement shivering through him. Apollo tries to ignore the sensation and yells into the oncoming wind, "Where are we going!" Luna looks back and answers with a smile, "Somewhere beautiful, a place not touched by war!"

Eventually the beach becomes beset with enormous boulders, with waves crashing together between them in a white foamy dance. Something catches Apollo's attention, a rising ridge in the distance that Luna is apparently heading towards. Within minutes, Apollo's watching those large rocks grow gradually smaller as the motorcycle begins to climb.

Soon the incline levels out and Luna slows down. They cruise through increasingly larger swathes of trees until they're surrounded by dense forest and Luna has to bring the bike to a stop. They climb off and she grabs the backpack, strapping it on, "We have to hike it from here, follow me." Apollo follows her lead and she takes him through the thick woods, meandering between the trees, until they reach a river. A wide ribbon of clear water speeding past, making crests and ripples that cream around the banks.

Apollo stares at the rapids, he's never seen anything like it. To him, it's way more impressive than the ocean, more energetic and full of life. The energy gives him ideas, reminiscent of the waves back at the pond. But it also reminds him of something he can no longer do, something else the Corsair robbed from him when they stole his home, his family. The thought occurs to him to reach out to ARIES when Luna turns back to him, "Stop. We're here."

He follows the girl as she sits down on a large flat stone next to the water, "Apollo, let me ask you something. Have you ever wondered where your name came from?" The boy looks at her with confusion, "What?" And she laughs, "Your name, Apollo. Have you ever wondered what it meant?" "No"

"Well my grandmother told me that I was named after an ancient goddess. Luna, the Goddess of the Moon, and the other night, before you came, she told me about you." Apollo shakes his head, "I don't understand what this has to do with anything." Luna puts her finger over his lips and pulls his eyes into hers, "Just shut up and listen, let me finish." Apollo leans back, listening quietly as Luna continues, "Your name, Apollo, it comes from the same place. You were also named after an ancient God, the God of the Sun." This causes Apollo to interrupt her again, "So what are you saying? The sun and moon equals me and you?" Luna yells at him, "No, I *said* let me finish!" Apollo mumbles an apology and sits quietly as Luna continues.

"So it's like this, we were named like that because we were part of some military program from the old government. Our names were chosen for a *reason* and they mean something. Everything *means* something, Apollo. And the only way I can explain it to you is to tell you the whole story as my grandmother told it to me. So just listen, okay?"

Unlike Apollo, nothing was hidden from the girl and for reasons he still can't explain, Apollo knows he can trust her, "Okay." So Luna goes into the story, through her grandmother's eyes, about how they both came to be and why they are here.

Chapter *Six*

Julia's Story

I have come to the conclusion that being a lab experiment is a lot better than being on patrol in the hot sun. Even though everyone said it, I have yet to regret signing up for this, and having a baby was something I always wanted. So what if there are some strings attached.

I was chosen for this program because I had a rare active gene in my DNA that the government hoped could be useful in specific research. The Army had always been good to me so I decided to sign up. My pay was tripled and they made the laboratory complex seem so wonderful. It was off-base and right on the beach and I would have full access to it and the town. All I had to do was go through a daily training regimen and a series of weekly tests, be inseminated, and give birth to a child.

The accommodations at the complex are rather plain but my living quarters are huge. There's a living room, bedroom, kitchen and full bathroom. There's even a balcony overlooking the ocean. Besides the daily round of exercises and occasional test, I'm free to do whatever I want which is pretty awesome.

I've even managed to make a friend, another recruit down the hall named Myra. She joined up just a few days before I did and we have become pretty close over the last few months. I haven't seen her in the last couple of days, so I decide to go visit.

It takes a few minutes for her to answer her door. I greet her as soon as it cracks open, "Hey you! I haven't seen you in a while." Myra looks like death warmed over, dark circles under her eyes and a pale sickly color to her skin. I can't help but ask, "Are you sick or something?" And she just turns back, letting the door swing open, "What does it look like?"

I follow her in even though she just snapped my head off, which she quickly apologizes for, "Hey, I'm sorry Julia. I didn't mean to be rude. It's just ever since I became pregnant I've been sick like this every morning. It's so awful."

She looks at me with her dreadful appearance but I can see a smile start to emerge. I can tell Myra is happy about the baby even though right now she's miserable. "Come on in, I'll make some coffee, decaf of course." I put my hand on her shoulder, "No you sit, and I'll make the coffee."

We talk for a while at the kitchen table, sipping on the brew and she starts to complain about the name given to her for the baby, "They said I had to name him Orion. What kind of name is that?" I try not to laugh but it isn't easy when Myra herself is snickering. "We're already making fun of the little guy and he's not even here yet, Myra!" We both laugh out loud this time, "They said I could change it a little but it has to be approved. Whoever is running this thing is pretty anal about it huh?" I shake my head, "Yeah, just a little." I get up to walk out to the balcony. "Let's go sit outside; the fresh air will do you some good."

The breeze coming off the water is warm and inviting, but still, it doesn't take long for Myra to bring up her son's name again, "I've come up with a better version of it. Do you want to hear it?" I look at her with curiosity, "Yeah, what is it?" Myra looks out at the water, "I've been doing a lot of reading lately and there's a correlation in the list of names for the children in this program and I think I've figured out what they are trying to do." I go from curiosity to confusion, "What are you talking about Myra?"

"Oh, never mind, I didn't mean to ramble on, anyway, it's Oriah. That's what I'm going to name him, Oriah Lex." Instantly, I answer Myra with my honest reaction, "I like it." And I do like it, it has a nice ring to it, "So do you think they'll approve it?" Myra then turns and smiles at me, "They already have."

I go back to my own room exhausted, but sleep eludes me as thoughts of my own inevitable pregnancy circle around my head. I get up and walk over to the computer monitor, "Computer, list the names of children in Project Nephilim." The screen flashes with a long list and I spend an hour scouring over them until I decide on two I like, Leo if it's a boy and Cassiopeia if it's a girl. My plan is to request those names and just maybe they will let me have my choice.

It takes months but I'm finally pregnant. I'm thrilled when the news comes in that it's a girl and the name request has been approved. Little Cassi rules my thoughts, my dreams, and I spend every waking hour either talking to her or longing for the day when we can finally meet. Myra comes by and checks in on me every day. I didn't get as sick as she did and she always likes to poke fun at me for it, calling me lucky or comment on how easy I'm having it.

Oriah is so cute. He's almost four months old now but he's so shy. "I'm thinking of having another one, Julia." Myra says and I admit the idea never occurred to me. I was shocked she even said it, "They'll let you do that?" She chuckles, "Strange but yes, apparently we are a rare breed, you and I." And I just try to shake off the thought, "Yeah, I guess."

When the day finally comes for Cassi to arrive, I am rushed straight into the delivery room and put under anesthesia. So the next thing I remember is waking up to her beside me in the incubator. She was so tiny and precious. I'll never forget the moment the nurse first handed her to me. Her little head was full of jet black hair and with chubby cheeks, she was the most beautiful thing ever. She even had Oriah beat in cuteness and I didn't think that was possible. My heart was overwhelmed with a new love that day.

And that love was broken the day we buried her. The dreary weather that morning seemed to mimic my anguish, heartache and loneliness. It mocked me. Her death came during the rebellion and after I fell in love with Felix. We had all sworn an oath to the newly formed Corsair together and now with both of them gone, I feel hopelessly trapped. They both died fighting for what they believed in, but it left me alone to raise my granddaughter.

It rained steadily in the region back then. I knew it had to be from Oriah's broken heart. I can't recall him ever being this sad. Myra's death consumed him and given his special talents, I'm sure his grief had manifested into this never-ending gloom for everyone.

He came to see me once, years later, telling a story about how peace will never last between the two Cities and one day fighting will start again. "More of our children will suffer, Julia. And so my son will come here and it will be up to you to guide him home. This will be years from now, but I must be able to count on you to do as I ask?" Oriah had always been like a son so for me, it was an easy promise to make, "I will do as you ask Oriah, in honor of your mother."

He kissed my forehead as spoke again, "Don't hide anything from the girl, tell her the whole story. Her talents are strong. I know she can handle it. These two will need that knowledge just as much as each other when the time comes." I reassure him, "I'll raise her strong and proud Oriah." Then I step to him, holding his face in his hands, "But you stay strong for me too, okay? It's what your mother would want." Oriah smiles, and when his eyes crinkle, they glisten with tears, "I can't let her go, Julia."

"Then don't," I say as I place my hand over his heart, "She is always right here, you know." Oriah hugs me and his sobs don't last as he gains his composure quickly. He steps back, giving a more convincing smile, "I'll be fine, and don't worry about anything. It's all a part of the plan."

~

Luna finishes her grandmother's story explaining how she and Apollo were named after ancient gods because they were meant to rule, *bred* to rule. She also explains how ARIES is also like one of them, a child of the program. And about how she's waiting for them to return to unlock protocol set up by Oriah that will finally liberate Alcazar from the threat of the Corsair once and for all. "There's a tunnel outside the city walls. It's supposed to lead to the Acropolis." Apollo finally breaks his silence, "I know where that is." Then the smile he fell in love with permeates across the girl's porcelain face, "Okay then, let's go and get your home back."

Chapter *Seven*

As Brutalius and Antonia walk through the Great Hall, the guards lining the wall pound their chests in salute. Brutalius points to one of them, "You! Come here at once!" The soldier rushes to his superior and Brutalius' commands him, "Give me the status on the End Game Project." The guard slams his right fist into his chest and scurries off, down the hall. A few minutes later he comes marching back, "The Project is awaiting your inspection, Sire."

Brutalius gives his approval before barking more orders, "That's good news soldier, really good news. Now back to your post!" The guard runs off and Brutalius takes Antonia's hand, "It won't be long now my love." He leans down and kisses it, "Shall we go see how our friend is doing?" Antonia smiles, "Yeah, let's see what we have accomplished."

They walk downstairs and enter the stairwell that leads to where they imprisoned Furious. But instead of stepping all the way to the bottom, they cut through a door after the third flight and walk down a long corridor. They enter a room that's mostly empty, except for a female Corsair soldier sitting behind a computer monitor. In front of her is a large metallic table surrounded by what looks like medical equipment. An unconscious man lies on the table and numerous cables and tubes run from his body to several monitoring devices. Strange metallic blade-like probes pierce into his temples.

"Hello Nathan, how are we doing today?" Brutalius smirks, knowing the man cannot answer. "The day has finally come, my friend." Brutalius looks over at Antonia who in turn, looks at the woman sitting at the monitor, "Initiate End Game Protocol on my mark." Antonia turns back to Brutalius, "Let me activate your client device." She presses a series of keys on a panel and secures a gold bracelet to Brutalius' wrist, giving it a twist which causes it to glow in a dull red glimmer. Stepping away, Brutalius holds out his hands and instantly, a long golden spear appears. Antonia speaks out loud, "Okay ready. Three, two, one, initiate!"

The man on the table suddenly jolts and the spear radiates in a brilliant reddish glow, as does Brutalius' eyes which are also filled with the same eerie light. He walks over to the woman at the computer with an evil smile perched on his face, "Brace yourself." He lightly touches the pole-arm against her shoulder and she instantly screams in agony as a fiery-red essence spreads from the blade and across her skin, consuming her entire body. Antonia gags from the stench of burning flesh but Brutalius doesn't even flinch. Then he slams the weapon into the wall and the weapon instantly dissipates in a brilliant flash and clamoring boom, leaving a gaping hole in the solid stone.

"Power down!" Antonia yells, "Secure the Host!" She walks over to Brutalius who is still admiring his work. "It was fully tested, Sire, there was no reason for that!" She gives him a scornful stare and Brutalius just smirks back, shaking his head, "Don't ever question me." He then extends his hand out, "Now, if you would be so kind and accompany me to the library and that's an order."

As they walk, Antonia explains how they still aren't able to decrypt ARIES' code, "It's not based on anything we know. It almost like someone invented a completely different set of laws for mathematics." Brutalius stops briefly and responds to her like the dim brute he is, "Then just destroy it!" Antonia shakes her head, "It's not that simple. It's hardware is protected by energy fields and we don't even know how the thing is powered. All that information and anything else we need are in the computer's files, which we are unable to hack into."

Brutalius continues with his flawed logic, "Then bring me the Nephilim. We'll use him to access the thing!" Antonia has to hold in her frustration this time as she answers, "The Nephilim is *dead*, Sire, remember?" They resume their walk and Brutalius doesn't speak again until they reach the door to the library, "Then contact my uncle, tell him to delay the Doyen's execution."

Antonia slightly shakes her head as she takes out her communicator. Brutalius walks into the media room, speaking out loud, "ARIES, I am now the ruler of Alcazar! Relinquish all commands and functions to me, at once!" His voice echoes off the rounded walls which it's followed by only silence. He repeats his request twice more, getting louder each time but met with the same empty result.

Antonia walks in and whispers to him, repeating news that sends Brutalius flying into a tantrum, "I'm sorry, we're too late, Oriah's *dead*." The man shouts profanities now and jumps in the air like a spoiled child. He points at Antonia, his eyes filled with rage, his words raspy and straightforward, "If this doesn't end well for me, *my dear*. I assure you, it won't end well for you either!"

~

Solomon speaks as he stares down at Furious, the man he just help set free, "So what's the plan?" Furious just looks at the boy with amusement and rubs his wrists, "Plan? There is no plan, chief." Grace steps beside Solomon, "You said you would help us!"

"Help you do what?"

Grace looks at Furious for a second before sorrow fills her face and she drops her head, "We... well...we just don't have anywhere else to go. What do you plan to do with all of us Alcazarians anyway? Kill us all?" Most of the time Furious would have some clever remark to come back with, but this time he just looks at the girl with pity, "Well my plan is to kill Brutalius and after that, I guess we can see."

Grace sends her hand flying towards Furious' face, but he catches her by the wrist just before impact. Then Solomon also grabs Furious' arm, "Hey! Let go of her!" Furious chuckles to himself as he attempts to defuse the situation, "Calm down Bro, what I meant to say was *our* plan is to kill Brutalius." He grins and Solomon just gives a cold stare, "And then what?" And Furious responds to him in a way that's just another attempt to not agitate circumstances, "And then we'll negotiate peace."

"Well which way do we go?" Grace interjects, trying to move things along. Furious replies, "Brutalius is probably trying to access the main computer, but I'm not sure where that is." Solomon speaks up, "I do."

"Well good chief, lead the way."

Grace asks, "But what about the other prisoners? Where are all the Alcazarians?" Her questioning give Furious a moment of hesitation, but then he responds in his usual way, "What makes you think there *are* any prisoners, sweetheart?" Solomon now lunges at him, and Furious just bellows with laughter as he easily pushes the boy away, "Keep your cool, we kill Brutalius *then* free everyone, okay? I thought that was the plan." Grace steps between them, "Let's just do it his way Solomon. Besides, you said we could trust him." Solomon briefly gives a stern glance to Grace then back to Furious, "Okay then, follow me."

The three walk up the stairwell and reach the main floor of the Acropolis. Solomon pauses briefly, trying to gain his bearings. "I thought you said you know where it is?" Furious asks and the boy quickly counters, "I do, just give me a minute, it's in the library." Just then, a voice breaks the silence, "You there! Don't move!" They look behind them to see two Corsair guards coming from down the hallway. Solomon and Grace instantly look to Furious for what to do and Furious immediately berates the guards, "It's me, you idiots! As you were!" But the guards maintain their approach and one questions Furious' intentions. "Where are you going with the prisoners, Sir?" Furious answers with contempt, "Since when do I answer to you, Grunt?" The guard replies, "I'm just following orders, Sir."

Furious leans into Grace now, "I'm taking them to Brutalius, per his request, for target practice if you must know." He cups her face in his hand, "Rumor has it, he loves hacking on pretty young girls." Grace jerks away, scowling at him, almost pouting as he cackles in reaction. Then Furious screams at the guards, "Now as you were, Grunts! Don't *make* me repeat myself!" The two soldiers comply this time mumbling something as they make their way past, continuing on their patrol. Grace's gives Furious a shove, "You think you're funny, huh?" Her comment brings more laughter from him and he teases her again, "Lighten up, I called you pretty didn't I?" Grace's cheeks chafe with embarrassment, "You're a jerk."

Furious continues his snickers as the two follow Solomon around the corner and up a staircase, "It's right up here." Solomon points to a door at the end of another hallway and Furious takes the lead, "Okay, when the fighting starts, you two take cover." They fall in behind as Furious cracks open the door, peering in.

Chapter *Eight*

Luna gets up and grabs the satchel beside her on the flat stone, "I need to change clothes real quick before we go. We have to make a stop on the way to Alcazar." Luna hands Apollo the bag and starts taking things out of it. She holds some black garments in her hands and glares at him, "Turn around!" Apollo immediately turns, clearing his throat and mumbling some sort of an apology. Immediately, he hears the sound of fabric being shuffled around and the jingle of the girl's belt buckle fills his head with images of what's going on behind him.

"Hand me the black make-up case, please." Luna says and Apollo fumbles around in the bag until he finds a small box and reaches back to hand it to her. He takes a quick glance just in time to catch a brief glimpse of her bare midriff. Luna reaches over his shoulder, taking a hairbrush out of the bag, "I saw that." Her laughter tickles his ear as she leans back and starts roughly running the brush through her straight black hair.

Apollo stammers something again and tries to look innocent but Luna just smirks as she turns him around and hands him a small mirror. She bends down and stares into it, pulling off the lid of an eyeliner pencil. She applies the make-up to her eyes and starts talking again, "I hate wearing this stuff, but we got to look the part. We're going to this creepy dive bar that's always full of grunts." Luna runs some lipstick around her lips, rolling them together in the mirror. Apollo watches her pucker at her reflection and he can't help but laugh, "Grunts?" Luna looks up at him and snickers, "Yeah grunts, soldiers."

The word makes Apollo's apprehension spike and it's almost like Luna can sense it, "It will be okay. We'll just keep a low profile, it'll be fine." She grabs the mirror out of his hand and stashes it in the satchel along with the rest, and for the first time, Apollo sees the finished results of her efforts. Tight leather pants and the black tank top cling to her perfectly and he can't but stare at her curves. His eyes follow up Luna's body until they make contact with her cold pale eyes glaring at him through dark eyeliner, "What do you think you're you looking at?" The accusatory expression on Luna's face leaves Apollo lost for words but then she bursts into laughter, slipping on a shiny black leather jacket and punching him hard in the shoulder, "You need to lighten up."

He follows her in awkward silence, rubbing his arm, as they wind back through the trees and reach the motorcycle. Apollo's still carrying the satchel so Luna takes it from him, fastening it to the seat. "You okay?" She asks as she climbs on. Apollo joins her, putting his hands around her waist, "Yeah, I'm okay." His fingers find the bare skin just below her shirt and suddenly, he struggles to catch his breath.

Apollo does well to hang on as they meander through the gradually diminishing forest. He's thinking about how he is so intimidated by this girl. It's far different than with Grace. He's known that girl his entire life and it seemed almost natural, way easier than this. Then his thoughts are suddenly distracted as he feels Luna's hand on his thigh, "Hang on!" She squeals and the motorcycle roars, rapidly gaining speed as they zoom down the hill.

They're now cruising up the coast and Luna begins instructing Apollo, "When we get there, keep your head down and let me do the talking." Apollo is still nervous about the prospect of even going to a Corsair bar, so he questions her, "Where are we going anyway?" Luna looks back at him, "It's a place called Urem De Occultis, people call it The Oculus. There's someone there that will help us."

"Who?"

"A man named Seth."

"Who's that?"

Luna brings the bike to a halt, spinning the back tire and sending a wave of sand out in front of them, almost throwing Apollo, "He's just a guy." Apollo looks at her in disbelief and it sends twinges of guilt though the girl's stomach. "So now you're keeping secrets from me too?"

She jumps off the bike and Apollo's not used to it's full weight so it slams into the sand, "It's not like that," Luna retorts as she walks away. Apollo runs after her. He puts his hand on her shoulder, "Tell

me then, what it's like?" Luna turns around, slapping at him, "Look, I'm not keeping anything from you. I know you want to know more, and believe me, you'll get your chance." She continues to scowl, her pink pale lips pressed tightly together as she waits for Apollo's response.

"Look, I'm sorry." Apollo says as he tries to embrace her but she pulls away, crossing her arms and glowers at him before responding, "Look, before we go any further, you have to swear to trust me. We're in this thing together, whether you like it or not." Apollo continues trying to apologize to her, "I know, I swear I have..." But Luna doesn't let him finish, "At least wait until we get to ARIES, and then you can decide if you want to hate me or not."

She walks off and picks up the motorcycle, climbing on. Apollo continues to plead with her, "Luna, I don't hate you, I..." But she interrupts him again, "Look, we need to get going." She barely gives enough time for Apollo to climb on before she kicks the bike and they tear off back up the beach.

The girl doesn't say anything to him now, even after they reach the streets of Corsair Territory, almost a half hour later. Apollo tugs his black cap over his eyes as they ride down the streets, noticing the people all watching them. They take a couple of turns and roll up a narrow alley. They turn again and Luna accelerates this time, between two tall buildings and along a space that's barely wide enough for them to fit. Concrete rubs Apollo's legs as he tries to pull them in as close as he can. When the path eventually opens, it seems as if they are back on the main street. They make one more turn before Apollo finally sees it.

The Oculus.

Chapter *Nine*

It isn't nearly as tall as the buildings around it, but for what the Oculus lacks for in height it makes up for in intimidation. It's gothic appearance is accented by tall narrow windows, each one framing pulses of fire that flare up, over and over behind each pane. The two large gargoyles that accent each side of the wide archway in front, breathe with fire and frame the entrance. As they pull in, Apollo notices a large crowd outside. They're surrounding something he can't quite make out and he cranes his neck trying to catch a glimpse. Luna slams the bike to a stop, reiterating what she said before, "I *said* keep your head down!"

They venture inside and Apollo's courage quickly cowers from the sight of the Corsair soldiers, *everywhere*. There has to be at least a hundred packed into the modest space because Luna practically shoves them out of the way and squeezes through. They finally make it to the bar and she speaks to the woman behind the counter cleaning beer glasses, "Where's Seth?" The lady continues looking down at the sink and snaps, "He's not here." Then the woman looks up to see who she's talking to, and her demeanor instantly brightens, "Hey Lu! We didn't know you were going to be here, is everything okay?"

"Yeah everything's fine I just need to talk to him." The woman motions over at Apollo, "Who's your friend?" And Luna turns to him, "Petra, this is Apollo." The woman then gives a nervous smile that clearly makes Apollo feel a slight hint of discomfort, "Indeed." She turns back to Luna, "I'll tell him you're here. Let me know if you need anything." Luna smiles back, "Okay, thanks."

As the woman walks down to the other end of the bar, Luna starts to say something to Apollo but a hand lands on her shoulder, "Where have *you* been hiding?" Behind her stands a really tall soldier just a few years older than them. He has greasy blonde hair and his skin almost completely covered in tattoos. He just stares down at Luna as she tries to blow him off, "Leave me alone, Marcus. I'm here with someone." The man looks at Apollo and points, "You mean this little twerp?"

Suddenly, Luna leans in and presses her lips hard against Apollo's. The boy's eyes widen in shock before they close and he takes in the sensation of her kiss. After a few seconds, she finally breaks it off and instantly looks back, "Yeah, now leave us alone!" Marcus glowers at Apollo, looking him up and down, "Then I challenge you!"

Luna scoffs, "You can't challenge him, you idiot. He's not a soldier." The man keeps his leer locked on Apollo, "What kind of Corsair calls himself a man and not fight?" Luna realizes she has already said too much and searches for a way out. That's when Apollo speaks up, "I'm with for the Kaines, on Furious' orders." The act stuns Luna and causes Marcus to erupt in a mad fit, "Well, is that so? I'm about to put an end to this!" The man lunges, but suddenly, stops just a few steps short. A look of fear suddenly grows on his face. Then Apollo realizes Marcus isn't looking at him, he's looking *behind* him. That's when a voice emerges, "As you were, Soldier."

A gray-haired man walks past and goes in to hug Luna, "You should have told me you were coming." Luna embraces him, "I'm sorry, we didn't have much time. There's someone I want you to meet." Apollo doesn't move, his attention is still on Luna's lips and the man who just tried to kill him. He finally snaps out of it when he feels someone grab his arm, "Seth, this is Apollo." The older man smiles as he shakes Apollo's hand, "Yes it is, you two come in the back."

They walk behind the bar and through a door. Seth leads them down a hallway and into a room with a large table surrounded by several plush chairs and a large monitor on the wall. He shuts the door behind them and motions, "Have a seat."

As Apollo sits, he notices the man studying his every move. "So what brings you here today?" The man asks and Luna answers, taking a seat beside Apollo, "I need... I mean, *we* need to know more about the End Game." Seth strokes his white goatee as if he's deep in thought and paces back a forth a couple of times before finally answering, "Julia send you here?"

"Yeah, this is Oriah's son. He.."

"I know who he is."

Apollo tries to join in on the conversation, "Well who.." Luna kicks Apollo's legs underneath the table and whispers, "I *told* you to let me do the talking." Seth interrupts them, "No, let him speak. What do you want to know?"

"Who are you?"

"My name's Seth. I'm the owner of this establishment."

"That's not exactly what I asked, but why should I trust you?"

The man then takes a seat across from them as attempts to explain himself, "Because I want the same things you want, Apollo. I care about the same things." Apollo jumps from the table, "What do you know of the things I care about?" Seth starts to answer but Luna interrupts, "Look, we don't have time for this! If you guys want to get together later that's fine with me. Could you just please tell us, what is the End Game?"

"It's a weapon my dear, well more of a power source for a weapon really."

"A weapon to do what?"

"To kill the Nephilim, of course."

Apollo feels Luna look at him and he returns her stare. He's surprised by the trepidation clearly showing on her face. She snaps her head quickly back to Seth and speaks with urgency, "We are going to the Acropolis. Is there anything else you can tell us?" Seth remains silent as he taps the table with the ring on his left hand. He stares intently at Luna.

Finally he speaks, "When you face the Kaines, keep in mind that they were engineered with the intent to be dominant on the battlefield. But there's something else you need to know. Varius and Vitus never meant to exist as two people. During the Project, the embryo split soon after insemination but the team was so intrigued they decided to allow the development to continue. Soon after the birth however, they found that just one of the twins met the criteria, while the other did not."

Apollo questions the man's response, "What does that supposed to mean?" Seth immediately counters, "Meaning they are genetically flawed and so are their children. Brutalius is the dangerous one, I assure you, but he has no real power. His prowess is keen but he lacks stability, not to mention the genetic talents that evidently fell to, let's say, Vitus' side of the gene pool."

Apollo retorts, "Well, what does this have to do with us?" Seth quickly quips back, "It means Brutalius is the one you must kill, son. Really, you should learn to listen better." Apollo almost snaps again but Luna disarms the conversation before it gets out of hand, "I get what you're saying Seth, use their flaws against them. Brutalius is unbalanced, we get it."

"Right, but also remember the other two aren't what they appear to be, either." Seth gets up, "Follow me, I want to give you something." Apollo and Luna rise and follow him further down the hall. They reach a doorway that frames a staircase apparently leading down to the basement.

Seth stops and holds his hands out, "Wait here." He walks down the steps and soon reemerges, handing Luna a black leather belt with a black "L"-shaped, nightstick type weapon. "You remember the Tong Fa, right?" Luna answers with a smug smile, "Of course I do, you taught me well." Then Seth gives her a small black metal box with a phrase etched in golden letters, "Host Inhibitor NL". She opens the lid and inside is a single syringe filled with a green liquid. "What is this?" Seth closes it back, looks at her and chuckles, "You wouldn't believe me even if I told you. But when the time comes to use it."

Chapter *Ten*

Furious immediately spots Antonia walking out of the media room. He looks back at Solomon and Grace, "Get down!" He kicks the door, sending it swinging open and marches toward the woman. Furious then goes to summon blades from each hand, anticipating his flames to surround them. But when nothing happens, Antonia laughs, "What's wrong Fury? You don't seem like yourself." Furious then notices Brutalius walk up, smiling at him with a flaming glowing spear in his hands.

Brutalius laughs as fiery plasma erupts from the spear's blade and Furious has to lunge to dodge the fireball hurling toward him. The trail of fire smashes into a tall bookcase setting countless books on fire. Furious quickly charges, pulling two long daggers from his sleeves, swinging them in a flurry but with Brutalius blocking him blow for blow.

Solomon sees what happens and it sets him to action. Grace screams in fear as the boy runs forward. Brutalius sees him coming and sweeps Furious' leg while conjures another pillar of fire. He sends it screaming at Solomon and it explodes on contact, slamming the boy against the wall.

Grace panics and runs to help but Antonia quickly snatches her by the throat. Antonia holds her there as Grace watches Brutalius calmly walk up to Solomon's body. He touches with the tip of his weapon to the boy's shoulder, and fiery plasma begins to devour him.

Suddenly, Furious springs on Brutalius with another barrage of attacks. One of them strike the bracelet on the man's wrist and the spear disappears in a quick flash. Before Brutalius can recover, Furious is behind him holding a blade to his throat. "Let her go Antonia, and I'll let *you* live!" But the woman doesn't relent, only tightening her grip on Grace's windpipe, "Why should I Fury? I know you're going to kill me either way." Furious can't help but chuckle as he responds, "Yeah, that's probably true."

Then quickly, he spins Brutalius around and shoves him toward Antonia. He grabs the bracelet off the man's wrist as Brutalius crashes into the women. All three of them fall to the ground but Grace is the first to get up. She makes a run directly for Furious as Brutalius helps Antonia to her feet. He pulls a dagger out of his sleeve and hands it to her, "Make sure that girl dies."

Furious now finds himself at a stalemate because he knows if he engages his cousin, Antonia will certainly go for Grace who is no match for her. For some reason, Furious wants to honor his word to her even as the very thought of it makes him wince. It doesn't take much for Brutalius to pick up on what's going on and begins taunting his rival, "Oh, let her die Furious. She just *one* Alcazarian child, one of hundreds who will die."

Grace moves as close as she can to Furious' body, holding on to the slim hope that he might still save her. The glint of the dagger's blade in Antonia's hand flashes in her eyes and Grace gasps at the devilish grin on the woman's face. Brutalius walks slowly forward, "Make a move Fury, forget about her." Furious leans in and whispers as Grace clings to him, "Get ready to run." She closes her eyes, trying to build up the courage to do what he asks.

Then without warning, a powerful quake rocks the building. It lurches back and forth as thousands of books fall all around them. Furious yells out, "Now!" as he manages to shove Grace toward the door just before he too falls over. He sees Brutalius struggling to remain on his feet as someone quickly tackles him. Furious realizes it's Solomon, "Hold him there!" Furious makes his way toward them as the tremors worsen and Brutalius begins screaming in howls of anguish. He flails around grabbing at his jaws as the ink in his face pales and his skin stiffens. Furious nearly reaches them before he sees Antonia lunge, her blade piercing Solomon's side.

The earthquake instantly stops.

A surge of guilt slams into Furious as he knows the boy is probably gone. He also that the odds are stacked against him now so before anyone can react, he darts through the door. He scrambles down the hallway, making his way around scattered debris. Furious finally spots Grace at the end of the hallway.

She is crouched down against the wall with her face buried in her hands, sobbing. When the quaking stopped, Grace instantly feared what it might mean and when she saw Furious alone, she knew it in her heart. He reaches out to her, "Come on, we have to get out of here." And when she resists, he only pauses in silence. For the first time in his life, the death of someone else actually means something and he isn't sure how to console someone, "I never caught your name." She finally looks up at him and tears roll down her cheeks. She answers in a pitiful whisper, "It's Grace."

"Well Grace, we need to go and get help. I promise we will return." After a moment, she finally takes his hand and Furious pulls her to her feet. She immediately asks, "What happened?" While Furious definitely feels empathy for her, in his mind, lying would imply weakness, so he answers honestly, "Antonia stabbed him."

Grace presses her face against his chest now, wailing in heartache as Furious runs his hand across her head, "We need to go, they'll be here any minute." He leads her down the stairwell all the way to the granite room. When they're about to step through into the tunnel Grace stops, "Where exactly are we going?" Furious turns back and answers without hesitation, "Back to Corsair Territory." Grace's voice suddenly takes on a panicked pitch as she questions his motives, "Wait, what about me? I'm Alcazarian!" He responds with a stroke of her hair, "Don't worry, no one will harm you as long as you're with me. I give you my word." She pulls away from him, "But what about the war?" Furious places his hand on her shoulder, "This is Brutalius' war, not mine."

~

Solomon lies on the floor as he hears Antonia standing over him, "I think he's dead." Solomon feels a boot slam into his side but strangely, he doesn't feel any pain. He only hears Brutalius answer, "It seems so but what about the girl? I thought I ordered you to kill her!" A crisp sound cracks the silence as Brutalius slaps Antonia's face and she cries out. Brutalius then shouts at her, "Let's go! They couldn't have gotten far!"

Solomon hears their footsteps fade and he attempts to get up. He can't even begin to overcome the weight of his limp body and feels completely fatigued as all his efforts barely manage the slightest movement. As his efforts subside, his thoughts turn to his mother and it occurs to him that maybe he's about to be reunited with her. A faint smile struggles across his lips.

"Solomon?" He hears a voice and now he's sure he's dead. "It's time, Solomon. Time to finally take you away from all of this." Then the boy feels himself lift him off the floor. He's upright now as if someone is holding him. His vision is strangely cloudy and he stares through the haze. He can finally make out what looks like his mother's face looking at him, "Mom? Is that really you?" Sabrina answers him by holding her arms out. Solomon doesn't question any further and falls into her, feeling her arms wrap around his body as a warm light surrounds them both. She whispers to him and hugs him even tighter, "It's over now, it's all over."

Chapter *Eleven*

Apollo watches Luna strap on the belt and put the small box in her satchel, "What's Tong Fa?" He asks and Luna shrugs, "Something Seth taught me. It's a combination of different martial arts that utilize a special type of weapon. He calls it Tong Fa." Then Luna suddenly snatches the nightstick from its holster, twisting and twirling it, until it becomes a blur too fast for Apollo to keep up with. She continues her demonstration by twisting the short handle and releasing a slim blade from the longer shaft. She swipes the blade through the air, creating rushing rips of wind that whip past Apollo with surprising force. She shifts the weapon swiftly in her hand and again, swipes through the air sending another airy barrage tearing through space. Finally, in a blustery burst, the blade disappears and Luna quickly returns the weapon to her belt.

"Whoa!" Apollo quips, "Remind me not to make you mad!" Luna laughs, "Yea that's definitely something you should keep in mind, Hell hath no fury right?" Apollo looks at her puzzled, "What?" and Luna just rolls her eyes, giving a playful shove, "Never mind." She continues snickering even as she climbs on the motorcycle.

"Hello? Earth to Apollo. Are we going or not?" Her voice brings Apollo back to attention. His was too preoccupied with thoughts of how amazing she seems to him and how the more he learns, the more intimidated he becomes. Shaking out of it, he finally clammers on the bike and his hands tremble as he finds her bare skin once again.

Apollo and Luna are soon racing down the beach. They take a turn just before the row of houses that mark the outer boundary of Corsair Territory. They continue across the land until the sand gives way to barren rock. After a while, Apollo can make out the walls of Alcazar on the horizon and yells out, "Make a right over here! It's right next to those rocks!" Luna turns the motorcycle towards the large boulders and heads toward the alcove.

~

Grace is still sobbing as she and Furious walk down the damp tunnel toward the outside world. "Well you guys managed to wipe out Oriah's whole family. *Mission accomplished*, huh?" Her sarcastic tone makes Furious wonder why he ever agreed to help her, "It is what it is, at some point you're going to have to decide for yourself how badly you want to survive." He stops and looks at her, "The only thing left in this war is the Corsair, so really, what choice do you have?"

She tries to slap him again, but like before Furious catches her wrist. This time though, she sends her other arm flying and he blocks it too, "It's either join us, die, or become a slave. You should really consider yourself lucky, I'm giving you a choice." Grace screams in his face, "I hate you! *All of you!*." Then Furious' replies and his voice takes on a more commanding tone, "Look, you *will* come with me, either as my prisoner or my ally, it's your choice"

Silence sets in as he awaits her answer. She responds by taking his hand, quietly weighing in her heart what she should do. Memories of her parents and home permeate through her mind, reminding her who she was and it feels like she is selling her soul.

But reluctantly, she follows him into the alcove. Furious gazes around at the tall slabs of stone, "We need transportation, Alcazarian farms have trucks, right?" Grace instantly imagines Furious rummaging through someone's house, maybe her own, stealing someone's truck and her pride won't let her concede that much to him yet, "No! You and your idiot cousin destroyed them all!" Furious sighs, "Look, I didn't mean anything by it, but we can't just very well walk can we? It's over twenty kilometers."

They both go silent again but then a familiar rumble thunders around them. Grace is the first to spot the source as it gradually comes into focus. Her heartbeat explodes when she realizes what she's looking at.

"Apollo!" The boy snaps to attention when he hears his name, almost jumping from the bike. He urges Luna, "Stop! Stop here!" He leaps off and runs into Grace's waiting arms. His heart races as he buries his face into her hair, longing for her sweet strawberry scent. As Apollo takes in the incredible feeling, he notices she isn't holding onto him as tight. That's when he hears Luna's voice behind him, "Good to see you found your sister."

Grace jerks away, "I'm *not* his sister!" Her voice has a dry quality to it and Apollo can feel the tension as Grace glowers, "Now I see what took you so long. Solomon's *dead*, you know!" She regretted the words the moment they left her lips, but it still doesn't help calm her anger. Apollo immediately lunges at Furious, "What do you mean he's *dead*! Was it you! Did you do it!" Grace pulls back at Apollo, "No it wasn't him, Apollo! It was Brutalius!" Furious chimes in, "And speaking of Brutalius, he'll be coming through here any minute."

"Good let him come." Apollo scoffs as tears flow down his cheeks, "I'm ready to end this." Luna quickly grabs his shoulders, shaking him in an attempt to snap him out of it, "No! We have to get to the library! Oriah's..." Furious interrupts her, "Oriah's *dead* as well." Apollo stares at him for a split-second before charging again, this time putting his hand around Furious' throat. They struggle with one another before Furious finally forces the boy off, "Look Bro! We don't have time for this! Brutalius will be here any minute and then we're *all* dead!" Apollo shoves him back, "I'm *not* your bro!" Furious chuckles, "Yeah, whatever man."

Luna then speaks out, trying to form a plan and points at Furious, "You, take the bike. When those idiots come out of this tunnel you lead them back to Corsair, okay? Apollo and I will find another way into the Acropolis." Immediately Apollo gestures at Grace, "Good, she's coming with us." But Grace shakes her head putting her eyes on Furious, "No, I'm going with him."

Apollo tries to argue with her but Grace doesn't listen. The pain of losing her family, Solomon, and now Apollo helps her finally make her choice, "No, you've been gone longer than you think." She stands beside Furious now who just shrugs, "Her choice, man. Don't worry though, I'll take *good* care of her."

Apollo starts to charge Furious again but the look on Grace's face stops him in his tracks. He just watches now, in silence, as Grace climbs on the motorcycle with the man. Furious looks towards Luna, "It might be best if you go through the break in the wall, it's up that way a couple hundred meters. I'll tell Seth you made it here safely."

Luna follows Apollo as they walk along the wall but neither say a word. Apollo finally looks back at her and he's surprised by the expression on her face. If he didn't know any better he would think she was sad. "What's wrong?" Luna waits a few minutes before she answers, "I'm sorry about your girlfriend."

Not sure what to say, Apollo turns and looks straight ahead. "I know Grace means a lot to you." Luna's words make him stop dead in his tracks. He turns around to face her, "What do you know about what she means to me, and how do you even know her name?" Luna is stunned at first, but then sorrow washes back over her face, "Let's just get to ARIES, okay?"

Apollo doesn't move. There's enough uncertainty in his heart now to almost make him run after that motorcycle. Memories of the mind games in the Chamber reverberate in his head and that familiar phrase echos in his thoughts, *Acropolis Resident Integrated Eugenic Supercomputer*. He knows ARIES is in walking distance now and he decides he'll be better off on his own. Just as he's about to tell her, Luna grabs his hand, "Please, just let us get to the library before you decide anything, okay? You swore to me, remember?"

Apollo stares at her conflicted now. Thoughts of Solomon's death and Grace's betrayal loom heavily in his heart as he gazes into her pale eyes. She's so mysterious and beautiful to him, he knows she's not that girl from the Chamber. She's the only friend he has left in the world. Then Luna smiles and instantly radiates him, conjuring his courage and restoring resolve, not only to win back Alcazar, but to face his uncertain future.

Luna takes his hand and Apollo responds by pulling her to him, hugging her even tighter. Her breath tickles his neck now as her voice reaches to his ear. She pledges to him in a whisper, "I'll never betray you, I swear it."

Chapter *Twelve*

Brutalius and Antonia stumble down the tunnel. As they walk, they can sense a low vibration. At the opening, the sound becomes more distinct and Brutalius is sure it's the engine of a motorcycle, "Let's go, now!" Brutalius doesn't even bother waiting for Antonia as he charges out. He instantly spots Furious and Grace, "It's them!" Antonia catches up just in time to see the motorcycle fade away in a dusty cloud. Brutalius breathes heavily but smiles, "It's okay, I know where they're going. Come, we don't have much time."

"We need to re-attune the lance." Antonia replies but Brutalius just rolls his eyes, "You know, it would serve me better if you didn't *constantly* state the obvious. Be useful for a change and inform the guards we need a means of transportation." Antonia doesn't argue but just reaches in her pocket for her communicator, "Have a truck fueled up and ready to go immediately." A voice replies back, "Copy that, it will be waiting for you out front." Antonia puts the device away and looks at Brutalius, "Is that better?" He doesn't even turn to look back, "Not quite."

They head back through the tunnel and to the laboratory that holds Nathan Lex. Brutalius stares at him lying on the table, looking weaker than ever, "I thought you said we had a means of keeping him alive?" Antonia responds in a dry tone, "He *is* alive, isn't he?" Brutalius shakes his head as he walks around the table examining every detail, "But in this weakened condition, will it affect the weapons power?" Antonia takes a seat at the monitor and types on a keyboard, "No not at all. He is merely the source of the signal, the amplitude is determined by the design of the nanomaterials in your bloodstream. You will be as powerful as any Nephilim."

Her words bring a chuckle out of Brutalius and she gestures at him, "Now give me the bracelet so I can tune it." Brutalius reaches for his wrist to find it missing. "It must be in the library!" He yells as Antonia jumps up, "Wait! I have something else." Brutalius stops right before the door and Antonia walks behind a table and produces a leather case endowed with several engraved daggers. "You questioned my usefulness earlier. Let me show you something that may change your mind."

She begins unsheathing the blades and concealing them in various places on Brutalius' armor, "There are nine total and all are laced with our nanotechnology. The handles are color-coded, with the red ones being for plasma-directed assaults, just like your favorite cousin. The blue ones are imbued with a hallucinogen, similar to the one you used on him before. And lastly, the green handles are lucidity inhibitors which were produced from the Nephilim. They eradicate all genetic mutations which Furious is already infected with. His death should come easily."

Brutalius acknowledges her accomplishment, but still in a way that berates her, "Very good, but next time don't hold out on me. Now let's retrieve that bracelet, something you clearly should have designed to be more durable."

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Back at the library, Apollo and Luna enter the media room. Instantly, the soft metallic voice Apollo has grown so accustomed to bounces off the dark elliptical walls, *greetings Nephilim, your arrival has been anticipated, initiating diagnostics*. Suddenly a warm sensation runs down Apollo's spine and a myriad of images saturate his psyche. His eyes flutter from the influx as he feels it all strangely settling in, like mental stones being laid down for a cobblestone street that leads to complete understanding.

Luna stands in awe as she watches Apollo begin to levitate off the floor. ARIES speaks out again, *repairs nearing completion, installing End Game countermeasures*. Luna detects a pungent odor fill the room and she has to hold her hand over her face to keep from choking. She then notices Apollo's breathing is really heavy now and his eyes fluctuate even faster as he floats there motionless.

Then his voice fills in her head, *Luna, I had no idea we were so much alike*. She sends her thoughts back to him, *I wanted to tell you, but you didn't trust me*. She anticipates his reply and after

what seems like forever, it finally comes through, *I trust you now. But it's way more than that though, I feel like I...*"

Suddenly, Luna flinches as a dagger goes whizzing by her head. She turns around and sees Brutalius and Antonia standing in the doorway. She pulls out the Tonfa from her belt just in time to block another flying blade. Immediately, Luna dives and rolls toward them, swiftly reaching her feet and slamming the nightstick-type weapon hard into Brutalius' stomach. Briefly stunned, it allows her to get behind him and pin his throat between the corner of the handle and the staff of her weapon. She leans on his back, pulling as hard as she can trying to crush his windpipe.

Antonia charges at her, but Luna swings around kicking the woman directly in the face. She falls flat on her back as Brutalius thrusts his elbow into Luna's side, breaking her grip. The girl slithers down his back and he pulls out the two remaining crimson daggers from his sleeves. He takes several fiery swipes at Luna with her eluding each one. Luna spins her Tonfa in her hand, ducking and dodging, giving the handle a twist, activating its blade. The razor-sharp edge fires out and she wields it now like a sword, matching Brutalius blow for blow in a clamoring barrage. But he is too strong for her and soon Luna finds her back against the wall.

"Apollo!" she cries out as she continues to fight. And suddenly, Brutalius is knocked to the floor by a frozen blast, erupting behind him with icy pieces exploding across his side. Brutalius growls of pain and stumbles as Luna spots Apollo standing over him with another frigid mast in his hand. The mace-type weapon crackles and pops with electric current as it highlights the sharpened expression dominating the boy's face.

A voice thunders through the room, but strangely, Apollo's lips remain still, "Brutalius!" Brutalius throws a blade at the boy in desperation, but is shocked to see it suddenly stop halfway and hang in mid-air. Brutalius watches in silence as the blade's metal liquefies and coalesces into a perfect shiny sphere, dropping to the ground.

It clangs out, rolling to Apollo's feet. Apollo holds out his hand, palm down as the orb surges from the floor and into his grasp. Then in an instant it surges from the boy's hand and slams into Brutalius' chest, dead-center. It penetrates the armor, sending Brutalius flying back and violently smashing against the wall.

Midst of all the action, Luna doesn't notice Antonia creeping behind her with one of the discarded green daggers. The woman lets out a hellish war-cry that roars in Luna's eardrums as she lashes out. Luna barely manages to dodge the strike but the greenish blade still manages to slash the girl's shoulder. She shrieks in agony and instinctively she sends her bladed Tonfa forcefully behind her, completely running through Antonia abdomen.

Luna pulls the bloody blade back and the wounded woman falls to her knees. A shocked expression freezes on her face as her body slumps over, lifeless. "Nooo!" Brutalius screams and charges but Apollo chases after him, hurling another icy club at his head. Brutalius ducks at the last moment as it collides with the wall, shattering into a thousand electrified frozen pieces. But Apollo instantly forms another frozen weapon in his left hand and hurls it while conjuring yet another one in his right. Brutalius doesn't even get a chance get near Luna, barely managing to elude Apollo's rhythmic attacks with each one bursting in a electrical explosion when they make contact.

Eventually, Brutalius sees an opportunity and runs through a doorway to escape. Apollo doesn't even bother to chase him. *Let him run*, he thinks to himself as he turns in search of Luna. He notices her crouched down on the floor beside Antonia. He's relieved to see her alive, even though he cringes when he senses her pain.

He feels nothing coming from Antonia.

As he helps Luna to her feet, Apollo sends out the thought, *are you okay?* He waits for her response and when nothing comes, he tries again, *Luna, can you hear me? Are you okay?* She continues to just stare at him, "Why are you looking at me like that? Shouldn't we go after him?" Apollo runs his fingers over the gash on her shoulder, "You didn't hear me, did you?"

"Hear what?" She replies as Apollo studies the greenish color of her wound. He soon realizes what is wrong. Apollo bends down and pries the emerald-laden weapon out of Antonia's hand, "Nothing, and don't worry about Brutalius, I know exactly where he is going." Apollo holds out the blade,

examining it, as he confers with the computer, *ARIES provide me with the necessary details in order to reverse the effects of this Corsair weapon.*

Instantly, waves of information flow into him, illustrating the science behind the Corsair technology. It only takes mere minutes to fully understand the logic and he easily taps into the actual nanobots transmitting from Luna. With a mere thought, Apollo alters the mechanics of the tiny devices just as ARIES did in him. So now, rather than hindering Luna's telepathy with him, the nanomaterial enhances it.

Then something happens that Apollo doesn't expect. Images from Luna's childhood flood his memories. Things like her desires, disappointments and regrets accompany her vivid scenes. It's almost like the girl's thoughts and emotions occupy the same space as his now and they share everything. He looks over and notices her smile, it's the same one he fell in love with. He knows now what she meant by all the things she said leading up to this moment.

Chapter *Thirteen*

Grace practically tries to bury herself in the back of Furious' jacket. It's the first time she's been on anything like a motorcycle and she is completely terrified. She squeezes so tightly, Furious finally has to come to a stop. Grabbing her arms, he lets out an exasperated sigh, "Sweetheart, you're going to have to loosen up back there, I can't breathe." Grace quickly lets go and almost falls off the bike. She wants to cry but that would just embarrass her more, so her frustration turns into anger and she goes hysterical, "I've never rode on one of these stupid things before, okay! If it bothers you so much, I'll just walk! You don't seem to care about anybody but yourself anyway!"

"Geez, will you shut up!" His interruption brings the girl's outburst to a halt and her eyes tear up now. Furious can't help but take a kinder approach, "I'll go slower okay? I didn't know it was your first time." Grace wipes her tears off her cheeks. "I can't begin to imagine how many times you said *that*." A slight smile shows on her face causing Furious to let out a wicked cackle, "I think I know what you need. We've got to go there anyway, might as well have a little fun."

He kicks the motorcycle to life and Grace wraps her arms around his waist, but this time not nearly as tight, "Where are you taking me?" Furious replies to her with another smile, "You'll see, get ready to have the time of your life." He makes the motorcycle lunge, but it's just enough for Grace to squeal. Furious then he pulls off slowly and Grace lays her head on his back. Closing her eyes, he lets him take her wherever he wants.

The ride is much better this time, but it's mainly because her attention is on what Furious said before, about becoming Corsair. She tries to find something, anything, that's left in her life to tie her back to Alcazar. Her parents are dead, Solomon's dead, her home is destroyed, and after seeing Apollo with that other girl, she realizes there is nothing. It occurs to her, if it wasn't for Furious she should probably be dead too and she thinks about what Solomon said about him. She can see it now for herself, hope.

Furious pulls into a parking lot, "We're here," and Grace looks up with wonder. The dark building with flames rising through its windows captures her attention and she takes in the yells and chants coming from within the cathedral-like building. "What is this place?"

"It's called the Oculus; it's where grunts go to blow off steam."

"Grunts?"

"Yeah, Corsair Soldiers."

Grace gasps at the sound of it and stares at the vicious brawl going on in the middle of a crowd gathered up front. The bike goes silent, "Don't worry, you're with me, they're not going to bother you." Furious jumps off and holds out his hand. She takes it and climbs off. She instantly notices all the people clad in black leather and suddenly feels self-conscious about her appearance. Her clothes scream Alcazarian and she finds herself clutching Furious' elbow for dear life.

"Calm down, it's okay." Furious taps her arm and they walk through the wide doorway. Grace is shocked by the amount of people inside, especially the men, they're *everywhere*. She can feel their eyes upon her as she follows him toward the front. When they make it to the bar, Furious tells the older woman behind it, "Two shots, whiskey." The woman slings two glasses on the wooden counter and fills them both half-full of a dark brown liquid, "I hope both of these are for you." She says as she puts the bottle away.

"Mind your business, Petra."

"You shouldn't influence the girl. You're going to get her killed."

"I'm not making her do anything she doesn't want to do."

Petra gives Furious a disapproving smirk then changes the dialogue, "An Alcazarian boy was in here earlier, with Luna." Grace hears her and breaks in on the conversation, "You mean Apollo?" Petra replies to her, "Yeah, how do you know..."

Grace interrupts, "Furious is right, no one is telling me what to do." She grabs one of the glasses and immediately throws the contents into her mouth. She swallows hard and it feels like her chest is on fire. Her coughs bring tears to her eyes and Furious slaps on her back with a chuckle, "There you go, live a little!" He throws down the other shot and yells, "Another round!" Petra re-positions the glasses but Furious puts his open hand over one of them, "No, just me this time." Petra nods her approval and pours the liquor. Furious quickly downs it, "Tell Seth I ran into her, and the boy. They should be at their destination by now."

"Is that so? What do you know about that?" Petra inquires but Furious ignores her, slamming the glass down on the counter, "One more!" Then Grace follows, "Me too!" Her head is spinning and she laughs as she tries to swallow the liquor. Petra looks at both with concern and then directly at Furious, "You better take care of her Fury, do the right thing." Another devilish laugh emerges from him, "Don't I always?" He turns to Grace, speaking right into her ear so she can hear him over all the noise, "Let's go mingle." Grace looks at him confused but then bursts into more laughter as he pulls her across the floor.

Grace is suddenly distracted by a huge hand grabbing her shoulder, "Hey Beautiful, haven't ever seen you here before. You're a real nice piece of..." Furious jumps and smacks the man hard across the face, "Watch your mouth, Grunt!" The huge soldier then grabs Furious, lifting him off his feet, "The Great Furious Kaine, I can take you! Fight me or the girl's mine!"

Furious just smiles as the people around them grow quiet. Then his expression darkens and Grace begins to feel the tension rise as the crowd slowly starts to chant, "Fight! Fight!"

Most of the crowd follows as Furious grants the man's wish and the two go outside. They reach the open space in the middle and are handed long wooden poles about a meter and a half long. Silence pervades across the sea of people again as the amusement on Furious' demeanor returns. He doesn't even bother taking his sunglasses off as he taunts his opponent, "Well whatcha got, *Marcus*?"

The giant man charges, screaming in rage. He's at least twice in size and holds his staff high above his head. When he sends it crashing down, Furious holds his own staff up to block the blow, allowing it to break into two pieces. Simultaneously, he sends his right boot hard into Marcus' groin as the giant man bends over and Furious hurls a blinding flurry of strikes into the man's head with both sticks of broken wood.

Blood flies everywhere as Furious beats him relentlessly, "Don't ever disrespect me again!" Then Furious finishes by leaping in the air, sending another hard kick, this time straight into Marcus' face. Blood splatters as the man crashes to the ground. Furious drops the sticks on Marcus' body, spits, and then turns walking back towards Grace.

Then he leans down and whispers to her, "I hope that didn't scare you." She replies by lying to him, "No, it didn't." As they walk back inside, the crowd roars again, "Furious! Furious!" It's now time for Grace's to shock him as she expresses a desire she's been curious about ever since they got there. And after what just happened, she's sure she wants to do it,

"I want a tattoo."

"You want a what?"

"I said, I want a tattoo, something that speaks to me." Furious laughs, almost a little nervously, "Okay now Grace, slow down a little there." He pauses for a minute, then remembers what he said before, "Well I did say no one's here to tell you what to do." Then his eyes run down her body, "So where would you like it?"

Grace didn't think that far into it, "Well I don't know." The absence of Corsair women around doesn't help so she asks, "What do you suggest?" He tilts his glasses so his eyes peer over the rims. He leans back, taking in the sight of her, "I'm not sure. I haven't get to see much of the canvas, but I'm sure we can come up with *something*." Grace shoves him, "You're still a jerk, you know." But this time there's something in her tone that completely changes the intent of her words. She gazes at him, imagining future kisses, and she's about to act on her impulses when an older man emerges from behind them. He violently jerks Furious around, glowering.

It's Seth.

"*Furious Kaine*, you and I need to talk." They go behind the bar and as they step through the door, Petra grabs Grace's arm, "You should stay here." Grace yells out, "Furious!" And he immediately

stops, "No, she stays with me." Seth places his hand on Furious' shoulder, "Come on Fury, you know Petra's not going to let anything happen to her. I need to have a word with you, in private." Furious looks at Grace who looks unsure of anything, "It's okay, I'll be right back." As he and Seth walk into the conference room, he can hear Petra softly speak to her, "What's your name, dear?"

Back in the conference room, Seth lets Furious enter and then swiftly slams the door, "Who do you think you are, bringing that Alcazarian girl to this place? Are you trying to start a riot? Furious returns the man's sternness, "She *wanted* to come with me, and what difference does it make?"

Seth remarks, "The difference is, word is surely to get back to Brutalius." Furious just scoffs, "Yeah I know, I'm counting on it, besides, he's already coming after us."

"No, he's coming after *you*. How old is she anyway? Seventeen?"

Furious runs his hand over the orange tips of his spiked hair, "I won't let anything happen to her." Seth opens the door, "You're right because she is staying here. And if she chooses to become one of us then she will need our help, *not* Brutalius trying to end her life. Petra will look after her for now."

Furious' takes off his glasses and steps to Seth, affirming his stance, "She *wants* to be with me." The old man replies this time with a calmer demeanor, "And then she will still be here, if she so chooses. Return to her *after* you kill your cousin." Furious stares at him for a moment before finally answering, "Yeah."

Furious turns to leave but Seth says something that gives him pause, "I watched you pick on Marcus earlier, what happened to the usual show-off I remember?" Furious looks down at his forearms and shakes his head, "I don't know, I think Brute did something to me." Seth then produces a syringe and swiftly stabs Furious' shoulder. "Hey!" He yells as Seth pulls back on the plunger, turning the vial deep red, "I need to confirm it's what I suspect." Seth pulls the needle out and places a swab on the puncture. He takes the sample over to the computer and Furious attempts to confirm Seth's suspicion, "I think it's the same thing he did to the Alcazarian boy."

Seth takes a sample and prepares a slide. Soon an image dominates the monitor covering the wall, portraying the nanobots that currently flow through Furious' veins. "You're right, but I'm afraid there's no way to reverse it, I'm sorry Fury." Furious doesn't respond, he just turns and storms out of the room. When he spots Grace waiting for him in the hallway, he walks to her, "They want you to stay."

"I know."

"But that doesn't mean I'm leaving you."

Furious' words make her smile and she stares straight ahead. With his height advantage it's as if she looking directly at his heart. She places her hand over the spot where she imagines it to be, "I'll wait here for you if you want." Furious put his hand under her chin, turning her gaze up to his. He then leans down and gently kisses her lips. Pulling back, Furious looks at Grace before kissing her again, this time on the forehead, "I'll come back for you."

They embrace until Petra finally comes in, interrupting the moment, "Don't worry Fury, me and Grace here are going to have lots of fun. I'm going to teach her what being a Corsair woman is all about." Furious responds with a chuckle, "She says she wants a tattoo." Petra looks at Grace with a wink, "Is that so? Then we might have to do something about that."

Seth reappears with two gold bracelets in his hands, "These are for you. Use them to put an end to what we talked about." Furious attaches the bracelets to his wrists and Seth gives each one a twist, "Now do what I taught you." Furious holds his hands out a summons two forward-curving, kopis-like blades equipped with wide serrated edges, "You never cease to amaze me in your designs, Seth." Furious gives the weapons a few swipes, "I still miss the fireworks though."

Chapter *Fourteen*

Walking gingerly around his laboratory, Paulus is still tender from the wound in his side. He also aches from the crippling thought of who did it. *Antonia*, her name persists in his head even though he's finally decided to take his brother's advice. Yet, he's still thinking of her when something grabs his attention through the window, a black Corsair assault vehicle, headed straight for him. "Antonia!" He proclaims as once again, his futile faith attempts to lift his hapless soul.

Paulus hobbles outside to get a closer look and surveys the interior of the truck as it pulls in front of him. There's only one occupant and it's the absolute last person he expected to see. "Where is she?" Paulus demands as stares down the tattooed face of the man climbing out.

Brutalius holds his hands out to Paulus in truce, "I'm regret to say, dear Paulus, Antonia's dead. It was your brother, I'm afraid. He tried to kill me too but I manage to escape. He's has taken up with a young Alcazarian girl. He's betrayed us, dear Cousin."

Paulus' judgment is bombarded with the conflicting news and his reaction is disbelief, "You lie!" But Brutalius continues pleading his case, "They all betrayed us, Paulus. The Nephilim is alive and it's clear Antonia helped him." With that, Brutalius holds out a small dark pane of glass, "Go on, and see for yourself." Paulus takes the panel and it instantly lights up with images of the beautiful dark-skinned woman handing a black bag over to the teenage boy. Then Antonia's voice follows, "Make your way back through the tunnel and to the Acropolis. It is imperative no one sees you until you reach the library. There is a Corsair uniform in here."

Brutalius takes the imager from Paulus and concludes his point, "They want dissolve the Corsair, lead us all back to Alcazar as slaves. Seth, Furious, *your father*, the whole lot of them. Our only hope is the End Game and the only one left who has any intimate knowledge of it is you." Paulus then replies in a tone that resembles a man who is starting to listen to reason, "And Seth, what about him?"

Brutalius quickly answers, "Seth is a fool! If I wield the final version of the End Game weapon, then no one can stop us, not even him. I will make certain Alcazar ceases to exist and the Corsair will reign over the entire region." Paulus wonders about how much Brutalius really knows about the new technology, "You are aware; you'll have to be in range of the Host in order for it to function properly." Brutalius replies, "Yes I know. That's why I am taking the fight back to Alcazar, to raze the Acropolis. And when the Nephilim tries to stop me, I will slaughter him."

"Then follow me," Paulus goes back into the laboratory. He takes a seat behind his computer and begins pressing keys on the touch screen. Instantly, the same footage of Antonia and Apollo plays and it shows exactly the same scene as the imager, except this one is several minutes longer. After Antonia speaks to the boy, Paulus distinctly hears Apollo ask, "Oria is that you?"

He looks up at Brutalius, "She did try to help him, but there was someone else controlling her. Maybe it was Oria, maybe it was *you*." Brutalius' voice thunders, "It was Oria you fool!" as his impatience gets the better of him. He attempts to regain composure, "But Oria is dead now. And I need those results from your experiments Paulus, to finish what we started and put things as they should be." Paulus slightly sighs at the words and it instantly sends Brutalius back into a rage.

He snatches Paulus up by the collar, "I demand you relinquish it, at once!" He punches Paulus' rib cage, ripping open several sutures. The man falls in agony and Brutalius stomps his side, causing even more damage. "Now where is it?" Paulus groans and Brutalius lands another hard kick. Paulus quickly relents, "It's...it's over...there."

Brutalius sees him feebly pointing at a large glass display case. Suspended in a transparent box is a small, flat cylindrical object, brightly glowing in an eerie red light. Brutalius slowly approaches it with awe. He examines the glass, trying to discover a way to get inside. He looks back at Paulus still writhing on the floor, "Open it!" Paulus struggles to pull a small remote out of his pocket and presses a key. The glass around the glowing disk suddenly evaporates, "This is the device that draws power

directly from the Host, channeling it to the wielder." Brutalius can now see the object is a small medallion made of a strange reflective copper-like metal. He reaches out and touches it with his fingers.

"Just have it anywhere on you. You can wear it around your neck or even put it in your pocket. It was designed to be concealed. You just have to stay in range of the Host. He serves as the wellspring, if you will. Without him, the weapon is useless."

Brutalius then fires off a series of questions illustrating his doubts about his cousin's loyalties, "What else is there? What else do you need to tell me? What about the glow? Doesn't that defeat the whole purpose of concealment?" Brutalius' inquiry makes Paulus notably anxious and he stutters to speak, "Just stay in range. Believe me, when it activates the glow will be the last thing anyone will be worried about."

Brutalius slips the radiant coin into his pocket and looks Paulus directly in the eyes, "Any surprises, I will come back here and kill you first. It would be best if you *and* your brother remain out of my way from here on out." When Brutalius gets out of earshot, Paulus grimaces and lets out a long sigh. He hid most of his pain from Brutalius as to not show him any weakness but now that he's alone he can barely stand.

As the truck roars away in the distance, Paulus stumbles over to the other side of the room, pressing a button on his desk, "Please send medical..now." The effort causes him to fall to the floor in sweaty convulsions, bloody, and nearly unconscious.

Chapter *Fifteen*

Suddenly, footsteps sound in Apollo's ears. He immediately can sense it's an approaching contingent of Corsair soldiers. He lets go of Luna as he detects eight in all and he can feel them getting closer. He looks over at her and she must sense them as well because she's crouched down with Tonfa in hand, ready to strike. *Wait for my mark*, he tells her as he backs her up, giving as much room between them and the door as possible. When the first of the soldiers enter, they immediately yell back, "They're in here!" Instantly the others promptly fall in and now all eight glare at the two teenagers.

Apollo hears the words, "Kill them," and immediately employs a strategy. He clinches his fists and each soldier stares down at their feet as their boots frost over in a thick rime. They struggle to break free from the icy embrace and Apollo looks over at Luna, calmly stating one word, "Wait."

He focuses in on a voice that's now coming from the device attached to one of the men. He hears instructions, telling all available units to converge on the library. He mentally tries to count all of the souls in Alcazar, *there must be hundreds*.

Luna conveys a thought out to him, *I've got an idea*. She simultaneously illustrates something inspired by the voice minutes ago; *command the guards*. Apollo takes her lead and holds his hand out to the soldiers and in an instant, he's aware of the minds of all eight men. He effortlessly coerces them under his control and they turn in unison, drawing their blades from their sheaths. As the ice melts from around their boots, they lead the way out of the library.

Apollo paces behind them like a field general commanding a battlefield. He instructs them to go into the Porticus hoping the ones hunting them will follow suit. The open garden gives them plenty of room to fight. They're barely a few meters into the hallway before they meet yet another detachment of four more leather-clad men. Apollo doesn't even break stride, bringing them under his subjection and they too, turn towards the open center of the Acropolis.

"Beautiful." Those is the word that leaves Luna's lips the second they enter the Porticus Acropoli. She gazes up at the tall trees, newly budding in the oncoming spring. Apollo stands next to her, taking her hand into his, *they're almost here*. He sends his gang of guards out in a wide arc in front of them just in time to engage the inundation of soldiers now coming through the doors.

Once the fighting begins, Apollo plants a suggestion in the minds of half of the soldiers currently in his dominion. He tells them to out and hunt for a specific target whose image now thrives in their minds, *Brutalius Kaine*. Luna watches as six men withdraw from the battle and leave the Porticus.

She almost panics before she realizes Apollo's actions. He quickly collects the consciences of the soldiers in the garden, four or five at a time, and instructs them, sending them out in small groups. He doesn't relent until every soldiers is gone and he and Luna are the only ones in the garden.

Apollo takes Luna's hand *we need to go now, follow me*. He leads her behind one of the larger trees in the Porticus, to a small trapdoor hidden in the southwest corner. He opens the hatch and they climb down a steel ladder, dropping into a extremely narrow passage that's pitch dark. Stone walls press against them from both sides as they squeeze through. "Where are we going?" Luna asks and Apollo tries to reassure her as they walk through the blackness, "Don't be afraid, I'm pretty sure I know where I'm going. It's like this whole place is mapped out in my head or something." Apollo follows his words with an image of a Corsair truck, closing in on the northern gate of Alcazar.

Suddenly the ground shakes beneath them and they hear what sounds like thunder. Apollo seeks out Brutalius' location in his mind and he's shocked by what it tells him. "Come on! We have to hurry!" They rush down the tunnel as another cacophony of explosions crashes around them. Finally, they manage to make it to the end and Apollo pushes open a door into blinding daylight. They are several meters away from the Acropolis facing the north gate when Luna shudders in shock as she sees the appalling scene before them.

Chapter *Sixteen*

Huge pillars of fiery plasma churn towards the sky as swirling, feathering flames scorch the dead bodies of Corsair soldiers that now litter the entrance to Alcazar. In the center of the carnage, is the tattooed-face of Brutalius, his arms outstretched with a phosphorescent red essence swirling around him. The glow in his eyes matches the resplendence perfectly and the sight is almost too dazzling to describe the destruction in which it dispenses.

As several more groups of soldiers approach, Brutalius sends his right heel into the stone beneath him. The relatively small gesture sends a surprisingly large lucent shockwave rolling out in all directions. When it reaches the outer wall, huge pieces of stone break off and crash into surrounding homes and buildings. The wave rolls over the soldiers, leaving them screaming in torment as their bodies solidify and break apart as if they were the stone themselves.

Luckily, by the time the wave reaches Apollo and Luna, it has dissipated enough to where it's merely a rumble beneath their feet. Luna pulls at him, "We have to get out of here! He's killing his own people!" Apollo acknowledges her but still doesn't move. Mostly, he's too preoccupied with what's going on around them. Apollo recalls what Seth said about Brutalius not having any real power, "It doesn't make any sense, Luna." The girl replies, "Of course it does, it's right in front of you!"

Apollo answers, "No, I mean it's not real." Luna looks at him, puzzled, "What do you mean it's not real? It looks pretty real to me!" The boy immediately counters, "No, I mean the way he's doing it. Seth said the End Game wasn't a weapon but just a *power source*, right? Luna nods, "Yeah," and Apollo continues, "Yeah, so that means Brutalius' power isn't really coming *from* him. It's being channeled from an outside source." Luna finishes his thought, "The End Game."

Apollo agrees, "Exactly, and if we can find it, maybe we can stop him." Luna then gives a suggestion, *maybe he can tell you*.

Apollo takes her idea and ventures into Brutalius' consciousness. Immediately he's distracted by a acute sense of something else going on. Apollo feels a deep sullen hatred for someone emanating from Brutalius and it gives him a clear picture of what's up ahead. Apollo turns and utters one word to Luna, "Furious."

Disregarding the risk, they run toward the gate. Luna doesn't bother to mention anything about the impulsive concern for Grace she suddenly sensed from Apollo. Pangs of rejection quell her heart and she's uncomfortable about the reaction; she's too proud to be jealous.

Then her thoughts are interrupted by Apollo's voice, "There!" She looks up to see Furious with swords in hand, taking full swings at Brutalius. As Luna moves closer, she's astounded to see the blades are having no effect. They are actually passing through Brutalius' body. It's as if the man himself wasn't real.

Just then, Brutalius stomps, sending another concussive wave blitzing the area. This time, everyone is close enough to feel its full effects. When the surge hits Apollo, it's as if every cell in his body seizes, and his muscles feel like their being torn away from his bones. He hears Luna start to scream as well and when her agony registers in his psyche, he feels another sensation suddenly hit him. But this one is familiar, it's a feeling he hasn't felt since he was back in the Porticus with his father.

Boiling heat rages in Apollo's core and courses up through his chest, burning behind his eyes. Instantly, Apollo's mind is acutely aware of the process in which Brutalius' wave is manipulating the molecules within and around him. Almost intuitively, Apollo begins to counter the effects by coercing the frequencies of all the surrounding matter back to their natural regularity. Now all of three people, including Furious, feel nothing as the wave is rendered ineffective.

Furious yells out, "Time to die!" and thrusts both his weapons toward Brutalius. But still, they pass straight through him and Furious stumbles to the ground. Brutalius cackles, "You can't defeat me!" as he slams both of his fists into Furious' torso, knocking the man back and sending red ribbon-like streams of plasma wrapping around his chest. Furious growls in anguish as Brutalius pulls a blade

from his sleeve, ready to finish him off. But before he can do so and without warning, the earth around him splits open and swallows him whole.

Apollo immediately appears above the fissure, examining his work. But then Brutalius quickly rises above the crevice and sails toward Apollo, kicking the boy hard in the face. As blood flies and Apollo falls, Luna lunges, taking futile swings with her bladed Tonfa. She's astounded to see them too, pass through unsuccessfully as Brutalius' elbow swiftly smashes into her temple, sending her to the ground alongside Apollo.

They both struggle to regain their bearings. Apollo covers the lower half of his face, trying to stem the flow of blood. As his senses come back to him, he refocuses in on Brutalius' mind. Within moments, Apollo knows how, or rather *who*, is powering the End Game and he drops the hand from his face showing his astounded expression that's smeared in blood, his pale eyes striking piercingly through the crimson complexion.

Brutalius returns his attention to the fight at hand and Apollo watches Furious try to elude the man's attacks. Then a thought of Grace flashes through Apollo's head as he changes his focus again, this time boring into Furious' psyche. Quickly, he discovers the man surprisingly has a lack of knowledge about the End Game. He also detects a hint of probity from Furious which goes against anything he knows about him. For some reason, this makes Apollo despise him even more.

Don't get distracted. Luna's voice interrupts and Apollo turns his attention toward her for a split-second. In that same moment, Brutalius breaks through Furious defenses and slams into him, bringing him to his knees. Brutalius quickly clutches his hands around Furious' head, coercing yet more misty-red material, spreading it down his entire body.

Then Brutalius suddenly lets go and Furious falls lifelessly to the ground. He begins marching toward the other two and Apollo shoves Luna, sending a thought out to her, *find my uncle*. Simultaneously, he places an image of Nathan Lex in her mind and turns to meet the now-charging Brutalius. When they converge, Brutalius swings at him and the boy instinctively reacts, holding up his arms up in fear. A thick layer ice instantly erupts around Apollo's forearms and Brutalius' attack is met with a frosty shield as strong as any steel.

Protected for the moment, Apollo yells out, "Hurry! Find him!" Luna runs off as Apollo blocks Brutalius' assaults. Then something triggers in his mind, a memory of him walking down the beach right after he escaped the Chamber. He quickly realizes it's the moment he first learned he could communicate with ARIES.

He reaches out, *ARIES what is the location of Nathan Lex*. Instantly, the warm metallic voice fills his head with information leading him to the abandoned level between the tunnel and the lower floors of the Acropolis.

Apollo relays the information directly to Luna and also tries to address his other immediately dilemma, *ARIES, what is the location of Brutalius Kaine?* The computer responds and confirms that the Brutalius is indeed, standing before him. He follows that logic and sends out his next question, *then why can't I hit him?* ARIES' reply frustrates him, even more than his increasingly vain attempts to keep Brutalius at bay. *Unable to resolve your inquiry, please restate the question.*

Apollo summons yet even more ice to his shield as Brutalius relentlessly pounds through it. Each strike sends new waves of plasma that eventually melts completely through, blistering Apollo's skin. He winces in pain, turning away from Brutalius. In frustration, Apollo conjures an icy club in his hands and swings it to no effect. Brutalius immediately returns the attack and Apollo barely manages to parry. The boy now finds himself fighting toe-to-toe and he knows it's only a matter of time before Brutalius kills him.

He turns to run for his life. As he's moving, he attempts to rephrase his previous question, *ARIES, how is the End Game affecting Brutalius Kaine?* This time the wording of his query satisfies the computer and it goes into a detailed explanation on how Brutalius is manipulating the matter around him. More specifically, how the negative charge of the electrons in his atoms are being reversed, canceling out opposition to other objects. ARIES ends with a simple summary, *regarding the aspect in question, the technology effectively causes the matter of the subject to be completely unabated by other masses.*

The information settles in Apollo mind and he now understands it fully. He pictures infinitesimal electron clouds surrounding Brutalius' atoms and he then imagines them reverting back to their original polarity. As he feels the changes occur, he swings his riny mace with all his strength. Brutalius doesn't even bother blocking Apollo's assault and his arrogance proves costly. The mass of electrified ice makes contact with Brutalius, exploding into a frigid, arc-blast of electricity.

Underground, Luna runs through an empty, abandoned passageway trying to find the way back outside. She still shudders inside from the state of the man she found chained to a table and near death. It was shocking how much he favored Apollo, it was almost like it was an older version of him lying there.

Finally she reaches daylight and spots Apollo standing over a smoldering Brutalius. "Stop! I found him! I found him!" Apollo's eyes widen and he instantly replies, "Where, where is he? Is he still alive?" Luna grabs Apollo's hand, "Barely, but we have to hurry!"

Apollo leaves the crumpled body of Brutalius and follows Luna back through the Acropolis, down the stairwell and through the passage that leads to Nathan Lex. Once inside, he is appalled by the conditions. Wires and tubes run from all across the damp dark room, each one attached to his uncle. Apollo looks to Luna for advice or suggestions, but the girl is at a loss. Then suddenly, someone rushes in as the ring of Luna's blade breaks the monotonous beeping sound of the surrounding machinery. She holds her weapon out ready to strike when they both recognize the familiar flame-tipped mohawk.

Furious doesn't say a word as he enters. He just stares down at the man on the table. He can feel Apollo glowering at him, "What's wrong, *Bro*? Got nothing to say?" Furious just shakes his head, "This is not my doings, man. I *am* sorry." The three stand there in silence, when something dawns on Luna.

"The syringe!"

"The what?"

"You know, what Seth gave me!"

Luna produces the small black box given by her mentor back at the Oculus. She hands the case over to Apollo. He stares at it confused and reads the message on the top, "Host Inhibitor NL." Luna nudges him to open it, "NL must mean Nathan Lex." Apollo nods and lifts back the top of the box. In that moment, the room suddenly explodes in a fiery blast, engulfing the entire area in flames.

When the fire dies and everything is left in utter darkness, Apollo searches through the now completely blackened space around him. "Luna!" he yells out, but doesn't get any response. He doesn't hear or *feel* anything of her. He shudders from the thought of her death as he notices a small, dim light glowing from across the room. It lights up something Apollo can't quite make out. Ever so slowly, it moves closer until he clearly sees what it is. It's the bloody face of Brutalius, illuminated by two flaming daggers in his hands, "You should have killed me when you had the chance, boy!"

Brutalius lunges and Apollo can barely manage to slip out of the way. He dodges another fiery swipe at his head that comes streaking across the blackness in a blazing trail. Then impulsively, Apollo encases his entire fist in solid ice and sends it into Brutalius' jaw. This is enough to knock the man off-balance and cause both daggers to fly out of his hands. Everything is back to darkness now but Apollo has an idea how to end this fight, once and for all. He concentrates on the air surrounding Brutalius, coercing it into a thick layer of frosty crust that instantly entombs him.

Apollo doesn't waste any more time and searches for the syringe on the floor. Luckily, it doesn't take long to find it. As he sends the needle into his uncle's skin, another explosion rips through the room. This time, it ends with a sharp, burning pain in Apollo's side and instantly, it's like all the strength leaves his body. He stares down to see a ruby-red knife handle protruding from his rib cage and he falls to his knees. The wicked burn from knife's laced steel slithers through his veins, pumping plasma directly into his heart. The boy struggles as his body convulses involuntarily and he clutches his chest trying to contain the sensation. But it's only a matter of seconds before he finally gives in and falls over, dying.

Apollo doesn't hear Brutalius mocking him. He is too occupied with the images of his childhood now flooding his memory. Even in death, he attempts to control the flow. Surprisingly, all of his thoughts dwell on Sabrina. Scenes of nights at her house, alongside Solomon, her tucking each one of them

into bed, her wishing them goodnight. He sees her bending down, kissing Solomon. Apollo wonders why he never got those kisses.

He covets her.

The guilt hangs even heavier still, when I hear him cry out. Even through all his physical and emotional pain, I know his sobs are still only for her. It's one of my deepest regrets, the miscalculation of the depth of my son's love for her. It's something, I'm afraid, I will certainly pay dearly for. But I can find some solace in the fact that this charade has not only saved our city, but our people. And it has also readied my son for his future. It's a great price to pay, a worthy sacrifice.

So in that instant, I lift the perceived destruction to Alcazar. With the exception of the hole in the outer wall, all the damage was just mere stratagem. Briefly I pause though, but only to listen to the sounds of Vitus' guards, who are now in the process of clubbing his badly informed nephew, Brutalius, into submission.

When they drag him away, I can't help but comment, "Not too bad for an *old man*, huh?" But the once boisterous, triumphant boy of a tyrant doesn't respond, apparently he is still too broken and embarrassed. But his uncle speaks to me, "Oria, I'll let you know when we set the execution date."

I reach down to help Apollo to his feet, but he refuses my hand. Instead, he springs up on his own. Backing away, he asks, "What's going on here?" I attempt to reach out to him mentally, *it's all over son. You did well.* But he remains aphonic and angry so I decide it would be better to convey the many reasons for my deception a different way. I send a string of mental images to Luna. I instruct her to go to Apollo and she follows my suggestions, falling into his arms. Immediately, I detect dubiety from him and it forces me to offer more, "Your mother is alive, Apollo. She's at the schoolhouse." He still doesn't move. Instead, he questions my motives, "If that is true then why? Why put us through all of this!"

"I had no choice in the matter. Our lives depended on it."

"And what about Solomon's life!"

I cringe as he spits his response. I try to place my hand on his shoulder, but he jerks away again. I attempt to explain to him that Solomon is too, alive and well. That Sabrina retrieved him unexpectedly but I know better than to try and dissuade her. "He's with her now even as we speak, in the bunker underneath the school, where she's always been. Go see for yourself."

"No this is just another trick! I saw her! I saw her blood!"

"No Apollo, it was merely a figment."

I feel him grow colder toward me, so again, I make a suggestion that could surely benefit everyone, "Go see them, Apollo." I expected he would leave this time, but still he remains. To my surprise, he rephrases his original question, his tone now low, downhearted and defeated, "Well why then, why put *me* though all of this?"

I visualize his pale-blue eyes pleading with me. I know they're probably flowing with tears. I also know he won't accept the answers I give him. I want to embrace him as my son and proclaim how proud I am but my heart I know he would just reject me. So my reply comes with my usual false sense of apathy.

"It was for your Ascension."

Then to my relief, Luna speaks up, "Come on, Apollo. I know they want to see you. I'll go if you want me to." I can sense his reluctance but he finally agrees. I wait until their footsteps tell me they have left the room and turn my concentration on tying up any loose ends. I no more than make my way up to my study when I feel Apollo's anger. This time it seems it's not pointed at me so I have to delve a little further to find its target. I'm shocked and disturbed to see it's Luna.

Apparently, Apollo doesn't accept my explanation, no matter who it comes from. It might be best just to continue to follow him, like I have been doing, ever since we got separated. Then perhaps, after enough understanding is gained, I can salvage what's left of my relationship with my only son.

Chapter *Seventeen*

"Fine be a fool! Stay away from me then!" Luna screams in frustration as Apollo retorts, "Fine!" And charges up the staircase. As soon as the boy finds his room he falls on the bed, exhausted. The reality of all that happened and all that *didn't*, fights in his mind as he stares at the fish darting back and forth in the aquarium.

What plagues him most of all is the thought of meeting Sabrina. Apollo was so used to seeing her practically every day of his life, but now she seems like a stranger. He begins to drift off to sleep, when suddenly, a loud explosion shakes the entire room. Apollo quickly jumps from his bed, looking out the window. It's nighttime now so there's nothing but darkness. He can barely make out the walls of the city but even in the shadows something doesn't seem right. Then the bedroom door bursts open, and Apollo catches the silhouette of a woman in the doorway. He instantly recognizes her but it's not his mother. It's his grandmother, Myra.

"Come Oriah, we don't have much time." Apollo begins to protest but she just ignores him, quickly cutting him off, "I need you and your brother to get to the bunker, now. I will meet you there as soon as I can. I love you." In an instant, she's gone from the room and another blast rocks the building. Apollo impulsively runs out into the hallway after her.

People are running back and forth obviously in a panic. A young boy, about eleven or twelve, rushes up to Apollo, "What's going on, Oriah?" Apollo can't think of anything else to tell the little boy, so he just plays along, "We're being attacked. Mom told us to meet her under the school. We must hurry, come on!"

The boy follows him as they make their way down the stairs and outside. People flee in all directions as buildings burn and the boys run toward the school. They finally make their way down to the front entrance when a familiar voice comes from behind, "There you guys are!"

Apollo turns to see a young woman with long blonde hair, it's a younger version of Julia. "Quickly now!" She ushers them inside and over to a staircase leading underground, "Down here!" At the bottom, she opens the large metal door and two men with rifles peer through, welcoming them inside. Julia addresses the guards, "These are Myra Lex's children, protect them with your lives." She turns quickly back, running up the steps.

Hours pass before Apollo sees that door open again. When it does only a small group of people stumble in, bloody and limping and among them is Julia. She immediately approaches the boys, pulling them close and Apollo immediately asks, "What's wrong?" But a reply never comes.

Suddenly, Apollo jolts in his bed to the bright morning sun beaming through his window. He sits up, wiping cold sweat beaded on his forehead as remnants of the nightmare linger in his mind. That's when I enter his room and surprisingly, Apollo doesn't object when I sit on the edge of his bed. He doesn't exactly offer any concern either, so I cut to the chase.

"I need you to understand something Apollo. Your mother had no choice in any of this, it's not her fault." I sense his attention focused on me so I continue, "But she still refused to leave you, left me instead, and the *only* reason she never told you the truth was because she knew, deep down, it's was the only way to preserve our way of life."

I go on to try and answer his question from earlier, or to use his words, why I put him through all of this, "There are forces beyond our walls, Apollo. Forces that plot and scheme to destroy what we have here, some of which you have yet to understand. So you see, I had to allow you experience loss, to feel what it's like to lose what you love the most. It was the only way you wouldn't become one of them." I put my hand on his shoulder and this time I get no resistance, but no response either, "Whatever happens Apollo, and however you feel may about me, just don't take it out on her. She doesn't deserve it." He finally speaks,

"Well, why isn't she here?"

"She had to take Solomon home. I'm sure they are there."

The mention of Solomon sends my thoughts immediately to my own brother. He's still in the infirmary but the surgeons say he'll make a full recovery, at least physically anyway. His mental state is still unknown as I have not been able to reach him ever since Brutalius started his cruel experiments. Nathan's part in this ordeal was something I did not anticipate, let alone prepare for.

Then Apollo says something that helps my spirits and definitely confirms he has fully embraced his gifts. "Nathan doesn't blame you. He says he just needs some more time." Before I can reply, Apollo quickly changes the subject, "What happened to her? And I can only respond with my ignorance.

"What happened to who?"

"My grandmother?"

I hesitate for many reasons, most of which has something to do with cowardice. Finally, I offer a vague answer in hopes that it will satisfy him, "She died so we all could live." Apollo responds in a way that painfully reminds me of his mistrust, "There's definitely more to it than that." His statement echoes the thought I've had since that day it happened. "Believe me son, I wish there were more answers out there."

Surprisingly, I feel his empathy, so now it's my turn to change the subject, "What about your mother? When are you going to see her?" Apollo counters with something I definitely didn't expect, "I was waiting for you to go with me." I reluctantly agree and Apollo offers to drive us there in Nathan's car. "I guess you've learned some new skills as well, well done." Still, Apollo doesn't give me much of a response.

When we get in the car, it's hard to tell which one of us feels the most anxiety. The combined emotion is enough to send both of us running, but yet here we are, riding to Sabrina's house. We pull up to the curb, get out and walk to her front door. I knock and within moments, it slowly creaks open revealing a chubby teenager.

"Apollo!" Solomon yells as he leaps to embrace his friend as the two exchange hugs. I decide not to waste time and quickly venture inside, "Where is your mother, Solomon?" And he quickly responds, "She's in the kitchen." I try to find my way back there and I hear Sabrina exclaim, "Oh my! They didn't tell me you were hurt!" I feel her hand on my wrist, leading me to a chair. As I take the seat, Sabrina inquires about the bandages covering my eyes and I respond as brief as possible, "They just tell me there is no chance I will ever regain my sight."

"I'm so sorry Oriah, is there anything I can do?"

"No, but thank you, I will manage."

"Knowing you, you'll probably find a way to use it to your advantage." I'm taken back by her assurance and use it as an opportunity to get a laugh out of her, "Yeah, maybe I can use it to make you take pity on me." I feel her fingers run through my hair, "Oriah, I could never pity you, you're the strongest person I know." Suddenly, she lets go and I get the strange impression she's hiding something.

A attempt to change the subject to our son, "He came with me you know, it's the reason why we are here." I feel Sabrina's uneasiness build and I try to calm her nerves, "It's alright, he *wants* to see you." That's when I hear Apollo's voice, "Hey, Miss Jon." And Sabrina's anxiety saturates the air now and I know Apollo must feel it. But in her usual fashion, she manages through it with poise and a warm smile, "Hey there Apollo, I'm glad you're here. I've been wanting to show you something."

I hear Sabrina leave and minutes later, come back. I detect the thud of something being placed on the table. It's apparently a book because Apollo reads the title out loud, "Apollo's Baby Book?" Sabrina explains, "Yes, I kept this when you were little. It has dates in it, things like your first steps, your first words. It was sort of a tradition years ago."

"This is a lock from your first haircut." I imagine her pulling a crop of hair from inside the book. I can picture Apollo holding it, experience it's texture, rubbing the strands between his thumb and index finger, "How could you do any of this? I was at the orphanage by then." I can feel Sabrina's anxiety peak again as the sound of her fingers nervously flip through the pages, "Well, it was because I never really left. I was always there. I always will be there, Apollo."

What follows next is dead silence, but then Sabrina speaks again, "Well, are you excited about the ceremony?" I cringe as I sense confusion coming from Apollo as he responds, "What ceremony?"

"You didn't tell him?" I know that question is directed at me. I try my best to explain, "I haven't had the chance to." That's all she needed to hear, "I swear Oriah! The ceremony is in three days and the boy has no idea!" She turns her attention toward Apollo and her voice returns to its soft tone, "Apollo, you can stay here with me if you want, your father apparently has no idea what he's doing." Surprisingly, the whole exchange has brought out a degree of exuberance from Apollo and I must admit, I'm thankful for that.

I have felt enough pain from him lately to know my distance would now be something that could be helpful, "I must go, they are things at the Acropolis that require my attention." I rise to leave and notice neither object. There's only more silence until I'm well out into the hallway. That's when I hear Sabrina, "Oriah wait." I stop to give her a chance to say what's on her mind and when she doesn't, I make a suggestion to her, "I'll be at the Acropolis when you decide to finish that thought."

It's well into the evening before she finally shows up. And when it comes to Sabrina, I can merely speculate as to what her thoughts could be. The scenario in my head always ends the same, her yelling at me for involving Solomon.

So I let her start the conversation, and she sounds as if she is an unwelcomed visitor, "Oriah, I never fully understood why you deserted our son. I only agreed to keep the truth from him because I knew somehow, you were probably right."

I try to remind her of the end, in hopes it will justify the means, "And he's safe now, we all are." Sabrina instantly agrees, "I know that." And I detect the slightest hint of concession from her. Then what she says to me next only returns me to more conjecture. "I hated you for a long time, for a long time I punished you. I robbed you, stole from you what you stole from me."

I try to concede, "Sabrina, you had every right to despise me, so does he. I can only hope one day to be forgiven." And my words are unexpectedly met with a growl of her frustration, "Oh Oriah, it's *amazing* the heights to which your assumptions will climb! They assuredly know no bounds!"

Then her voice surprisingly descends to a more composed register as she continues, "It's understandable though, Apollo wasn't the only being kept in the dark." Then I hear Sabrina walk around my desk and I sense her kneel down beside me, "I need your understanding now Oriah, as much you need mine."

I can imagine her eyes looking at me as she speaks to me, almost in a whisper, "There's a part of me that sometimes wonder if you aren't behind the entire thing." She pauses and then for some reason, I feel a degree of amusement growing within her, "You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

We share a nervous laugh for a second then Sabrina resorts back to her solemn tone, "What you don't realize, Oriah. What you can't *possibly* realize, is that we share the same wish." I don't even try to speculate now, I just feel my heart crave her answer, "What wish is that?" I hear her swallow, forcing down whatever is trying to make it's way to the surface, and even though I can't read her mind, it's like I know what she is going to say, "The wish to be forgiven."

I only see her lips now, waiting them to part and reveal her soul, her secret. But when they finally do and words escape, they wound greatly and truly confound. For the first time in what seems like forever, I now know *exactly* how Sabrina feels.

Chapter *Eighteen*

I'll always remember the day she left. It was the same day I sent Apollo to the Orphanage. "If he can't stay here, then I can't stay here!" Every ounce of me wanted to reason with her, convince her to stay, but I know Sabrina would never relent, not this time. I still feel her shoving me out of the way, "You never once thought about me, or him!"

Almost a year passed before I saw her again. Even though I searched for her, it was always in vain. I'm convinced she had to be at that dive bar with her psycho father. Then the next spring arrived and word came that she was applying for the teaching position at the school. So instantly, I went to see her and the sight I found is forever burned in my memory.

Her back was to me, and she was holding a *baby*, swinging it in her arms like she used to do with Apollo. I remember feeling the urge to turn back but then seeing her eyes on mine, and I was hopelessly drawn to her, like always. Her smile beckoned to me too, like always, but this time instead of warmth, it burned me with betrayal. "Oria..." But I didn't let her finish. I just blurted out the only thing on my mind,

"Who is the father?"

So now, it's took fifteen years for her to finally give me an answer. And for some reason I still lash out, like it was that day, long ago, "You sure it's *wasn't* a Corsair soldier?" Sabrina erupts in a tantrum, "Oria, you *know* me! Do you really think there was ever anyone else?" I reach out for her but I don't get her embrace, only more bitterness, "I thought, *you*, of all people, would have figured it out! But no, you're still too busy trying to be that *little* boy, trying to live up to his mother!"

What little pride or dignity I had left, just lay dead from those words. And deep down, I know she's right. "Well, what about *them*? Do they know?" Sabrina quickly answers, "No," and I sense her get closer, so I reach out. My fingers find her face and I try to imagine what her expression looks like as I stroke her soft cheek. I find wet lines left by her tears, "If only it could be as it once was." I say it before I even realize, but instantly I don't regret it, it's exactly how I feel. Then I feel her pull away and the sound of her footsteps travel across the room.

"You know Oria, when you took him away, I needed to get as far away from you as possible. I did go stay with my father. He's the one who taught me how to block you out, because that was the only way I could come back. I had to be with my sons in peace, *without* you."

I start to hear her slowly walk towards me, "But even then, your voice was still in my head. At first, I thought it was you, that you had some way of getting through. After a while though, I realized it was only *remnants* of you, memories of the years of manipulation. You haunted me, Oria."

"No.." I try to speak but she doesn't let me, "It will *never* be as it once was! Just mark it up to another one of your *precious* sacrifices! I really hope you can live with the cost of it all, Oria, because you deserve it!" Then her feet echo towards the door. She stops and says one last thing to me, almost like a wish, "I hope my voice haunts *you* now!" I hear the door slam shut, and my heart tells me her wish was definitely granted.

The next morning I lie in my bed not wanting to move, not wanting last night to be real. I appreciate Sabrina's rant in its effectiveness, because it feels like that day she didn't come back. I had this fantasy that one day, maybe she might forgive me, but now I know that's never going to happen. She has two fatherless sons she can blame me for.

Then I hear something that's like an answer to an unspoken prayer, "The preparations for the ceremony have been delayed, due to the heavy rain." I can't mistaken that voice, "You just don't know how good it is to hear your voice, Nathan."

"Wow Oria, you haven't called me *that* in years."

"Well it's your name, it's what Mom called you and it's what I should have called you. I'm so sorry." I feel his hand over mine, "Sorry for what Oria? I like who I am. It's you and me, remember?" I know if I still had my eyes, tears would be fighting to fall, "Yeah, I remember." Then Nathan nudges me, "Well

then get up! We have a party to prepare for!" He swings my feet over toward the floor and I question his urgency, "I thought you said it was delayed due to the weather?"

"Well, we still have to instruct them on what to do, what to expect. I'll go wake Apollo. Is Solomon here or.." I quickly interrupt him. I don't think I could even bear hearing her name right now, "She's going to handle all of that. They're both with her."

"Well we'll just go over there."

"No, I don't think that's a good idea."

"Well why not?"

"She doesn't want to see me."

I explain to Nathan what happened last night and I don't do it in words. I convey scenes directly to him and immediately, I feel his empathy, "Well, that certainly explains the rain. I'll go talk to her. I have a way with her."

I don't object and when Nathan leaves for her house, I lie back on the bed. Her house isn't far from here, so I must be quick. It's a good thing it's much easier to relax this time. The soft mattress is a far cry from the stone floor of that Corsair prison cell where I followed Apollo all those weeks. I make myself comfortable and within minutes, I channel myself through, just in time to see Nathan approach Sabrina's door.

"I'm here to talk to Solomon, his Ascension training begins in a couple of days and I would like to augment his preparation, with your permission of course." Nathan's smile doesn't have the effect he hoped for and Sabrina just give him an impassive stare. "Sabrina, I swear I'm here on my own accord." She finally returns his smile, "Okay then, come on in. I'm glad to see you well, Nathan."

Immediately, he questions the quiet house, "Where's Solomon?" and Sabrina answers with the obvious, "They're not here." Nathan laughs, and you can detect a slight hint of anxiety, "Okay, well where are they?" Sabrina's voice changes in tone when she replies. It sounds like she's annoyed, "You know, you're only making this worse." Nathan tries to reassure her, "Sabrina I told you, I'm here on my own.."

"I'm not talking to you!"

Her voice booms and I know now who it's directed at. "You must really think I'm a fool! I want *both* of you out of my house, now!" Sabrina composes herself before addressing Nathan directly, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, "Nathan, Solomon will be there with the rest of the students, tomorrow. We will see you then." She then walks over and opens the front door, gesturing Nathan to step through and he does, quietly. As soon as he's out, the bang of the door slams shut, ringing in his ears. He gets back in his car, and as he drives back down the road, he sends a thought out to me, *I'm sorry Oriah.*

Suddenly, I'm distracted by a voice, *wake up!* Immediately, the sensation of Apollo standing over me inundates my senses. I'm surprised by the openness of his thoughts and I get a piece of a conversation between him and ARIES. Then he speaks, "I thought what you said about forces beyond our walls that I had yet to understand. So I did some research, and it seems most information about anything other than the Corsair, is conveniently *not* stored in ARIES' memory. It's in *yours.*"

As soon as the words hit me, Apollo shuts me out again, making me cringe from the now throbbing headache. He continues to talk, "I want to show you something." I snap back, "You can't show me anything, I'm blind." He returns my contempt, "And I'm fully aware of that. Seriously, do you want me to trust you or not?"

I don't say a word, I just follow him all the way to our destination. The sweet, musty smell of old books mingled with birch tells me we're in the library. That's when I hear Solomon's voice, "Everything's ready, I *think.*" I want to inquiry what's going on but Apollo talks before I can, "Just sit and try to relax." I find one of the recliners and lie back. I feel someone removing the bandages from my face and the next thing I hear is Apollo speaking out as if he's speaking to a room full of people, "Okay ARIES, start the program." Suddenly I feel something burn my face as searing pain tears through my head. I groan in agony, but eventually that pain is replaced with a warming sensation, almost like a hot, soothing bath. Next comes more pain, much sharper this time and the dark void around me is transformed into a bright, blinding light.

Then in an instant, everything fades back to complete darkness again and I hear ARIES, "Program complete. Procedure was successful." Before I can contemplate what just happened, I hear Apollo's voice, "Open your eyes." Then it dawns on me, my face feels *normal*, no pain and no discomfort. I do as he says and at first, I cringe from the glare. Then that's gradually replaced by the extraordinary sight of my two sons looking at me.

"We've been here since last night. I figured if she could fix me, she could fix you." I lie there in silent, but utter gratitude, lost for words. Then reluctantly, I turn to Solomon, "I'm sorry, I didn't know." But before I can gauge his reaction, Nathan walks in, "It worked!" I sit up and expect astonishment from him but all I get is something more like delight. "How did you know?"

"Wow, Oriah. You surprised I knew something you didn't?"

Then it occurs to me, I never even bothered to explore his thoughts this morning. I've always *trusted* Nathan, so I never have a reason to. "Are you ready?" He turns to Solomon and the boy replies with a nod. They walk back through the library and I hear Nathan preparing his new apprentice, "We have a lot of work ahead of us. The scheduling the staff of this place alone is a nightmare!" As they leave, I stand to embrace Apollo, but he surprises me yet again. This time not with his actions, but rather with words.

"Who is Prescott Cynric?"

Chapter *Nineteen*

"ARIES access all information pertaining to The Bloc, RAC, North America." We're in the media room now and as I command, ARIES accesses my memories and begins to both display images and transmit information directly to Apollo's brain. After a while, the boy looks at me with an expression of significance and I confirm his trepidation, "That's right Apollo, they have others, just like you and me."

"And Cynric?" I see now that Apollo has made the wrong assumption, so I explain to him, "Cynric is merely a bureaucrat, but he commands thousands and they possess weapons that make the Corsair machines look like toys. But the others that are like us, that's an entirely different matter. There's no way of knowing how many they may have."

Suddenly, an image emerges on the screen that I must admit is rather frightening. It's a depiction of what must be *thousands* of soldiers marching on a bloodstained beach, littered with corpses. Countless machines hovering above them, covering the sky. I search through the computer and eventually realize where the picture is coming from,

"Apollo, where did you see that?"

"ARIES showed it to me last night."

I passively try to explain away the image, "Well it has to be a scene from the Last War." But Apollo disagrees, "When I asked ARIES what was my purpose.."

I interject, "I've already told you that." But my interruption doesn't deter him, rather it leads him to his point. "That's just it, when I asked her what I was supposedly protecting Alcazar from, that's is what she gave me."

I quickly decide the best way to address this situation was to go directly to the source, "ARIES, what is the date of the image." After a few moments, ARIES answers, "That information is classified. Authorization: Second Lieutenant Amy R. Lexington, Code Prime - USAMRMC, Fort Detrick, Maryland."

I react to her response by probing further, "Okay then, show the file on Second Lieutenant Amy R. Lexington, USAMRMC." The computer replies with the same reference to classified materials, followed by only silence. I don't ever remember ARIES being reticent, so I repeat myself, "Who is Amy R. Lexington?" After another silent moment, I change my focus and turn to Apollo, "We'll have deal with this later, right now I've got to get you ready."

Apollo then explains how his mother drilled him on most of the specifics of the Ceremony. Which is a good thing because I can't seem get that name off my mind anyway, *Amy R. Lexington*. It's almost like the sound of it reminds me of someone. The look on Apollo's face shows he senses my dilemma too. So instead of feeding him, I try to change the subject, "Walk with me Apollo, the some fresh air will help clear our heads."

We go downstairs and out into the Porticus Acropoli. Walking toward the pond, I say to him, "Luna will be there tomorrow, you know." His reaction isn't exactly what I anticipated, "Will her grandmother be there?" and I nod, "Yes, she will be there, is something wrong?" He just shakes his head, "No, just curious."

Then I think Apollo attention goes to another place because he just stares out at the water. I can only guess who he's thinking of. I also get the impression he would rather be alone, so I oblige, "Well if you need anything, I'll be around. You know you are welcome to stay here, if you like." Apollo answers, "Don't I have to?" And I reply, "No, you can do anything you want. I only ask you always try and do the *right* thing. In this instance, staying with your mother is perfectly fine with me." I turn back and head for the archway. As I walk inside, I hear him say something that hints at faint hope for the future, "I'll see you in the morning."

After spending all night in the library, I still don't have any answers. I've probed every bit of information in ARIES' memory and my own. It's like the woman didn't exist. "ARIES provide a list of all the second lieutenants in the United States Army, last name Lexington." The computer shows a list of three individuals, none of which are who I'm looking for.

Then I hear Apollo's voice, "I got a feeling there's someone who can help us." I sit up to see him approaching me. "Who would that be?" He responds to me in a way that almost feels like condescension, "Obviously, Amy R. is an anagram." My eyes widen when the idea dawns on me, "Amy R. equals *Myra*." Apollo nods in agreement, "Exactly."

I go with his lead and convey the question to the computer, along with the image from before, "ARIES explain this image. Authorization, Second Lieutenant Myra Lex, Code Prime - USAMRMC, Fort Detrick, Maryland." As the picture dominates the domed ceiling, ARIES responds, "Authorization denied."

I take a deep breath and try again, "ARIES explain this image. Authorization, Second Lieutenant Myra *Lexington*, Code Prime - USAMRMC, Fort Detrick, Maryland." And again she replies, "Authorization denied." I slam my fist on the table in frustration. Surprisingly, Apollo doesn't respond the way I did, but rather with complete confidence, "I figured she would say that, Code Prime must mean something as well." He smiles at me, "And we both know someone who would know what that is." I complete his thought and my answer makes us both smile.

"Julia."

Chapter *Twenty*

I sit in the cafeteria, alone. It's much too early for anyone else to be here, so I know it's completely empty. I wanted to have the opportunity to get a first look at the new apprentices, besides I think I may have an early visitor. I also have a lot to think about. Apollo's whole family will be here today, including Sabrina's father. He never care much for me. Just then, the door creaks open and someone walks in, just as I anticipated. "I had a feeling you would be here."

"No more of your little mind games, huh Oriah?" I respond to him with my own derision, "Seth, what could we possibly have to talk about?" I stand, wanting to leave, but he walks around the table and meets me, eye to eye, "Your *sons*, for starters. We both know there's a lot more at stake here than our petty differences." For once, the old man is right. It's amazing what genetic science can do, Seth is over seventy but doesn't look a day older than myself.

I sit back down and demand an answer to a question, returning his grim stare, "And what happened with Brutalius? He must pay for his crimes, you know. I don't view what he did as *petty*." Seth's demeanor calms, "Neither do I Oriah, but I'm sure you know by now he's escaped." With that, Seth drops a red coin on the table. I reach out and slide it across the surface until it's at the edge, snatch it up and let it flip it over and over across my knuckles. "You don't expect me to believe that, do you?"

"Oriah, don't play your games with me! I've grown tired of your rhetoric over the years." I counter Seth's disdain with, yet again, more of my own, "And *you* know just as well as I do where he went and there's *nothing* we can do about it. It's just an unfortunate circumstance."

A few students start to trickle in now to get their morning meal. Seth calms his tone and steps to me, as not to cause a scene, "That's where you're wrong, Oriah. It's way more than some unfortunate circumstance. This will certainly lead to another war, more destruction and more bloodshed on both sides. You know that as well as I do." I watch him leave and I know he's right, but that doesn't necessarily mean I'm wrong, there's still *nothing* we can do about it.

Soon after, Apollo walks in and looks around, like he's searching for someone. I motion for him to join me and he does. "Who are you looking for?" I ask and he replies with what I fear, "Seth, wasn't he just here?" I answer, "Yes, but he left." I anticipate Apollo to run after him but I'm surprised when he doesn't. He just takes a seat across from me, "I wanted to ask him about Grace." I try to dissuade him once more about that distraction, "You need to forget about her."

My words cause him jump up, but instead of running off, he just scowls at me, "You can't tell me who to care about!" Then he storms off, getting in line for breakfast with the other students. I ponder how I can ever resolve his anger towards me. I'm afraid the only answers I have will only bring more mistrust.

Eventually he comes back and sits down with his breakfast, continuing his questions, "So what did he want?" And I try to act nonchalant with my answer, "He just wanted to ask me the time of the ceremony." But I can tell Apollo doesn't buy it, "So he'll be here?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

I search for an explanation that will satisfy his curiosity and I am distracted by a voice over my shoulder, "Hey Apollo, everything alright?" I get a degree of hostility toward me from Apollo, as he answers his mother, "Yeah, we're good." I realize now, Apollo already knew the answer to his question and he just wanted to see if I would tell him the truth. Sadly, I'm pretty sure I just failed his test.

He ignores any acknowledgment and continues his talk with Sabrina, "I was wondering if I could stay with you tonight?" Sabrina walks around the table, "Of course you can, you know you're always welcome, we will be thrilled to have you." She smiles and he returns it by standing, hugging her. While she holds Apollo in her arms she looks over at me and her face explodes with surprise, "Your eyes! They're better, what happened?" Apollo interjects, "ARIES repaired them."

"Well that's wonderful! I'm glad to hear it." Then Sabrina's expression changes to something more astringent, "Oriah, I'm afraid we need to talk." I get up, and notice she nods to Apollo as he sits back

down to finish his food. I follow her outside and anticipate another argument, but surprisingly, her tone is calm and right to the point.

"I think he wants to live with me"

"Okay, but you could have said that in front of him, you know."

Sabrina then walks closer to me and asks for something I didn't expect, my *advice*, "I need your help. I think Daddy wants to take Apollo to the Oculus tomorrow for training and I don't know what to tell him." I react without thinking. "To tell who, our son or *your* father?"

"*Our* son, of course!"

"Then that means you agree with your father? That he *should* go?"

Sabrina catches my tone and gets my meaning. She grabs my shoulders and looks directly in the eyes. "Whatever you think you're talking about Oriah, I agree with you. He needs to stay here."

"Then tell him, your father." I say and Sabrina quickly backs off, dropping her head in apparent shame, "Oriah, I didn't come here to argue with you. I just didn't know what else to do." I reach in to console her, "I know that." I wrap my arms around her and she lets me, causing my heart to swell. I haven't felt her embrace like this in years.

The door opens and Apollo walks out. Sabrina and I let go as he joins her by her side, "So am I going with you?" His words remind me how I failed his test of trust. It's difficult to accept the entire blame for all the secrets kept from him about his heritage, but still they seem to all fall directly on my shoulders, alone.

Sabrina replies to him with a stroke of her hand against his cheek, "Later Apollo, I promise. Right now you need to go with your father and prepare, you need to be ready." He tries to argue with her but she just kisses his cheek and whispers something in his ear. Then she grabs my hand for a brief moment before walking away, back towards town. "Well it looks like you two are warming up, *one big happy family*, right?" At first I take Apollo's words as sarcasm but then he laughs and I realize I don't have a clue where my son is coming from anymore.

As we walk around the Acropolis, I begin a conversation that is hopefully a start of a new, candid relationship with my son, "Apollo, I realize you are aware why Seth and the other members of the Corsair will be here tomorrow." Apollo maintains his silence as I continue, "You know the Corsair was once part of Alcazar and there are ties that reach across to both sides." Then he interrupts, "'Quit treating me like a child. I'm not ignorant!" I respond by getting straight to the point. "I know you're not. You know Seth is your grandfather, right?"

"Yeah, but why are you telling me this now?"

"He wants to take you back with him today, to stay at the Oculus, to train you how to fight."

Apollo then says something to me that makes me think that things just might work out between us after all, "Then what do you think I should do?" I answer instantly and with complete honesty, "I think you should stay here."

We spend the rest of our walk in silence. I wish I could read his thoughts but his mental block remains intact. I finally ask Apollo what his intentions are but he still doesn't give me much of an answer. It's just enough to confuse me even further. "First, I need to go talk to someone. I promise I'll be back soon."

Chapter *Twenty-one*

I look out the window of my study at the gathering crowds around the ceremonial square. It's been nearly three hours now and Apollo still hasn't come back, making me a bit nervous. Then I get a thought from Nathan, informing me two Corsair trucks have approached the front gate and Seth Jon is demanding entrance. I instruct Nathan to let them in and make my way to greet them outside.

As soon as I'm out front, the trucks pull up. I stop for a moment to take in the scenery. Seth is the first out, walking quickly around to the other side. He opens the door, helping Julia. That's followed by Luna and Paulus, exiting from the other truck. I resume my walk towards them, "Welcome!" Julia smiles at me with her arms open but Seth barely acknowledges my presence, "Orah! It's good to see you well, my dear." I reach down to hug her and she kisses my cheek, "It's good to see you too, Julia."

"Where's the boy?" Seth looks around, waiting for an answer. "He will join us soon enough. I hope Petra is doing well?" My reply gives him a look of confusion, followed quickly by one of suspicion, "Yes, she had some things to attend to back at home." In an attempt to move things along, I remind my guests of the festivities, "Come to the square, there are plenty of refreshments and entertainment for everyone." I send out a thought to Nathan to meet me there, to take over their arrangements. We finally meet up and I gladly pawn them off on him. I need to find out where Apollo is.

Sabrina's absence should have hinted at me what was going on, but the thought didn't actually occur until I saw them together. As they approach from the road that leads to her house, I notice Sabrina has her arm around his shoulder. She spots me first and motions for Apollo. When we reach one another, Sabrina initiates the conversation, "Apollo has something to tell you, but hear him out before you say anything, okay?"

"Alright," I anxiously reply and wait for my son to begin but Sabrina has to prod him along. When he finally begins to speak, he says it as if it was all planned out, "I understand why you want me to follow in your footsteps. And everything you did, you did for me, and for the sake of Alcazar. But I have to make my own way, my own choices. I'm going to go back with Seth, to the Oculus."

Apollo stared at his feet the entire time, but now he raises his head and looks directly at me, "You told me yesterday I could do whatever I wanted, as long as I always did the right thing. Well, I feel this is the right thing. We both know what might happen soon and I want to be ready."

I want to counter his argument with things like loyalty and trust, but I know I have earned neither. Then Apollo's voice fills my head, *you trust me, right?* And the look in his eyes reflect his notion. I reluctantly have to nod in agreement.

The ceremony is finally set to begin and I have taken my place at the seat in the center of the square, with Nathan standing by my side. The new class of students are seated directly in front of us, divided into the two main areas of study, agriculture and engineering. They are all dressed in white ceremonial regalia.

Then I spot our Corsair guests, seated in the first row behind the students. It's not hard to spot their black fatigues in contrast with everyone else. I notice Julia and Luna talking between one another. I can feel their happiness. Seth's mood however, is darker and much more reserved. Sadly, Paulus feels mostly confused and empty. Sabrina and Solomon are in the Acropolis assisting Apollo with last-minute preparations. I hope the news of his departure for Corsair Territory doesn't give the people of Alcazar any misguided feels, like something that will make them feel insecure with his future leadership. That's the main reason I believe leaving is a mistake. However, I'm afraid I share that idea alone.

Then suddenly, my attention cuts to a bloodcurdling scream that pierces above the chatter of the crowd. A distraught woman then rushes down the main aisle, towards me. Nathan quickly grabs her, trying to calm her down but she continues going hysterical. The woman's speech is mostly incoherent, but I can still get a sense of what is troubling her.

Images of four men dragging away two children flash in my head. Then the feelings of tremendous loss permeates through and I realize it's her children who were taken. I search through her mind for

any clue, but find no reason that leads me to who the men might be. Then I detect what sounds like a enormous engine, accompanied by a whistle that resembles a strong wind. Finally the noise gradually diminishes until there is only the woman's sobs amid the silence.

I reach out to her and convey my thoughts, assuring that her children will be returned safely. In an instant, I retrieve all information I need about them, things like their names, appearances, and personalities. In moments, I also gain a bearing on their whereabouts. It becomes dreadfully clear they have been taken by the same people Brutalius ran to.

I instruct Nathan to take the woman inside as Seth appears from the gathering crowd that surrounds us, "What going on?" He demands and I reply to him in a way I know only he'll understand, "I'm afraid that unfortunate circumstance we talked about earlier has made an unexpected appearance."

I barely see Sabrina's face when another deafening rumble grows around us. This time it is a Corsair motorcycle and I see the wild-looking, heir-apparent complete with his orange and black hair, dismount in a panic. He immediately runs to Seth, "She's gone!" And Seth counters, "Who? Petra?" Furious shakes his head, "No! Grace, they've taken her!" The sound of the girl's name instantly heightens Apollo's attention. As Seth tries to shake some composure into Furious, the boy races toward them, shoving Furious to the ground, "What do you mean they've taken her! Who has her?"

"Marcus sold her, man! He sold her to the stinking Brits!" Seth interjects, "Marcus? Where is he now, Furious?" Furious only stares at Seth with a look that tells him all he needs to know.

Marcus is dead.

"We've got to go find her!" Apollo yells and a smile streaks across Furious' face, "I was hoping you would say that. Let's go!" Apollo doesn't say anything else to anyone, he just joins his Corsair counterpart. Then Seth throws something toward them, "Here, take one of the trucks." As Furious snatches the keys from the air, Sabrina grabs Apollo in an attempt to keep him here, keep him safe. It doesn't work because Apollo pulls away from her, "I'm sorry but I *have* to do this!"

Sabrina screams as she falls into the arms of her father. I can hear Seth consoling her and I can only turn away. My loneliness painfully reminds me of my own mother. Then suddenly, the conversation Apollo and I had earlier occurs to me. I immediately walk over to Julia, bend down and whisper in her ear, "We need to talk. Who is Amy Lexington?"

The expression that flashes across Julia's face portrays shock from my question, but it also reveals she knows exactly what I'm referring to. She quickly informs Seth that she and Luna will remain in Alcazar for a while. Her reason was rather convincing, she hadn't seen the Acropolis in quite a while and she wanted to visit an old friend. Seth didn't protest, he just insisted, to me anyway, that my whole life solely depended on Julia's well-being.

So as soon as he and Paulus are on their way back to Corsair Territory, I instruct Nathan to disperse the crowd and assure them again that they are safe. I also tell him to remind the distraught mother her children will return, safe and sound. Then I send another thought out, this time to Luna, telling her to take Furious' bike and catch up with Apollo. As she scrambles away, I look at Julia, "Now I need to know all you can tell me, our lives probably depend on it."

She nods but doesn't say a word. She just directs me through the Acropolis until we are in the Porticus Acropoli, at the center garden. It's a place I can never bring myself to visit, my mother's final resting place. Julia gazes toward the sky and speaks out loud and it's immediately clear she isn't talking to me, "I am going to tell him the truth now. I hope you can forgive me."

Julia turns and takes my hands into hers. I stare into her eyes and hang on every moment. I also think how easily it could be to just pry into her thoughts and get what I need. But I also know she went through the same Program my mother did, and she could block me out just as easily. I've had that happen enough to me lately and I'm tired of learning that lesson. Not to mention, I really can't afford to lose anything else.

It's only minutes before Julia speaks again, but it feels like years. And when her words reach out, they claw me, like cruel, icy fingers. I can't even begin to comprehend what it all might mean for the idea is literally inscrutable in my mind. But somewhere deep down, a small spark of betrayal ignites in my heart and it's flames engulf it, burning everything I am and everything I've become. It mocks

everything I did to my wife, my son, even myself. What Julia says to me implies that I have been foolishly wrong about *everything* this entire time.

"Oriah, your mother didn't die that day in battle, she betrayed us."

END OF PART TWO

Epilogue

**British Army
Corp of Royal Engineers
RAC Division**

Internal Memorandum 0021405

TO: All Regiment Command

SUBJECT: Status Update - North America Southeastern Regional Report

Be aware that new information has been obtained on the status about the former U.S. Program, *Nephilim*. Target identities has been determined and proper measures are currently being administered to proceed execution of orders to follow. Main command will be immediately relocated to a secure location in proximity. Top Secret, Protectively Marked Information, NATSEN.

It should be made known to all His Majesty's subjects that secrecy is to be maintained, now more than ever. The latest conflict between the current city-states of that region [Alcazar, Corsair] have put the area on high-alert status. It has been our policy in the past to remain neutral in these regional quarrels but now that stance has appeared to have changed. Again, orders are to follow.

Lt. Gen Sir P. Cynric, KCB, CBE, DL, DSO
Chief Royal Engineer, Corps of Royal Engineers RAC

OFFICIAL:
Brigadier M. McEwen,
Commander, Corps of Royal Engineers RAC

14.03.69 RAC 0021405