

# Ascension

## The Rising Son

by A.P. West

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# Chapter *One*

## *Apollo*

*I hate myself.* The thought creeps in my mind again as I stare at the pale-white square tiles that make up the floor of our empty classroom. I'm the first one to arrive because the bus from the Orphanage leaves everyday at 6:30 sharp. I'm always alone. Yesterday was the sixteenth anniversary of my birth and I still don't know who my parents are. *I hate myself.*

The other kids start to slowly trickle in, one and two at a time. Everyone is excited. One more week of school, and then it's off to start a two-year apprenticeship at the Acropolis. I've never been to it, but I see it every day; you can't help but see it. It's by far the biggest building in our City. Its elegant white marble walls tower at least five stories into the sky. A dozen or so gleaming golden windows adorn each of its four walls. It's not only our academy; it's the home to our leader, the *Doyen*, Oriah Lex. He has protected and governed our City ever since the peace that followed the Last War.

But before our apprenticeship begins, we're given genetic tests consisting of simple DNA scans and aptitude exams. Then our occupational assignments are chosen based on those results. We were taught in class that before the War, people were not just born, they were *bred*. The initial embryos were developed with certain traits so they would produce children more genetically enhanced until the eventual descendants would come together and form a complete harmonious society. But the Last War changed all that.

I'm not looking forward to my results though. I've tried to track down my heritage, but found nothing. And I don't mean a few clues or some information that eventually lead to nowhere. I mean nothing; not a birth certificate, a renouncement of parental rights, a family tree, *nothing*. So I can just imagine what those results are going to be. I'll probably be branded some kind of reject, freak, or failure. I'll have to live my life as one of the Waif, no ceremony for them, just training; then a life of being moved from one custodial job to another. *I hate myself.*

"Cheer up Apollo." I hear the familiar voice as my best friend Solomon, walks around behind me and gives a hearty slap to my shoulder. I grimace at his cheerfulness, "What are you so happy about?" He just shrugs and sits at his usual desk in the back. I already know why he's happy, he loves being here. His mother is our teacher, Miss Jon, and his life has always been centered on this school. He loves learning and helping others, just like his mother. Miss Jon always encourages us to learn everything we can, despite what our futures might be. She tells us, "Knowledge is the wing wherewith we fly to Heaven." I never really related to or cared for what that means. The only place I'm probably flying is to the life of a servant, trash collector, or something else demeaning.

Then my spirits lift when I see *her* walk into the room. Her long graceful strides, she is dainty and beautiful. Her dark wavy brown hair, streaked with the slightest hints of red, frames her creamy complexion and deep brown eyes perfectly. Grace. Her parents named her well.

The way our desks are assigned, Grace has always sat directly behind me. I always look forward to seeing her. I guess you could say we're friends, but she's friendly to everyone. It's probably more like she's been stuck staring at the back of my head for ten years, so she makes the best of it. And I can't help but keep my distance ever since it came out that I was an orphan. It wouldn't exactly be fitting if I hung around with the prettiest girl in school.

She catches me watching her and gives me her usual smile. I quickly look away toward the blank screen of the monitor mounted on the wall, feeling the warmth in my cheeks from my embarrassment. "Good morning Apollo," she says as she walks behind me. I can only mutter back as I catch the sweet scent of the perfume that always follows her. I remember the first time I saw Grace, we were six and it was the very first day of school. She wore this white lacey dress and my first thought was she was an angel. In my eyes she still is.

Everyone has now arrived and is sitting quietly at their designated places. At precisely eight, Miss Jon walks in and stands before the class, "Students, please give your attention to the monitor, the

Doyen, Oriah Lex, has an important announcement.” Then she quietly takes a seat at her desk and turns sideways, looking up toward the screen as the lights dim slightly and an image of a man's face appears.

*“Good Morning Students, as we all know, this week marks the end of the final year in the first stage of your education. And soon, you will be taking the next steps toward Ascension. I wanted to be the first to congratulate you on your accomplishment, and wish you much success in this next important endeavor. I also look forward to welcoming you to the Acropolis on Monday. So with those sentiments, I would like to announce that your last week of school has been canceled, effective immediately. You are to report to your parents at once, as they have already been informed and will be waiting for your arrival. Thank you and have a great day.”*

I look around the room and all of the kids are smiling, knowing their school life is now over. I feel enraged; my usual morning mood of disdain toward life in general has twisted into frustration and anger. *How dare he take the last thing I had left; my last week of freedom.* I take a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. I'll have to walk back, alone, to my lonely prison at the Orphanage. *I really hate myself.*

While the other students are cheerfully gathering their things, eager to make the trek back to their happy homes, I throw the few things I have, a couple of styli, my Notebook, and a keyboard emitter into my satchel. Miss Jon approaches me with her usual smile, leans down and speaks in a low whisper, “Come with me Apollo, Principal Deacon needs to have a word with you.” I think, *Oh great, what did I do now?* I rise from my chair, stuff my jacket in my satchel, and sling it over my shoulder following Miss Jon out into the hallway.

As we walk down the corridor, she slows her pace allowing me to walk beside her. She places her hand on my shoulder, “Everything's going to be fine Apollo, you have nothing to fear.” I know she is just trying to reassure me, but her effort makes me feel worse. *What do they possibly need to talk to me about?* I am nothing, only one of three orphans in the whole school, no surname, no family, no real future, only destined to be a submissive, a *nobody*. Miss Jon begins to speak, “You've done nothing wrong, Apollo..I..” She holds her head down as we walked down the hall. I don't think I've ever seen sadness on her face like that. She says, “I'm really proud of you.”

Her last words hit me like the dead of winter, *proud of me?* Although I've never been in any trouble, I'm sure I've never done anything to make anyone proud of me, so I say nothing and just nod.

When we arrive at the door to Principal Deacon's office, Miss Jon puts her other hand on my opposite shoulder and gives me her customary smile, “Be well Apollo, you're going to do fine.” She pulls me to her and gives me a tight hug, but it's not all that surprising. I've spent a lot of time with her and her son over the years. They always seemed to try and include me in their little family. I always wrote it off because it was all I ever really knew, but now that I approach this uncertain moment, I get the feeling maybe she really did care. I feel this weight in my chest as I watch her walk back toward the direction from which we just came, leaving me alone, perhaps forever, to face whatever there is behind the black metallic door.

Opening the door, I anticipated a crowded room of people, but for some reason only one man stands in front of Principal Deacon's desk. He wears a long, bright red robe with golden trim. The colors so deep and vibrant the whole thing seems to glow, it just screams royalty. He turns toward me with a pleasant look on his face, his arms folded in front, “Hello Apollo, I'm Viceroy, special assistant to our Doyen, it would be my honor for you to accompany me to the Acropolis.” He seems to be in an awfully good mood for someone leading a talentless nobody for no apparent reason. I snap at him, “I still haven't been told *why* I'm even here; I need to get back to the Orphanage, *Doyen's* orders.” My sarcasm escapes my new companion as he just brightly replies, “In due time, haste my dear boy!” He pushes at me and ushers me out the door, and down the hallway until we're outside.

Sitting out in front, I'm mesmerized by the most awesome automobile I've ever seen. Its body is long, lustrous, and gleams a brightly polished white, almost to the point to where you have to squint to look at it. The intense color is in stark contrast to its blackened mirror-like windows. It all looks futuristic to me and so out of place for the ordinary surroundings.

As we approach the vehicle, I hear a deep, strange, but familiar rumble. At least twice a week it happens. Growing from the distance, it sounds like a hundred roaring engines. I look around at the great wall that surrounds our home. At least ten meters tall, it always obscures everything beyond our boundaries, including whatever is making all the noise.

The thundering disturbance vibrates throughout everything, in a ripping crescendo, only to fade away as quickly into the wind. The dust rising up from beyond the wall is the only real sign, well besides the blaring roar, that anything ever took place. Viceroy seems strangely oblivious to the event, only extending his hand toward the sleek-looking car, beckoning me to enter its luxurious space.

I open the door and sit down. The plush interior is even more extravagant than I expected. Soft, thick red fabric covers both seats and cradles my underside comfortably. I reach out to get a feel of the fine wood paneling that endows the dashboard. The sweet scent from inside smells like entitlement and authority; fine leather wrapped in money. I don't know whether to be awestruck or envious, knowing that this is the first and last time I'll ever be this close to something as amazing as this.

Viceroy steps in from the other side and looks at me with a smile. "It is an honor to be the first to meet you." *An honor? This has officially become weird.* Looking straight ahead to the road that is now speeding towards us, I try to downplay his sentiment. "I would feel better if I knew what was going on." I think maybe my words will entice him to elaborate about all of this, especially since no one else has felt the need to let me in on the secret.

My new acquaintance tries to explain, "You're going to meet with Doyen, he has something very important to share with you, and I think you should be excited about that." How can I feel anything but fear when I don't know *what* he is going to share? For all I know I'm going to be executed. I look over at Viceroy and notice something I didn't realize at first; his robe matches the upholstery of the entire car, *exactly*. It reminds me of those crazy people I see around the City, walking their dogs, both with matching outfits. *Viceroy and his pet car.* The image brings a smile out of me. I think this is the first time I've done that all day, but then I remind myself of my situation and remember I have nothing to smile about.

"We have arrived!" his voice is almost ecstatic as we pull around to the side of the Acropolis. I've seen it almost every day of my life, but not like this. It always looked impressive up on its hill, but at this close it's downright magnificent. The radiant white marble entirely covers the outside. Terraces, each equipped with a balcony, jut out from every side of its pale-green slate roof which looks like it has its center cut out. The whole structure resembles four thick ramparts surrounding an opened square. I think to myself, *maybe there's a pool*, as I count the stained glass windows that ornate each wall in rich hues of reds, oranges, and golds.

I remember occasionally admiring the Acropolis, back in those summer days playing chess outside with Solomon and his mom in their backyard. I always tried to stay with them as much as I could, because it was way better than the Orphanage. Every once in a while we would play late into the day, and she would call to tell them I was going to stay at her house. The Orphanage never objected, one less mouth to feed I guess. Come to think of it, those two are the only people in my life that ever made me feel good about anything, and now that I'm facing the unknown, I really miss them.

The car finally comes to a stop, and the scene isn't what I imagined. I pictured rows of servants whisking me away to the royal chamber of our *precious* Doyen, blaring horns and ridiculous confetti showering everyone in his supposed "greatness". Instead there was only one man, *him*. I'm taken back by the apprehensive look on his face, his lips are pressed tightly and his eyes are wide open. *What on earth does he have to be nervous about? I should be the nervous one; I am the one being led in the dark.* I open the car door and step out directly in front of him. His eyes squint and his gaze rises until we make eye contact, "Well the day has finally arrived. Welcome Apollo, we have much to discuss." I want to spit, *you probably just want me to be your new servant boy, so let's just get this over with*, but my nerves get the better of me.

Oriah continues, "There is so much to tell you, so much to explain, I know you have no reason to trust me, but I really hope you can give me the benefit of your doubt. I know people have purposely withheld the reason you are here, and I don't want to perpetuate that any further, so I'm just going to come out and say it."

I notice as Oriah begins to move on to his next statement, the distressing expression strengthens

on his demeanor as he speaks, "An important time in your life is now here. You deserve to know the truth about who you are and where you came from." Oriah then takes a brief pause, swallowing hard as though his words are trying to devour him from inside.

"Apollo, you are my successor, *and my son*."

# Chapter TWO

## Oriah

I always kept track of his progress more closely than anyone else, but now that he stands before me, I'm clueless as to what to say to him. I know he hates me. Besides, it's poignantly projected on his face. He stares at me with eyes sharpened from his annoyance. I don't blame him, I'd hate me too. I notice he looks just like I did when I was young, same golden brown hair, same expressions, but with his mother's pale eyes. Deep down she hates me too, she left when I sent Apollo away. Even though she understood *why* I had to do it, her love for me could not bear the burden of the guilt for allowing it. She tried her best to make it up to him, so I decided to let her. I also decided to let Apollo take the lead in this conversation, "I know you have a lot of questions, so ask me anything and I will respond openly and honestly. There will be no more secrets." I cringe inside with the acknowledgment of the lie I just told my only son, but I can also feel his resolve loosen a little. It's a start.

"Well if you are my father then why did I grow up in an Orphanage?" He laughs at the absurdity of his words as I answer them, "Because a person who is going to grow into a man in this position can't afford to have a childhood enveloped in privilege." I don't know why my response was so cold, maybe to numb the feeling that I did wrong him, or maybe I know he deserves the bare truth, or both. "I wasn't aware that having parents was considered a privilege, did you not *want* me, or even love me *a little*?" That one hurt. "Yes I did ..I *do* love you, son" I can see that last word wounded his pride. "Yeah, whatever."

Becoming proud of his defiance, he doesn't ask me anything else. I just get this insolent glare that shoots right through me. I don't want to provoke him anymore than I already have, at least not without a good reason, so I instruct Viceroy to show him to his room as well as give a basic tour. Before I leave, I turn back to Apollo and say, "The Acropolis is at your disposal, we will continue this later." He still doesn't give me any concession other than the same look of contempt, but I can feel he is beginning to open himself up to what awaits him, and that's progress.

I notice Viceroy leads Apollo toward the cafeteria, I should have known he would be hungry. I really need to get better at this whole parenthood thing. I cannot allow my failure as a father be the very thing that tears Alcazar apart. I walk up the steps, turn left down the veranda, through the side door and up the stairs to my study. I have recently gained a better understanding of what's going on with our neighbors, the Corsair. Their gangs have been traveling closer and closer to our borders with growing frequency. They are looking for a fight but they won't find one.

Their late dictator, Varius Kaine, was just recently and gruesomely dispatched by his maniacal son, Brutalius. It is the way in that heretic community; new overthrows the old. I've always found their empirical fascination morbidly disturbing, and more importantly, detrimental to the entire region's longevity. However, it does adequately clue one in to what they're all about. Subtlety was never their strong-suit, only greed and a lust for power. Varius and I had reached an understanding in that regard years ago, but I'm afraid his son will need a more persuasive incentive than his father. That is something I'm going to need Apollo's help with, and I've got a long way to go.

I walk over to the window that provides a view of the ceremonial square in the center of town. The last rays of the sun are feathering their way through the trees and onto the stone walkways. The focus of my attention is on what Brutalius is up to. He is in his father's old court with his counsel, Vitus. I've gained a respect for Vitus over the years for he's learned the valuable lesson of sacrifice and I'm hopeful he'll steer his nephew down a path that doesn't include our mutual destruction. The Corsair rely on their access to the ocean as a means of sustenance, fish, salt, oil. But they still need our grain, our milk. They also strive on technology, so over the years we have struck a beneficial balance, grain for whale oil, milk for salt, beef for computers. But now I fear Brutalius' youth is going to fail him into thinking he can just take what he wants. Alcazar is a peaceful community, and its people, *my* people, aren't made for a fight. Besides it's a fool's errand, something his uncle knows all too well. There is a

tone to their mood that makes me uneasy. I try to get a feel for what they are discussing, when something breaks my concentration and I notice a small figure walking along the street to the right of the square.

It's dusk outside so my eyes can't quite make out who it is, but my mind tells me it's Solomon Jon. It's unusual for him to be out this late alone, so I seek Viceroy out to go and see if the boy needs any assistance. After a few minutes I see the familiar red robe approach him. The two exchange a few words and I know now he's been trying to figure out what happened to Apollo. I'm amazed sometimes how blind I can still be; too blind to realize that he would be worried about his friend. I can never seem to stop adding fuel to the fire of regret that burns within me.

Standing in the Great Hall, I wait for Viceroy. I instructed him to bring in Solomon, call his mother and inform her of what's going on. I'm sure I'll get a visit and stern lecture from the *Old School Teacher* soon. When they reach the Hall I dismiss my robed assistant, and invite the boy to join me as we walk upstairs toward Apollo's room.

I peer inside and find my son gazing at the very large aquarium against the opposite wall, tracing the paths of the brightly colored saltwater fish with his fingers as they dart back and forth across the tank. "It was a gift," I announce as Apollo turns around and gives me an inquisitive look, "A gift from who?" His tone does not contain the usual resentment; maybe we really *are* making progress. "An old friend who passed away recently," I reply. With that his attention turns toward my companion and I feel both of them swell with friendship. "I just wanted to bring Solomon by and tell you he is welcome to stay if he would like, I've already spoken with his mother." I motion for Solomon to join his friend. It's best to leave them alone so I walk toward my own room. As I head for my chambers, I can't help but let my thoughts surround me with all the decisions and mistakes I've made trying to keep everyone from the danger that's outside those walls.

# Chapter *Three*

## *Apollo*

“What are you doing here?” I say because that's the only words that come to mind. “Wow, I'm happy to see you too, *Apollo Lex*.” The upward curl of his lips shows me his relief and amusement. “I thought you fell off the face of the earth only to find out you're a prince!” I never thought of it that way; a *prince*, a surname, a heritage, a future. I like the sound of that even though I still have my reservations about the whole thing, especially about Oriah- that's what I've decided to call him. “I guess.” I shrug the thought off with my shoulder, *don't let your guard down*. I will admit though that I have been treated really well here. The food is delicious, nothing like the bland slop-burgers they serve at the Orphanage. I always wondered what kind of meat the really put in that stuff.

My room is like a palace all to itself, fine wood paneled walls, thick royal red carpet, deep as Viceroy's robe. There's a huge bed, private bathroom, and a walk-in closet with all the clothing I'll ever need. A fancy ornate chess table with plush chairs also matches the room perfectly. There is *no* monitor. Every dwelling and structure in our Community has a news monitor mounted somewhere on its walls, but not here. There's also a wide balcony, right by my bed, that's equipped with two chairs and a silver telescope.

But by far my favorite thing in the room is the massive aquarium. The fish are amazing. I didn't realize God made such creatures- flat fish shaped like teardrops- bright blue, red, yellow, and the sharks, about half a meter long, bright orange with silky white stripes moving horizontal across their bodies trimmed in bold black. “So are you going to give me a tour of the place or what?” Solomon asks as he nudges me in the side with his elbow. “Sure let's go!” I nudge back. It's good to have my friend again.

The first place I show him is the library. We didn't have one at school. All of our texts were digital, and easily accessible through our personal Notebooks. I never even seen a real book until yesterday, so I'm sure Solomon hasn't either. “Hey! There are real *texts* in here!” Yep, it's new to him too. “They are called books. Solomon.” My comment doesn't break his astonishment; it's easily the biggest room he's ever been in. Thousands of books canvas every wall from floor to ceiling. There are at least a dozen tables for reading, a computer lab, and a media room. I've only browsed through a few shelves briefly, it's just not my kind of thing but I knew Solomon would appreciate it.

“The touch screens here have catalogs of all the materials.” We look up to see a lady standing from behind a desk pointing to a row of monitors in front of her, facing us. “Feel free to use them as you wish, sir, I am here to assist.” Her show of respect catches me off-guard, and I'm not sure how to respond. I finally manage to mutter a thank you as I follow Solomon who is already making his way to one of the screens, “I want to see if there is anything on the ancient history of our people,” he says as he starts tapping on the glass going through the various menus.

After a few minutes, he finds something that must intrigue him. He asks our assistant for help and she walks over to our screen. After a few taps on the glass she leads us to one of the large bookcases. She presses a keypad next to it and the selves start to move silently from top to bottom sinking into the floor until the correct one containing the book is at eye level to us. The woman reaches out and grabs a thick, dusty volume and hands it to Solomon. “Let me know if you need anything else.” With a polite nod she takes her place back at her desk.

We make our way to one of the tables in the center. Solomon places the book on the table and I see the front cover, “Holy Bible.” The words are unfamiliar, and I have no idea what they could mean. “This is supposed to tell the ancient history of our world,” Solomon says as he begins to open the text. “That's an interesting choice.” I hear a deep voice behind us and I know immediately who it is as Oriah walks over to our table. “I hope I'm not disturbing you two, I can leave you alone if you would like.” Solomon speaks up before I can. “No its fine, we were just trying to learn more about our history.” Oriah looks to me for approval of his company, and I give him a fallacious but friendly smile, “Join us.”

"This is a book of great wisdom and vast experience," he tells us as he reaches for it. "This is the stories of our distant ancestors; great men, one in particular, who tried to teach the rest of the world the right way to live. It's full of sacrifice and pain." Oriah begins to thumb through the pages of the old book, "If you really want a history of how we got here I can show you." Somehow the solemn look on his face makes me anxious. "How?" I ask. He quickly responds, "I will show you an example." The excitement that appears in his eyes makes me want to refuse but Solomon replies before I can, "Well show us." Oriah looks at both of us, "Okay then, bear with me." He sits at the table and motions for us to join him.

What comes next is something a person would have to see to truly appreciate. As soon as we sit down, the wall and everything else in the library vanishes in a quick, blinding flash and what is revealed is a dim light-blue sky, tinted with dull orange around the horizon. It doesn't take long to realize that we are standing on top of a really tall structure because you can see from all directions. Hundreds of rectangular buildings, some with great spires, rise up from the blurred dull line where land meets the sky. "This used to be one of the largest cities, in one of the most powerful nations on Earth." Oriah yells over the wind as he holds his arms up and out, the gusts from the city flap the long sleeves on his robe. "What happening Doyen?" shrieks Solomon. Oriah just looks around with wild exhilaration and howls, "Wait for it!"

After what felt like just seconds, I began to here a familiar growing rumble much like the one the roars through Alcazar on a regular basis. I notice a disturbance in the east gradually distorting the horizon. Soon an enormous, menacing green and gray mass rises from the distortion and consumes the entire sky until it's all we can see. A thunderous crash pummels our bodies, slamming us to the roof then sweeping us up in its embrace, and I suddenly realize I'm underwater. I kick my legs with all my strength, clawing with my arms, struggling to find the surface. My lungs almost burst as I finally break through and gasp, filling my chest with the now oily, salty air. I look around and find Solomon and Oriah wading in the debris-filled water nearby, "What happened?"

Oriah replies, "Death happened."

I snap back, "Well that's a little cryptic. " And in that moment I feel dry again as the warm wood of my chair supports my body. I realize we've been sitting in the library the entire time. "How did you do that?" Solomon's words synchronize with mine, both our voices filled with amazement. "It's a tool I use." he calmly replies. "Yeah, some tool" I can't help to remark, but Solomon gives me a disapproving look so I decide to refrain from commenting further.

Oriah continues, "That wave left the great nation crippled, and a long time ally moved in immediately. But instead of giving aid, they occupied the land. There was a long time grudge between the two that was thought long forgotten. An insurgency soon set in and the opposing sides fought fiercely until what remained was just a shell of the former world." Solomon seems to read my mind. "The Last War?" Oriah nods with approval as he answers, "Exactly Solomon."

"Well what caused the wave?" The words escape me before I even realized, *you're not supposed to not care*. "It was cause by a mountain that erupted a great distance away, across the vast ocean. *Cumbre Vieja* they called it." "That doesn't explain how we got here." I smile as I make my point.

Oriah says calmly, "I'm not finished yet," and his words precede another flash. This time we are standing in what seems a smoldering, desolated city. A man with two boys, about the same age as us, scurries through the street, their clothes tattered. The skin that peeks through the holes is stained with blood, and an anguished look occupies all three of their dirty, sweaty faces. "Just a little farther." I can hear the man say as they move past us toward a large covered truck where a woman and another young boy wait.

The woman looks maybe thirty, thin and plain, dressed in dark blue, camouflaged fatigues; her long blonde hair is pinned in a bun. She smiles as she grabs one of the children's faces in her hands, "You're safe now." Just then a loud blaring sound, like a trumpet, vibrates painfully in my ears and I bring my hands up to try to muffle the sound. "Another attack! Let's go!" screams the woman as everyone loads into the truck and it speeds off down the broken, cratered street.

Another flash, this time we are at what looks like some kind of large campsite, a collection of small buildings and tents occupy the flat spaces around us. Around the perimeter I notice people busy on the construction of a high stone wall that looks eerily familiar. Then I spot something emerging from

the wall behind us, it's the truck from before. It comes to a stop and everyone piles out. They are greeted by an emerging small group of people from one of the buildings- a man and a woman, another young boy and two young girls. Everyone exchanges warm greetings as they move back into the small building.

*Flash.* We're in the building, well what appears to be the building, more specifically the basement. I figure that because I'm looking at the same group of people from outside, descending down a concrete staircase that perfectly matches the stone-like walls around me. I see a row of beds along each side of the rectangular room. Large trunks sit in front of each bed making the whole thing a look like some military barrack. Oriah points to the woman from the truck and says, "Apollo, that lady is your grandmother."

As the two boys collapse onto beds next to each other, the man who I assume is their father, shakes my grandmother's hand as she speaks to him, "You'll be safe here. This place is not on any map and we're well out of the range of the bombers. The worst is over. The Bloc has already taken anything of any value that wasn't destroyed by the war. All that is left now is a wasteland... and this place."

Suddenly, were once again back in the library. "I hope that helped." Oriah says to us and starts to get up from his seat. Solomon looks up, "Was that our city?" Oriah nods, "Yes." I can't hold back my interest anymore, "That was *you* with her in the truck, wasn't it?"

He looks at me, but he doesn't address my question. "That was a glimpse into how this place came to be," Oriah gets up from his chair, "Perhaps later, I will show you more." With that, he turns and abruptly leaves, clearly trying to avoid my line of questioning. I try to think why he would do that. Maybe it's because of what he went through, being born during the War, and having to literally fight to stay alive. For a brief moment, I imagine myself there and I wonder out loud, "I wonder what happen to her?" After few moments, Solomon finally replies, "Maybe it's too painful for him to think about." I just nod in agreement. *Maybe so.*

For the first time, I think I might actually feel something for my father.

# Chapter *Four*

## Oriah

I awoke early this morning feeling as depressed as the night before. Seeing her face again had more of an effect on me than I thought. I miss her so much. There was so many times in the last few weeks I could have used her council. One of her lessons to me was if you don't learn from your mistakes, you're doomed to repeat them. And while her sacrifice wasn't a mistake, it's definitely something I want to try to avoid. I decide to clear my mind and take a walk through the Porticus Acropoli, her garden in the center of this palace. I hope to try and catch a scent of the Winter Daphne that blooms there. My mother planted those years ago, and I hoped their fragrance would make me feel closer to her, but all it does is remind me again how much I miss her. I walk through the mixture of trees and flowery shrubs with my head hung low from the tug of sadness that has suddenly flooded my heart.

"Still feeling sorry for yourself, I see."

I raise my head to see someone walking toward me. I thought I was staring at a ghost until I realized who it was. Her light blonde hair is now nearly to her lower back and I like it. I don't think I ever seen it that long. Her ocean-like eyes, still peering into my soul, even though I'm forbidden to ever have a glimpse at hers.

"So have you told him yet?"

"It's not my place."

Sabrina stops in front of me and I feel the temperature drop twenty degrees. "I'm not talking about *that*," she says and gives me a look like it's my fault she decided to put on her charade. "Well the boy has a right to know," I retort. Her next words kick me hard in the gut and I struggle to catch my next breath, "It's funny how you pretend his *rights* are what you're concerned about."

"You know Sabrina, if you came here just to hurt me, I can do that all by myself. Besides, you inflict wounds that tend to linger"

"So do you Oriah."

She steps closer, puts my hands in hers and I feel the air thaw a little, "I came to get Solomon, where is he?" I point at the East Portico, "Through there and up the stairs, he and Apollo are probably just waking up." She smiles at me and squeezes my hands, but I stand stoically, remembering how she hurt me and I her. "Thanks again for finding him, Oriah," she lets go of my hand much too quickly. Sometimes I think she still likes to make me suffer.

She disappears into the Acropolis, and I notice our conversation has served at least one good purpose; my dark mood has brightened. I return my thoughts to the task at hand, and suggest to Viceroy to check in on Apollo and notify me as soon as he is alone. After a while his response appears in my thoughts and I make my way to Apollo's room. The boy rises from his bed as I walk in and I ask, "Have you had breakfast yet?" *I learn from my past mistakes.* "Yes I just got back."

"Good," I say as I walk over and take a seat at the chess table, "Miss Jon teach you chess?" Apollo nods as a grin grows on his face, so I inquire further, "Are you any good?" Motioning for him to sit, he joins me and smugly replies, "There's only one way to find out." Then the thought occurs to me, *This will be a great opportunity to teach the boy humility.* I politely point to the board, "Your move."

Apollo's opening was completely predictable even if I couldn't read his mind. Queen's Gambit. I decide to start this one out symmetrically, so I mirror his move- d4, d5. He reaches in and picks up the white pawn to the left of his queen and slides it two spaces ahead. "Ambitious," I say as I take over the same square with my own pawn, capturing his piece. "That wasn't very smart," he says in a flat tone. "Why do you say that, Apollo?" He then bellows to me like the victor he believes he will become, "Because you just gave me the center!" So I let my warning sound like good advice, "Never let your opponents know when you have the advantage." He just scoffs and stares at the board, planning his next move. Maybe he is stubborn like his mother.

We continue to play match after match with me soundly defeating him after each one. I let him play white every time, allowing him to be the aggressor. Every time he starts with the same opening, Queen's Gambit. I defend in the typical styles, Indian, Slav. I both accept and decline his gambit and always win. Still he never changes his strategy. *He is stubborn like his mother.*

After a couple of hours I decide to call an end to this first lesson. Brutalius is planning something big and I need to find out what it is before it's too late. I tell Apollo to be sure to eat and if he ever wants to visit Solomon and Miss Jon just to let Viceroy know as he is here to assist him in anyway. He just looks at me as if I never said a word, "What was my mother like?"

The question chases away every thought or explanation I could have ever come up with. I hastily try to use the mental lapse to my advantage, "I tell you what Apollo, practice your moves and when you defeat me then I will tell you about your mother." The boy screams, "I hate you!" and storms out, slamming the door. I instantly realize how hopelessly doomed and heartless my solution was. I might be the superior chess player but I'm a terrible father.

I walk upstairs to the solitude of my study. Lying down on the leather couch, relaxing my body, I focus on my breathing until it is even and slow. My mind begins drifting to the point where sleep usually happens, and it's at this moment I release my conscience, like cutting ropes that tether a hot-air balloon to the ground. Slowly, my buoyant cognizance rises above the couch.

I roll over and look down at my body for a moment; peacefully asleep. My will takes me through the wall toward Apollo's room, but it's empty. I place him in my thoughts and quickly realize he journeyed over to Sabrina's house, on foot. Although he is upset with me, he is safe, so I move on to what I was set out to do, and journey to the northeast, gaining speed toward the Corsair Boundary.

I reach the coast and swiftly weave through the rows of barracks and up to the main compound, concentrating on Brutalius until I realize his location. I fly over to a tall, antennae-thronged building at least four stories high. Angling my flight to the top I slip through the wall and into a room where a tall figure stands behind a woman who is sitting at a computer screen. "How long until it activates?" he asks the woman. "The upload is at sixty-three percent, Sire, meaning there is less the seventy-two hours until completion."

"Good, we'll be ready to attack by then," a heinous smile widens across his illustrated face.

I change my thoughts over to Vitus and find him not too far away. I start to focus in on him when a man walks through the door with a flinty look. "You and I need to have a word, Brutalius." I almost think it's his deceased father, until I realize it's his twin, the man I'm looking for.

"There's is nothing to talk about, Uncle. I am the rightful ruler of the Corsair and I am the word."

Vitus just scowls at Brutalius, as he knows he is powerless to stop him. "The Gods will have smiled upon you Nephew, if you live long enough regret this." Those are the man's last words and he just stands there, silent and subordinate. I need more details about Brutalius' intentions so I get familiar with the specifics of the computer technician. I read things from her mind like her name, address, her daily routines; pieces that will lead me back to her.

I propel myself back to the Acropolis; assimilate back into my body and wake up refreshed, like I just had a good night's sleep. I stand up and walk to the window, veering my attention to the computer operator. Her name is Antonia. She is still at her station and I can feel her concentration as she works with the data flowing on the screen. I conjure up her thoughts pertaining to her conversation with Brutalius. What they reveal is much grimmer than I had previously thought. In less than three days, Alcazar will cease to function, maybe cease to exist. I have to talk to Sabrina.

I make the suggestion to Viceroy that we should take a drive. He meets me at the garage and we get into his vehicle. As we make our way down the road I catch him up on the whole situation and what I plan to do about it. Glancing briefly over at me with an upturned eyebrow he finally speaks up, "Are you sure all of this is going to work?" And I respond, "It really depends on Apollo, but I believe he will do the right thing, he is strong-willed, besides, he'll have no choice."

We arrive at Sabrina's. "Do you want me to wait here?" I shake my head at Viceroy and tell him to join me. I need him to stay with Sabrina after I take the boy with me. Viceroy and Sabrina have always been close so I am confident he knows just how to talk to her.

I knock on the door and after a few seconds, the door opens and Solomon stands in the doorway. "Is your mother here?" He just glares at me; Apollo must have filled him in on our deal. "Yeah, she's

here." And as he says that I see her standing in the doorway to the front room, staring at me. "Solomon, go in the living room with Apollo." She never takes her sullen eyes off of me, "I need to speak to our Doyen, *alone*." She definitely isn't lacking in her own influence, she knows what makes me tick.

"What's wrong?" I ask as she moves closer. I feel a blinding, sharp pain as her hand makes contact with my left cheek. "You're not going to use *him* as a pawn in one of your stupid games!"

"Varius is dead, Sabrina."

I try to explain and rub the pain from my face, "His son stabbed him to death three days ago, and now he's planning an attack. He wants everything for himself." I tell her about the virus being uploaded to our computer system, and the attack that will destroy our exposed city. "What about the boys Oriah?" I take her hand, "I told you I won't let anything happen to him, remember?" She shakes her head and looks up at me, "But what about Solomon?" I answer, "Of course him too, he is in no danger." She throws away my embrace and her cold blue eyes stab at me again, "You know, for someone with sight as remarkable as yours, you can be so blind."

She turns to walk back inside the house. "You know I have to take him with me." My words stop her dead in her tracks. I walk up to console her but she pulls away. Sabrina turns her head to the side barely giving me a glance, "I know you must have a plan, Oriah, and it better work." I nod. "I give you my word it will." Hopefully my word is something she still believes in.

I still feel compelled to plead with her, "But I still need your help. Viceroy will stay and fill you in, he knows the plan." She turns to me, "Why don't you just call him by his name?" I reply, "It's tradition, Sabrina, he understands." She turns her back to me, resuming her way. I wish she would just give me a chance, so I say to her, "You know what's in my heart, I can't do this without you."

She looks back at me, "How can you be so sure of our survival?" I can tell she's scared so I try to respond with reassurance, "Do you really think they're a step ahead of me?" She just shakes her head and walks through the doorway. I follow her inside. I must find Apollo; we've got a lot to do. There's no more time for games or lessons. I must explain everything to him now, which means I'll have to tell him about his mother.

# Chapter *Five*

## *Apollo*

The only reason I agreed to leave with him is because he said we would begin my Ascension training tomorrow. And with all that has happened in the last two days, my curiosity has gotten the best of my contempt. "What am I ascending to be anyway?" He looks over at from the driver's seat of Viceroy's car, "To be Doyen of course." he replies. "Well maybe I don't want to be Doyen." I know I don't mean that. I just want to see what his reaction will be. His response surprises me. "Perhaps, but at least give me the chance to show you who you really are and why you are here, and if you still don't want to be Doyen, I promise you can have any life of your choosing. I give you my word." I still don't completely trust him yet, so I quip, "Any tricks tomorrow and I walk." He immediately nods and says, "I promise no tricks, rest tonight and in the morning, we'll begin your training."

I walk up to my room and crash into bed. I am so exhausted I don't want to move. I lie there on my back, watching my aquatic friends swim through their vibrant home. Their beauty eventually makes me think of Grace. It seems like an eternity since we were back in the classroom. I regret not ever having any kind of meaningful conversation with her. When we did talk, it was always some mundane topic like homework and I really didn't know that much about her. Yet still I felt it whenever I saw her, the nervousness. But she never seem to notice it.

I start to imagine what it would be like if I could see her now. I visualize us together in the Porticus, surrounded by all the trees and the sweet smelling flowers. It's summertime and life is everywhere in the garden. From head to toe she seems to glow, her white lacy gown catches the sunlight, and her auburn hair radiates. She looks just like the angel I always imagined, and for some reason I know exactly what to say to her, "I never got to tell you how beautiful you are." She smiles, "You should have, you know."

The response brings a warm, hopeful feeling in my chest, and I can't help but smile back at her. "Maybe there's still time," I say as take her hands into mine. "Maybe" she looks at me lovingly, waiting for me to say something, but this time the words fail to come to me. I pull her closer. She reaches in and ever-so-lightly touches her lips to mine. They taste like sweet strawberries. The realness of the sensation snaps me back to reality. I shoot straight up in my bed and touch my fingers to my lips. *It felt so real.* I still taste her lip gloss as I fall asleep thinking about her.

The next morning, Grace is still on my mind. The memory of her lips against mine dominates my thoughts, and I wonder if I will ever see her again. I shower, put on some clean clothes, and make my way to the cafeteria. By the time I get back to my room, my dirty clothes have been removed and my bed made. There is a note stuck to the glass of the aquarium.

*When you are ready, meet me in the media room.*

*-Oriah*

I peel the note off the tank, stick it in my pocket, and I make my way to the library. I walk into the media room to find Oriah sitting in one of the plush recliners in the center. On the wall is easily the largest monitor I've ever seen. At least five meters high, it wraps around the ovoid ceiling so you get the sensation it's surrounding you. Oriah greets me with a smile, "Sleep well?" For once I can respond with the outright truth, "Yes I did actually." I feel better than I have in weeks, and I haven't stopped thinking about Grace since I opened my eyes. My thoughts cling to the dream I had about her.

"Apollo, I want to show you something about your grandmother before the War." I watch Oriah with interest as he speaks out to the empty space. "Good morning ARIES." A metallic, but pleasant female voice responds, "Good morning Doyen, how may I assist you today?"

"Retrieve the personal log of Myra Lex, Department of Defense, United States Government; play entries sixty-two, fourteen-oh-five, and thirty-two-twenty-nine." Instantly the face of the woman from

the vision Oriah gave us the other night dominates the wall.

*"Personal Log Myra Lex, USAMRMC, Fort Detrick, Maryland, March 27, 2107. I brought Oriah home today. He's only six weeks old and he's already so smart. I couldn't be more proud of him. The genetic experiment seems to have been a success as there are no apparent side-effects. I love him more and more each day. I can't wait until we're able to move into our new home. Being a mother is the best decision I ever made."*

There picture flashes to another sequence. It shows the same woman, her blonde hair is down around her shoulders; otherwise she looks the same.

*"Personal Log Myra Lex, USAMRMC, Fort Detrick, Maryland, July 6, 2112. Stage two is underway as Oriah continues to develop well, despite his anti-social behavior. His telepathy is extraordinary, and we will begin the OBE's soon. A female was introduced to him and he responds really well to her. Genetically, they are almost perfectly compatible for our experiment. They both show strong leadership qualities. I think we may have found our Pairing."*

Another flash, another scene, but this time the woman looks extremely exhausted. Her hair is pulled into a bun. Her face is smeared with sweat and dirt.

*"Personal Log, Myra Lex, USAMRMC, Middleton, Maryland, September 8, 2122. This will be my last entry. Martial law has been the only thing keeping peace in this country after the economic collapse thirteen years ago. It's now obvious that the peace is about to come to an end. The site for our experiment is still a few months away from completion, but I'm afraid we don't have any more time. A lot of good people have already died for this project and we must see it through. I'm also convinced it's the only way we will survive. We make our escape tomorrow."*

Oriah speaks again, "ARIES please give a summary for Project Nephilim, Department of Defense, United States Government." Immediately, large images of old records flash on the screen as the computer voice narrates.

*"Project Nephilim was a government program to develop a ideal military leader in an attempt to save the former United States of America. A genetically enhanced male and female were to be placed inside of the walled city; Alcazar. They were to produce a child, the Nephilim. The child would exhibit special genetic conditions encoded within its human genome. It was to be raised in a controlled virtuous environment free of outsidess influences until which time his or her experience and training would effectively co-exist within its unique genetic parameters. The experiment was not successful."*

Oriah looks at me as if he is anticipating a reaction. Several thoughts sound off in my mind. *What is a Nephilim?...unique genetic parameters? Military leader?..Of what? What does this all have to do with me?* But only one question emerges from my lips, "What about my mother?" Oriah's expression proves to be an adequate preview of the apprehension that is evident in his voice, "I will tell you Apollo, but you must promise to stay on the grounds of the Acropolis after you know the truth. I will know if you are being honest or not." His request seems strange but doable, so I immediately accept. He seems to believe me because he again speaks, "Your mother loved you, she still does. I need you to understand that everything she did, she did for you." I interrupt him, "Well where is she? Is she dead? He shakes his head, "She's not dead, Apollo, just promise me you'll try to understand.." I jolt from my chair, "Just tell me!"

"Your mother is Sabrina."

The words hit me with disbelief, and I nearly charge at him. "You're lying!" Stomping and pacing around the room, I try to think of things to hurt him. But my mind can't help but go back to that day in the hallway at school, and how she said she was proud of me. I remember all of those nights in her home, the extra attention she paid to me in class, the frequent invitations to join her and Solomon for

lunch. I thought she did it because she pitied me. Now that I know I'm her son, could it be because she loves me? All of the thoughts swirling in my head make the room spin around me and I struggle to find my chair. I collapse into the recliner and I mutter the only word remaining in my head, "Why?" Oriah looks at me empathically, "I will let you see for yourself."

The library instantly flashes and we are in what looks like someone's living quarters. I see a woman holding a child, gently swaying back and forth trying to soothe the crying toddler. I instantly recognize who it is; it's Miss Jon, Sabrina, *Mom*. She looks young, her platinum hair is cut short just above her shoulders. Her eyes are puffy red and you can see streaks staining her cheeks from dried tears. A man with golden brown hair is standing a few feet from her but his back is turned from my view. "It's the only way, Sabrina" The man turns and I can see now it's a youthful version of Oriah. I am surprised on how much it feels like I'm looking at myself. "I can't do it Oriah, I *won't*." She pleads as he approaches her, putting his hand on her shoulder, "I promise I won't let anything happen to him, and when he is sixteen, I will bring him back here."

Sabrina hugs the boy against her chest, kissing his neck. A woman in a white dress enters and gestures for the child. Sabrina jerks away and gives a look that convinces the woman not to repeat the attempt. Oriah glares over at the woman as he starts to rub Sabrina's shoulders. She continues to plead with him, "The war is *over* Oriah, we don't have to go through with the mission, there's no need for this!" He replies, "But what about Varius and Vitus, you know they won't sit idle forever. Peace is not what appeases their hearts. When they turn on us, we have to be ready. The government is finished and we're on our own now, you can see that as clearly as I can."

She sniffles and tries to hold in her emotions as she gives the child to him. She raises her saddened, swollen eyes. Her indignant stare matches her tone, "You may get your way in this, but I am *not* leaving him." She pulls away and turns to leave, stopping right before she reaches the threshold, "Don't try to stop me, and if you *ever* try to delve into or manipulate my mind, I'll know and I'll shut you out, *forever*. I'll never forgive you Oriah." She doesn't turn to look at him, but just walks through the door and seemingly out of his life, becoming my teacher, my protector, and a normal person in our society. She goes on with her life, and has Solomon. *Solomon*. I can barely utter the conclusion that pops in my head, "Does this mean Solomon is my *brother*?"

Suddenly, we're back in the media room and Oriah answers my question, "Yes, but it seems no one knows who his father is. She won't tell me and, as you can see, I will not dare try and find out." I let that sink in and that's when I remember the part about the Project, "So you have like, special *powers* from some genetic mutation?" Oriah shrugs, "Well basically you're correct, but it's actually more like a genuine natural ability, extracted from what already exists in every human's DNA. I have what you would describe as telepathy. You have it too, but unlike me you also have a potent psychokinetic capacity. I have a plan to try and bring it out in you and teach you how to exploit it, but in order to exploit something, you must first understand it. So for now, we will break for lunch, and after, I will teach you. It will be a lot of information, so try and relax your mind for a while. Remember our promise, Apollo."

Oriah gets up and leaves, probably headed to the cafeteria. I'm left confused and empty, but definitely not hungry. I want to confront her. I want to ask her how could she know for all those years and not tell me. But I also made a promise to Oriah. He seems to be straightforward with me so I think should return the favor. Besides, playing along is probably the only way I'm going to get more answers. So instead of leaving I head toward the Porticus for some much needed fresh air.

I sit near the small pond in the southeast corner of the enclosed garden, leaning against an old oak that has long since lost its leaves to the fall of the year. It's winter time now so the air has quite the chill and I get up to go retrieve a jacket from the closet in my room. As I turn around, I'm startled to see the very girl from my dreams. This time she's dressed in jeans and a light blue shirt, her henna-colored hair is tied in a long, single braid that goes down her right shoulder. She's wearing a snow white jacket with fleece cuffs and a collar. I see her carrying a soft pink flower, twirling it in her right hand. I check for a moment to see if I'm still dreaming. "I had a dream about you." I have to check again. *Were those my words I just heard?* "Apollo, did you hear what I said?" I wriggle, trying to shake my bewilderment when I realize that those were *her* words. "We were here, you and I, just like now but it was warmer. You were really sweet; you told me I was beautiful. I think I.." Her cheeks grow flush as

she looks down at the flower in her hand. ".Well, I just haven't been able to get you out of my mind since." We stand there together, and I can feel the anxiety starting to creep in. She finally looks up at me like she needs to say something, "I just wanted to come and see you."

Maybe what my father told me was true. Maybe I do have some unlocked genetic talent. She just described her dream, *my* dream. And now that dream is like a guide, telling me what to say to her, "You are, you know." gives me a puzzled look, "What?" I force down the lump in my throat as I elaborate, "Beautiful."

She smiles and I watch her move in and reach for my hand, just like in the dream, *our* dream. "I knew you would say that," she laughs. I respond with my own laughter, but mine is more from nerves than amusement. "Do you know what I did the last time you told me that?" Her brown eyes search mine and it's my turn to be confused. A half-whisper comes from my now dry throat, "What?" Adrenaline invigorates my whole body, and my heart feels like it's trying to jump from my chest when she reaches in and kisses me.

Her lips taste like strawberries.

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