

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.

"Arrrrggghh!" 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 clambers 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.

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