

# HYPERBOREA

—SEVERED LEGACY—



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*Ethan Zolotor*

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## **SEVERED LEGACY**

**BY**  
**E.M. ZOLOTOR**

**oZtor**

**ZOLOTOR PUBLISHING**

**FOR TARA, WHO READ EVERY WORD FIRST;  
FOR JAPAN, WHO'S STORIES INSPIRED MY  
CHILDHOOD;**

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Published by Zolotor Publishing.

ISBN: 978-x-xxxxxx-xx-x

Written and Illustrated by E.M. Zolotor

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## CHAPTER ONE



### AGAINST THE INFINITE STORM

**T**he never-ending sandstorm that plagued the western desert of the North American Sector loomed in the distance. Vibrating sand churned in plumes that rose to the clouds. It was likely a few days away from hitting them, if it moved in their direction. No one could ever say which way or how fast the permanently roaming storm would move, but it was closer than usual.

Eos and his sister, Maxima, were walking towards the sandstorm to explore the North Dunes. That was the name they gave the area where relics of an old society could sometimes be found. Eos explored it as often as he could. It was the most adventure the desert confined siblings could get. Maxima often went with her older brother to make sure he didn't venture off too far.

The staccato of thunder within the storm was masked by the roar of sand being hurled to the sky.

*Huurrr. Kadooom! Huurrr.*

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The wall of dark gray-brown, that blocked out the sun beneath it, flashed with an ominous orange each time lightning flashed inside.

Eos raised an arm covered in thin beige fabric and pointed to the north west. “I’ve never seen those before.” He referred to the metallic structures peaking from dunes two miles away. “The storm must have uncovered them. Let’s go check it out.”

Maxima pulled the top of a desert shawl from around her neck and tucked her chin under it, holding it between her lips as she thought. The cool fabric hid a scar where her lip had once been split. It was a raised white line that separated her lower lip into two distinctly colored sections and slashed her top lip with a thin streak. “We’ll be cutting it close getting back. We’re already seven miles from the complex. We have to work tonight.”

“Well...let’s be fast in getting there then.” Eos said and quickened his pace. It had rained hard for the first time in months the night before. The one-hundred-degree heat and beating sun had made short work of drying up the sand and now the air was heavy with moisture.

Maxima sighed with exasperation and brushed her long, raven black hair from her face as she took quick, careful steps to keep up with her brother. “You didn’t listen,” she said.

“I did listen. I’m still considering what you said.” He smiled playfully at Maxima as he stomped forward. “I imagine I’ll have made up my mind on what to do about it by the time we reach those juts.” He referred to the metallic structures. It was a term used for any old-world buildings that peaked out briefly from drowning in the desert. The winds had to favor moving a dune the right way, and even then, the building could be covered again in a matter of days.

Maxima rolled her eyes but smirked from under her shawl at her brother’s uncontrollable desire to explore. They were near enough that she could make out enormous silos now. Three tilted and off kilter,

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fifty-meter-wide cylinders were topped with coned roofs. Two remained mostly buried in sand, but the one nearest them was uncovered. The roof of it was deteriorated and full of missing sections.

“Wow...” Eos let out excitedly when he saw the scale of the silos.

A movement of black in the shadows of the silo ahead caught Maxima’s eye.

“Eos, something moved out there,” she cautioned. “We should go back.”

“I don’t see anything.” Eos squinted through the bits of blowing sand that were beginning to kick up. “We’re already here; come on.” He gestured for her to follow.

Maxima looked again in shadows of the silo but saw nothing.

The tilted metal structure had a spiral of stairs around one half and a caged ladder that went straight up the other. The siblings climbed the metal stairs, but Maxima kept looking down where she had seen something move. She bit down on her shawl harder.

When they reached the top, they saw that sections of the balcony were missing, preventing them from walking around the full circumference of the roof. Large gaps of the metal sheet roof were missing or rusted away, leaving the sand filled cavity inside partially exposed.

Eos and Maxima sat at the edge of the railing, staring into the infinite sandstorm, mesmerized. It kept a distance that was threatening, but not yet dangerous. There was only the *huurrr* of the storm and *crackle-boom* of thunder. Eos pulled out a silver coin from his pocket and held it up with his right arm. His right arm was covered in black—like the ink of a tattoo. It darkened his entire hand and crawled up his forearm in wild crashing waves that branched from one another. This strange mark had always been with him and, on occasion, it caused a wild urge to reach for answers beyond his grasp. He turned the coin

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over, holding the tiny piece of metal before the never-ending wall of the sandstorm. One side of the coin was marked with an ancient language that circled the face of a man. The other showed a soaring bird, whose wings streaked to the edge of the coin as if it was flying at incredible speed.

“Maxima, you know my book about old coins.”

She nodded. It was a rare reward from their employer, General Braxton, for their tireless work. Though it was more of a concession to Eos’ constant requests than a gift.

“The first one or the new one?” She asked.

Eos continued, “The new one. Well I finished it last night. Dad’s coin wasn’t in it. Nothing.”

“Well there are more books out there. There has to be a book that will tell you what it is.”

“I don’t remember, but I can feel...like a half memory. I know dad gave this to me. I just have to find out where it’s from.”

“Well, next year you’ll have to ask for another book about old coins.”

Eos gritted his teeth. “No. That’ll take too long. At this rate I may never learn what I want to. This...” He spun the coin against the backdrop of the sandstorm. “...It’s the key to knowing who they are and where they are...if they still are.” He admitted the last part with a sadness in his voice. “I have to do something else. We can’t just keep using our powers every night like slaves. We have to do something drastic and soon or we’ll be stuck like this forever, and then we’ll never know why we have abilities that no one else in the world does.”

Maxima shook her head. “How about instead of *soon* and *drastic* we do something *planned* and *smart*?”

“Fine let’s plan something smart—*very soon* and make sure it’s drastic.” Eos shot back.

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*Clink. Clink. Clunk.*

Someone was climbing up the stairs.

Maxima looked over the railing and scanned for the source of the noise. A bearded man covered in dirt and sweat was making his way up the stairs.

Maxima glared at Eos. “*I told you I saw something move.*”

Eos looked around frantically, already planning for an escape route if needed. The railed balcony was missing a section that would allow them to get to the ladder on the other side. They were trapped on the side with the approaching stranger. Then, Eos and Maxima found themselves looking through the large missing section of roof to the daylight on the other end. The sand filled silo was still pooled with water from rain the day before.

A grim voice growled from halfway up the stairs. It was less than friendly. “What are you doing up there? Stay right where you are.”

Maxima’s face went white. Eos pointed at the light coming through the opposite hole in the roof and urged her towards the only alternate route, “Go through to the ladder. I’ll distract him so that you can get to the other side.”

Eos could feel his heart beating all the way down in his feet. *They were supposed to be alone this far out in the desert...so who...?*

A graying, bearded man, wrapped in dark, loose fitting desert clothes, climbed up the last stair. He had binoculars around his neck and a canteen at his waist. His bloodshot eyes met Eos’ just as Maxima disappeared inside the silo.

“I said wait!” The man sprinted at Eos, seeing that Maxima was going inside.

Eos stepped between the man and the opening in the roof. “Who are you?”

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“Girl, get back here.” The man called into the sand filled cavity. He turned to Eos and marched toward the opening.

Eos threw himself in front of it and glared, clenching his father’s coin.

“Don’t be stupid, boy. You—” The man stopped and noticed the shine of silver in Eos’ hand. He grinned a dirty, rotted smile. “That’s a nice piece of silver. Why don’t you let me see it?”

He shot out towards Eos’ hand, but Eos wrenched his arm back into the silo, out of reach.

The man’s sweaty fist wrapped around Eos’ shirt, and he yanked Eos towards him, still reaching for the silver.

Eos shoved him away, but the man did not lose his hold.

*Thud.* Eos was slammed against the roof, his weight bowing the thin metal, and the edge of the opening cutting into his back.

The man snarled at him, but then a strange look crossed his face as if realizing something.

“Where’d ya get that coin?”

“Ughh,” Eos grunted, struggling as the roof cut into his back more. “It’s mine. Back off.”

The man’s eyes went wild. His pupils bounced around as if processing. “I highly doubt that.” The sour stench of the unbathed man pressed against him curled Eos’ nostrils. The man slammed Eos against the metal again. “That’s a...” He squinted. “Hyperborea coin you got there. Ain’t no way that belongs to you. Best let me take it off your hands.”

The man reached so that his body leaned into the silo with Eos’ arm. The cloth around his chest stretched and pulled down as he reached, revealing a tattoo near his clavicle of two snake heads. In the scuffle, Eos couldn’t quite make out what it was.

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For a moment, Eos thought the man was being serious. It was a strange word that he had never heard before...*Hyperborea*. It only took him a second's thought to realize the man was spouting gibberish to try and steal precious metal. This was a desert wanderer who saw the opportunity to steal something of value. He probably saw his next meal in Eos' hand, but Eos wanted to believe for a split second that the made-up word meant something.

"Agggh! Get off me, you rot mouth thief." Eos provoked the man as the pain cutting into his back was getting worse. They both rolled and teetered dangerously close to falling into the silo.

"Eos!" Maxima's cry broke his concentration from the struggle. "The sand's wet. I can't get my feet out." She said with panic.

"Hold on, Maxima. I'm coming. Arrgh." Eos grimaced as he fought.

The man's fingers were now struggling to pry open Eos'. He was bigger, stronger, and winning. Eos wouldn't be able to keep hold of his dad's silver piece much longer.

Maxima's voice echoed from inside again. "My ankles are under. I'm sinking! There's nothing I can reach."

The urgency in his sister's voice gave him power to yank away with all his might.

Eos rolled off the roof so that the man had his back to the opening now, but he still had hold of Eos' fingers.

"Stop struggling, kid."

The man lurched for Eos again, but this time, Eos reacted out of instinct.

There was a crimson glow that came from his blackened right hand. A neon vapor escaped from his fingertips until a small, pea sized sphere of red energy burst to life in his open hand! This was the power

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that he and his sister alone possessed. It was a power beyond human ability.

Without thinking, without hesitation, Eos thrust the churning red sphere into the man's chest.

There was a crackling explosion where the energy met the man, and the man went flying backwards. He was torn back into the silo, but his grip on Eos' hand had been strong. The man screamed out and pulled Eos in with him.

The grip broke, but not before raking Eos' fingers open.

The man flew violently inside.

The silver coin, highlighted by the fading red light, spun high in the air and then fell somewhere in the silo.

Eos was left on his stomach, half way fallen in. There was a heave in his belly at the thought of losing the coin. He scanned desperately for sight of it.

*There!*

He saw light hitting the round edge of the coin stuck halfway into the sand ten feet away. He pulled himself further in with a singular thought. *He must get back his father's coin.* His hands squished into coarse, wet sand until his feet were barely hanging on to the balcony outside.

He reached until he thought his shoulder would come out of its socket. He had to get the coin.

His arms plunged deeper into the sand trap. Still, he stretched—willing his arm to be longer.

It was no use. He couldn't reach, and his supporting wrist was submerged. But he couldn't will himself to stop reaching.

“Eos!” Maxima screamed. “My waist. It's up to my waist.”

Eos looked between the gleam of silver almost completely under sand and the silhouette of his sister's upper body on the other end. He

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shrieked internally and pounded his fist into the sand as he resolved to give up on the coin.

“Maxima, I’m going to get you out.” Eos’ mind shifted to the task of saving his sister. He had little time, but how could he do it? As his mind raced, Eos put a finger to his left cheekbone and rubbed a scar that began near his temple and fell down his cheekbone an inch. It ended in an outward curve that faintly resembled a dagger.

“Oh, no...” she cried.

“Maxima, can you see the man?”

Maxima bit down hard on her scarf and then said with fright shaking her voice, “Yes, but he’s not awake. I’m still sinking... but I have an idea.”

“I’m going to get you out.” Eos reassured her. “What’s your idea?”

Maxima breathed deeply, trying to coax herself to be calm. She laced her fingers together and turned them outward so that her knuckles popped as she thought intently. “I need you to make a hole at the base of the silo—as big as you possibly can.”

“A hole?”

“Yes, it will drain the sand out through the bottom.”

Eos understood and sprinted down the metal stairs without another word, his feet slamming into rusted planks without looking where his feet were landing. There was only the desperation to save his sister.

When he reached the last step, Eos backed away from the silo and began to form another sphere of red energy. It swirled in his hand as it swelled to life with an electric sound of humming and static popping. The storm echoed the sound behind him. He focused so that this sphere was larger than the instinctual one that had formed during his fight atop the roof. It was taking minutes to form.

*Faster. Come on, faster.* Every second he took, Maxima sank deeper.

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He could hear Maxima calling to him from above but couldn't make out what she was saying. It only made him work faster.

Finally, it was done. He hurled the red sphere into the slanted wall at the base of the silo.

*Booom!*

A large hole was blown in the metal, and a rushing torrent of muddy sand mixture gushed forth.

Eos ran out of the way to avoid being swept up in the river of sand.

After two minutes, the silo had emptied, and Maxima crawled out of the hole Eos had made, shaking. She pulled herself out and fell onto dry sand at Eos' feet. He helped his traumatized sister sit up.

Maxima punched Eos in the shin.

"Ow!" Eos jumped.

"I said we should have turned back." Maxima got up. She put her arms around Eos and hid her face in his shoulder as she breathed heavily.

Eos held his sister apologetically but worriedly scanned the outpour for the man. "Maxima did you see the man in there?"

Maxima murmured, "He was face down and went under right away."

Eos relaxed. The man was nowhere to be seen.

Then he remembered the coin and threw himself into the muddy sand. He dug his hands into the pile and began scooping handfuls of sand behind him without pausing.

"Dad's coin. It went in." Eos said, continuing to dig.

Maxima bent down to help him, but after a short while looked up. Eos wasn't stopping, but she could see the amount that had poured out of the silo wasn't searchable if they had all year to try finding the coin. It was a mountain of sand that would soon become one with the desert.

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Eos was working furiously as if he could somehow find their mom and dad if he found the coin, but Maxima put a hand on his back and whispered, “I’m sorry, Eos. It’s gone.” He slowed his pawing at the sand and saw what Maxima had—the vastness of the search area.

“No.” He said through gritted teeth. “No.” He punched the sand. He punched again. And again. He continued until his knuckles were bleeding and he resigned himself with slumped shoulders. “I lost it...it was all I had.”

“I know, Eos. I know.” Maxima comforted him as best she could.

A blind rage overtook Eos’ vision and thoughts. Time stopped existing around him. There was only white in his vision and tension in his skull.

“We have to get back to the complex. We have work tonight.” Maxima reasoned with him.

“I’m sick of working for Braxton. I’m...I’m...” he choked out the words.

When Eos stopped seething and regained his awareness of the world around him, the Silo was a spec against the storm behind the siblings. There was only Eos, Maxima, the wall of black storm filled with electric orange, and an empty pocket.

Eos reach into his empty pocket one last time, knowing his only connection to validating who he was and where he came from...was gone.

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The large industrial building Eos and Maxima called home was an old United States manufacturing plant. It stood tall and resilient—far enough south from the path of the sandstorm that it was at little risk of being buried. It was removed from civilization; expanded by many

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levels on the western wing for Eos and Maxima's permanent assignment.

Maxima went inside first, but Eos lingered. He stared toward the North Dunes, where he knew his coin now lay with the remains of the old world. They were already late to return from their exploration and so he reluctantly went inside to join his sister.

He saw that Glenn had already passed out for the night. Their guardian was unprepared when he took the siblings on, and his way of adapting over the years had been imperfect. He lay peacefully snoring on the couch with empty bottles of whisky on the floor around him. This was his usual state after returning from a night out with his friend from a nearby desert colony, Shaun Dunn.

On the small kitchenette stove aromas of carrots, potatoes, and beef bathed in gravy diffused through the air until they reached Eos. He sniffed and closed his eyes while imagining the tastes even though he knew they were only rehydrated military supplies. He considered sitting at the dinner table, but Maxima summoned him. Her voice traveled down a long corridor and so he went.

Eos entered the complex's main room. The door slammed shut behind him, causing an echo that bolted throughout the ten-story room.

In front of him towered a monster of a machine that spanned the entire height of the room and descended for a good depth more. It was a spiral of metal; a beast ever twisted.

"Are you ready Eos?"

"Ready," he mumbled and kicked his foot at the floor with his hands tucked deep into his pockets.

After grumbling, Eos slid a leg back into a firm stance and swirled his hands around an imaginary pocket of air. He started slowly, but his

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intensity increased. Drips of sweat fell from his brow and his hands continued molding some invisible sphere until static filled the air.

Faster and faster... eventually the motion reached a climax with a mighty crackling that resulted in a crimson ball of bright energy forming in his hands and he bent it to his will.

Eos mentally prepared himself for the rest of the job as he toyed with the strong churning light; tossing it from hand to hand and making the vibrant sphere grow in size, but tonight focus would not come. As he worked on his creation, his mind was on his father—a faceless memory that he caught glimpses of in the reflection of spiraled metal before him.

There and then gone. He searched the red shimmers but could only catch the images of his imagination as they disappeared. The face, like the coin, was lost.

Eos released his energy into the machine with a familiar thrust. It disappeared between the spaces of the spiraling metal shell. The thing creaked and moaned, resisting what it was meant to do.

On the other side, the energy came out, and Maxima caught it with a grunt. She too toyed with it and eventually injected her own sapphire energy. The energies did not mix; they were marbled in churning layers.

She pushed forward more hesitantly, though with a great deal more grace and poise than her brother and released the energy back through the machine. This time it was more than double the size it had been, and the intense red was now marbled with blue.

After hours of performing the nightly ritual, the large metal column was engulfed in two separate energies that acted as one. It was passed back and forth through the machine, growing in size and power each time. During each pass, it tugged at the twisting structure until a tremendous mechanical groan began.

The great machine was set in motion.

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The contraption rotated quickly. A plasma-like sheet of energy encompassed the metal's surface and was moving with speed and elegance; back and forth like the ebb and flow of the moon manipulating the ocean. The ceremony continued until there was a wave of red and blue that circled around the spiraling metal, giving it life.

Every surge of red hypnotized Eos further until he was no long aware of the room he was in. There was only strobing crimson that imposed on him until he felt small and too light. He was missing the weight of his father's coin.

*"Why? Have you forgotten us?"* A voice screamed out from within the machine. It was the voice of his father! The face became clearer so that he could almost make out some features...almost...but then a wave of blue washed it away.

"No. I didn't." Eos whispered.

His fists tightened as he grew scared and angry.

*"You have forsaken your mother and I. You could not hold on to even a single coin!"* The voice wailed, and the face appeared again like a mirage. The words were not his father's. If Eos hadn't needed the validation of the vision, he would have recognized the thoughts were his own...but tonight he needed to believe. So, he fed his fears in the machine.

"I had to—for Maxima." He yelled into the overwhelming noise. His body began to shake, and he unconsciously fed the machine more and more energy until it was spilling from his hands to the shadowed glimpses of his father.

*"Now you will never find your way. You are lost."* His father's ghostly image faded and so did his voice.

"Wait!" Eos cried out into the vortex. "I'll find you, come back!"

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His mind went white and his vision blurred until he was no longer in control of himself. His energy flowed freely from his body, trying to recreate the ghost that had faded back into the machine.

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Glenn awoke to an overwhelming noise coming through the walls. He got up from the bed and felt a ringing through his skull. He stumbled across the room, through the minefield of previously enjoyed bottles, and stroked his beard stubble groggily.

“I would have had a few less drinks last night if I would’ve known those two were going to give me this headache,” he mumbled to himself as he looked over at the dinner table across the room that was still lit by a dim overhead light.

“Oh, and I see it’s too much trouble to actually eat the food I slaved to make for them,” he rattled on to himself, “One of the greatest minds on the continent has been reduced to babysitting and maintenance.” He rolled his eyes and drug his fingers down his cheekbones.

Glenn looked over at the small analog clock on his bed side table. It read 2 *A.M.* Glenn, not missing a chance to complain, muttered on to himself about the time as he went down the hallway to check on Eos and Maxima and the tremendous grinding sounds that were causing him such pain.

Two thick strands of his strawberry blonde hair refused to stay slicked back with the rest and he brushed them out of his weathered hazel eyes. He pushed open the door to the generator room. Oh yes, he thought, another great wonder provided by the North American Sector government. The room’s *sound-proofing* abilities left much to be desired. Though, he knew he was still better off in the military

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controlled North American Sector than in the Asian and European Sectors...probably.

As he moved through the doorway, he shouted into the vortex of noise. “Eos, what are you doing? It’s two in the morning!” But Eos wasn’t listening. His stare was a trance locked onto the generator, and crimson light poured from his hands like Glenn had never seen before.

Maxima had stopped feeding the machine and was already shouting, trying to get Eos’ attention.

It was as if Eos was possessed. No words could get through to him.

Glenn glanced at *his* machine: the source of the racquet. It was layered in an energy veil that looked like lava. His jaw dropped. Without hesitation, he ran in a faltering dash and tackled Eos, breaking Eos’ concentration and bringing the machine to a halt as the energy became motionless. The shroud of red fell towards the floor but dissipated into vapor as it crashed down.

Glenn’s throbbing head, which he held in his hand, finally had a few peaceful seconds, but Eos didn’t let the silence live long. He stood up completely exhausted and now exasperated. “What was that Glenn? You just interrupted the whole night’s work!”

“Are you serious?” Glenn exclaimed outraged, “Look at it!” His voice fell to a whimper, “Look at it.”

Eos stared at the motionless machine. Every inch of spiraled metal was now steaming; the entirety of the monster glowed. There were even spots where the metal had liquefied and began to drip.

Glenn sunk on his knees. “Look at it. You trying to kill my baby? What were you thinking?” He struck his forehead with an open palm. “It can’t handle being used for that long. More importantly—I can’t handle that. If I started repairs on it now, I wouldn’t be done for weeks!

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It's too hot to touch as it is," his eyes watered in sorrow exaggerated by his impaired state.

"Eos wasn't himself...he didn't mean..." Maxima said as she made her way over.

Eos' legs were numb and his body weak. He felt hollow. A pain broke through all the excitement and penetrated his conscious. His arm was cursed with the black, twisting pattern, and with the mark came pain when he exerted himself. Tonight, he had gone far beyond his own ability. A burning sensation had been growing in his arm and it culminated as the effects of adrenaline faded. With nothing to mask the feeling, his bone felt as if it was being set ablaze.

Maxima apologized while avoiding Glenn's eyes, "We're so sorry. At least we'll have a few nights of rest from all of tonight's work." She offered hesitantly and then nudged Eos to remind him to apologize.

Eos looked distant and shaky. If he could have spoken, Glenn did not let him.

"Oh, you won't be doing work tomorrow or even next week," Glenn thrust his thumb into his chest while kneeling dejectedly on the ground, "but I sure will."

Suddenly, Eos waivered and fell over limply. His head dropped into Glenn's unready arms as he prevented an uncontrolled collision with the floor.

Maxima was immediately at Eos' side.

"No, it's happening again."

"What's happening again?" Glenn gestured frantically to the unconscious body in his lap.

"He's passed out like this a few times before, but it's been happening more often." Maxima's words trembled as she realized, "He shouldn't have push himself so hard." She steadied her emotions and held her older brother, cradling his head of dark hair.

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“Should I do something?” Glenn ran his fingers through his hair.

“No, I can heal him. Somehow my energy helps. Go get some sleep, Glenn.”

“I think I’ll do that. Tomorrow’s gonna be a nightmare.” He staggered back to his bed talking to himself and complaining about the work they had caused him. Despite his self-pity, he worried about Eos ...and about having to report the destruction of the North American Sector’s lead power source. As he opened the door he caught himself looking back at Eos on the floor.

Glenn threw his head back. “They’ve turned me into a bleeding-heart mother.” He went back to Eos and Maxima. “Help me get him up, and we’ll carry him to his bed.” As they did he said under his breath, “Lucky I don’t drop him on his head for what he did to my machine.” After his rough words and a clumsy carry to his bedroom, Glenn set Eos down gently in his bed.

Maxima then held her hands out over Eos, letting small amounts of energy drip from her fingertips to his body, which absorbed it readily. She had learned this in her desperation when Eos fell two times ago.

Glenn left Maxima tending to Eos in the dark. A soft blue glow illuminated Eos’ bronze skin in an aura of security and healing.

This time was worse Maxima thought. Eos was further gone than before.

They were left in a sea of darkness held at bay only by Maxima’s sapphire light.

## CHAPTER TWO



### THE REQUEST

A falcon tucked its wings over the greenery, north of the United States border and made a final lunge for prey in the forest below it. Talons tore into a smaller bird in the tree tops, but the predator flinched and dropped its prey. It observed a figure in a black cloak standing with an ominous calm below the branches. The ends of the cloak rippled at his feet and red tassels dangled from the clasp at his neck, thrashing in the wind.

Two hundred meters ahead, stood a pair of guards in front of a razor wire gate. A sleepy haze hung about them as they feigned attention, picking their heads up every few minutes when they realized they had dozed off.

The cloaked figure took slow, effortless steps towards them until he floated into their vision.

“Halt!” One ordered.

The approaching man stopped a few paces out from the gate. There he stood in silence. The wind blew at his hood, tugging it across

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his face. Despite this, he remained completely hidden in shadow under the black cloth. The gust eventually won, and the hood was pulled just right to reveal pale, grey lips and a sly smile that drew the corners of his mouth just a bit past good intentions.

A stroke of fear rose in one of the guards who had recently heard a rumor. He had been told of cloaked men who periodically stopped by the European Sector's base in Canada. The other cloaked men who had come before were fabled as monsters and murderers who could intimidate even the generals of the European Sector. The terror surrounding the stories made him step back with shaky legs—bumping into the gate behind him and snagging his tan uniform on its barbs. This only made him squirm more.

“It’s one of them...” the man whispered to the other guard, trembling in his maroon European Sector boots.

“I know. We have to follow orders!” The other guard said, less intimidated by the unarmed man before him.

The backpedaling guard froze as he thought about his choices.

He bolted around the side of the premise.

The remaining soldier yelled out, “I can’t let you in. I have orders that no one may enter today. That includes you!” The muzzle of his rifle bounced unsteadily as it eyed the pale lips protruding from the shadows.

In a steady, sure voice the cloaked man said, “You’d do well to either let me in or follow your friend’s lead.”

The guard shook his head. “If I shoot, the guards above will hear and shoot as well.”

With shaky hands, he turned off the safety. His target remained absolutely still.

“You won’t have time to,” The figure murmured.

## THE REQUEST

There was a flash of dull, dirty light. The guard looked down in shock at an object that had just torn through his mid-section. He let out a squeal before he hit the ground.

The shrouded intruder pulled firmly on his weapon. Something resembling a chain whip reeled back into the outstretched sleeve and disappeared in a faint blur.

The guard lay, clutching his abdomen with detached consciousness. A wet spot spread through the cloth around his wound. He looked up as the intruder stepped slowly over him. The dark fabric brushed him like the touch of a ghost.

The cloaked figure stood in front of the only entrance into the building and waited. Eventually it opened. The steel panels folded in revealing a well decorated general standing within a circle of guards. He had round, wired spectacles and thin hair that wrapped only around the sides of his crown. He motioned for the intruder to follow with a slight reluctant flick of his fingers.

The intruder acknowledged the gesture with a casual strut as the gates closed behind him.

The General led them across a courtyard into the main building, through multiple corridors, and into a room with vaulted ceilings. They stopped underneath a pillared arch with square engravings cut above it. The general ordered his guards out of the room and the two were left alone. The cloaked man blended in underneath the shadow of the pillar.

“You trust me in a room alone with you, General Allenby?” The man in shadows asked with amusement.

“Ares, you don’t reach my rank without being able to perform under intimidating conditions. I know what you’re capable of; I also know you won’t kill me here and now,” General Allenby paused to

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wipe sweat from his brow before finishing, “That was absolutely unnecessary out there, killing one of my men.”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t have tried to keep me out,” Ares said slyly and raised a hand. The General flinched.

Ares pulled at the General’s collar as the old man struggled for breath.

“You’re breathing uneasily General. Don’t worry, I prefer you alive, as you said...for now.”

“And what is it that you want from the European Sector this time? Making any deals will be extremely difficult. Our invasion into the North American Sector is struggling, so much so that the battlefield has almost been pushed back to this base. There is little we can afford to part with right now.”

Ares stepped into the light and approached General Allenby, “I need another cargo carrier by the end of the week.”

“Another? Last time I was able to pull some strings and avoid having your organization meet face to face with all the generals. Doing that a second time won’t be so easy, especially if you’re here alone.” Sweat was rolling down the wire temples of the General’s glasses near his ear and he dabbed it with his sleeve. “Before, your group had services to offer; they will want to push the timeline on our previous deal forward. I’m sure you won’t be surprised, as second in command I can’t meet your demand alone.”

Ares leaned in closer, “I’m aware.”

General Allenby was suddenly desperate to leave the room.

A strange crest was embroidered on the breast of Ares’ cloak: a red snake that formed a circle. Both ends of the serpent had a ridged head that turned away from the each other at the top and their tongues were both hissing outward. It was hard for Allenby to divert his eyes to anything else.

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“You ask for too much. You still have to uphold your end of our previous deal...and your *private deal with me*. Your words have not turned into actions and already you’re asking for more.” He spoke as if talking to the red snakes, and they hurried him toward a conclusion. “The generals will meet in three nights after tonight. I’ll guarantee you can make your request in front of them, but whether or not they listen....” He cleared his throat and began to back out of the room.

“The bureaucratic ways of your sector prevent anything from being accomplished in a timely manner,” Ares condescended while tapping his foot impatiently on the stone floor, “but I have no choice. I trust you will make them aware of their options ahead of time.” He smiled at General Allenby with arrogance from underneath his hood. “And then words will become action. You’ll get what we agreed on.” He finished the sentence while turning back into the darkness.

General Allenby never took his sight off of Ares. He reached to open the door with shaky liver spotted fingers, all the while keeping his head turned just enough to keep an eye on the smile that watched him from the shadows. He felt a wave of relief as his hand reached the door handle’s cool metal, and he gave it a turn.

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Ares navigated the depths of the underground network that made up the base for the organization known as *the Mitad*. It was a dimly lit, musty labyrinth, but those were the conditions required to operate in secrecy as they did. He strode through the ancient rooms and connection ways of underground buildings with an unhurried saunter. His pace commanded time in this subterranean place.

There was light up ahead, through the concrete passageway. A glowing stone lit the room. Someone was waiting for him.

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As he passed through the opening at the end of the dark gray hall, he received a jolting pat on the shoulders—as he had anticipated. His anticipation only just prevented a violent reaction. If it had been anyone else, he might not have forgiven such an encroachment of his space.

“Welcome back, Ares.” A man said with tease in his voice. They wore same black robe. “You travel fast. Too fast to make it back here from the Euro Sector’s military base. That’s a long way. The girls been helping you travel huh?” The voice chuckled in a friendly tone. “Or are you helping her? I can’t keep it quite straight. But why would you help Bellia?”

Ares faced the man. His hood was down. He had a chiseled face and matted straw hair. The single lantern in the room revealed no more, but Ares knew the man well. “Tessio...you know I help the cause alone. The plans cannot afford any delay.”

“Right, Right. But perceptions being what they are when you’re trapped underground most of the time...wouldn’t want the boss to get the wrong idea. I noticed he’s been watching.”

Ares sighed through his flared nostrils. “Let him watch. I’m gaining power for the Mitad. That’s all I’m after—power. No woman, no man, *nothing* will get in my way. Now, you’re talking more than usual, Tessio. I think that’s enough. What’s gotten into you tonight?”

Tessio put an arm around Ares, which Ares merely tolerated with a squint. “We’re brothers in the Mitad. We’ve been working together, what eight years now? I’m looking out for my superior officer. If you keep it up with this, *favors for Bellia* stuff...he’s going to notice. That’s all.”

“Well I appreciate the warning, but I’m well aware. You know...I’d beat down any other subordinate who’d talk to me like

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that.” Ares smirked as he said it, showing the first hint of emotion. “Why do I tolerate you?”

Tessio nodded. “Because I’m good. You appreciate my skills and they serve you well. And we’ve been through some times together. I lost count of who saved who more in the second battle at Pacem.” He pointed at Ares in appeal.

Ares eyebrows drew together. “You had my back once. The lost count must have been how many times you escaped death because of me.” He said with a dry wryness.

“Right.” Tessio’s pointer finger dropped and he looked at the ground. “But the point is you put up with me.” He shrugged and nodded to himself. “Besides, I wanted to tell you before you get to the meeting that they’ve given up on Constantine. He didn’t return, and the search found his lookout point destroyed.”

“Destroyed how?” Ares asked sharply.

Tessio turned up his lower lip. “I don’t know. Wasn’t there myself. Scouts said the silo had a big hole in it. Braxton’s men must have seen him coming. Unlucky, but I said from the beginning we shouldn’t send some fresh, weak, *ostaka*,” the word was for those without powers like their own, “into the direct path of soldiers—”

Ares scowled and interjected, “It was just surveillance. Using an officer would have been a waste of resources. He was no loss. Our *Soul Wielders*,” the word referred to those with powers like his own, “are too scarce here to be sending out for simple work. Almost every person here that isn’t ranking also can’t wield. Hmmpf pathetic *ostaka*... if Constantine failed on such a simple task, he had no value.”

“You’re right. Just has me nervous that Braxton’s men got one of us.”

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They were silent for a time as Ares thought on it. The event was too peculiar to be believed. In an entire desert...one lone man was found at the uncovered silo and engaged because he was monitoring military routes.

Tessio picked up a glowing stone that provided light like a lantern would and illuminated his tattooed hand.

The two walked together with the dark pressing in around them.

“I didn’t mean to pretend I know better than you about the girl earlier. Forget I said it.”

Ares grunted in return.

“Aww, come on. I don’t need to deal with scowling Ares for three days. I only said it to look out for you! You’re respected, powerful, rising in the ranks. You have the pedigree—”

Ares turned on the lanky man.

The glowing stone flickered, and the light on the walls shook with Tessio’s hand. He knew he said something wrong.

“What does that mean?” Ares asked.

“Come on. Forget I said—”

“No.” Ares said through gritted teeth. “Explain to me.”

Tessio hesitated. “It’s just...you know...you’re...you’re from two powerful bloodlines. That comes with some—”

*Thud.*

Ares drove his fist into Tessio’s abdomen in a vicious blow.

Tessio clutched his stomach and seized over, falling to a knee. He barely kept hold of the light stone as spittle flew from his mouth.

“I have no family. I have allegiance to the Mitad. I am Mitad.” Ares grabbed his subordinate’s hair and yanked his head up. “See this?” He pointed to the two headed snake emblazoned on his breast in red.

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Tessio nodded with fear in his eyes as he breathed short, tight breaths.

“I’m part of the whole. Don’t ever make that mistake again. You know better.”

Ares helped Tessio stand straight.

“And don’t make me strike a brother of the Mitad.”

Tessio shook his head. “No. I won’t. I forgot my place.”

The two walked on together into the depths of the dark labyrinth.

## CHAPTER THREE



### THE WHISKEY BLUES

**G**lenn stood on a small ledge within the twisting spire of the generator and peered up over thirty feet of ladder to the generator room above. He was surrounded by melted power cables and permanently deformed metal. The creation he had helped bring to life was left scarred like a burn victim. Black covered his hands; whether it was more char or dirt, he couldn't tell. He had been working on the innards of the generator for the entire day, and the ferrous smell of scorched steel burned his nose.

He clasped the ladder with boney fingers and rested a foot on the rung, but he hadn't completely given in to making the climb. He was surrounded by his own fallen work and searching the recesses of his brain for any ideas that would let him salvage the generator.

"Glenn?" Called Maxima's voice.

Her soft sea-blue eyes looked over the edge of the drop at Glenn.

"I heated up the stew you made last night and put it on the table. Take a break! Eos still isn't awake so clean up and come eat with me."

## THE WHISKEY BLUES

Her voice was gentle and inviting, but Glenn was in the depths of defeat.

“You think you could eat the food I make *within* twenty-four hours of me making it?” Glenn echoed from below.

Maxima stared down at Glenn’s face. It was smeared with grease, protected only by his strawberry colored five o’clock shadow.

“Would you please shave off that nasty stuff on your face?”

“Hey, I like my stubble! In fact, I think I’ll let my beard grow out.”

Maxima protested, “Really Glenn—”

“I’ll tell you what, I’ll shave it when you stop chewing on your scarf all day.” Glenn would regularly catch Maxima rolling the fabric between her lips. “Besides, a shaved man is a well put together man with his life in order. I make no claim to that.”

Maxima smiled. “Well, *if* you had a life to put in order, it would look better without the beard. Now, are you ready to eat?”

“I need my most important tool.”

Eager to help, Maxima went to the bag at the top of the ladder. “What do you need? I can drop it down.”

“It’s a very special tool.”

Maxima nodded and waited for instruction.

“I do my best work with it.”

“Well, which one?” Maxima asked.

Glenn stared up with bloodshot eyes, “...Whisky.”

Pupils rolled to the back of Maxima’s head in return. “If that were true, Glenn, you’d do a lot more good work. Do you need any tools or not?”

For a long time, there was no response.

Glenn turned a full circle, taking in the destruction and ruin around him, and letting the reality sink in. The room was silent except for the

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droning pitter patter of sand beating against the outside walls. The desert's infinite storm drew nearer.

Finally, he spoke in a solemn tone, "No...there's nothing more I can do."

It was a broken-down man that made the climb out of the generator. Glenn did so without a single complaint. When he reached the top, he looked Maxima in the eye.

"It's much worse than I thought...the hardware is completely ruined, and the structure is beyond repair. You two did such a job on it that I'm gonna have to do it now, you know. I'm going to have to call the capitol and inform *him*." Glenn stood motionless, all humor gone from his voice.

Maxima's eyes widened in despair as if she was a child that had just been told to go to bed without dinner. She rounded her shoulders and crossed her arms. "Isn't there anything you can do? You're a genius Glenn; you can fix everything. Please?" Maxima begged him.

"Not this. I wish I could but..." He brushed strands of hair from his face, leaving more smears of dirt in their place.

She put her head down and said, "Let's go check on Eos. He's been unconscious for a full day now. I'm getting worried that he won't wake up."

They exited the room together, walked through the hallway, and into the kitchen. It was a small room, about twenty some feet long and a bit less across. The far corner was occupied with an off-white fridge, a peeling stove top, and a sink. Just off center of the room was a square dinner table with a chair on each side. The table had two empty bowls stacked on it and one chair was occupied by one hungry Eos shoveling the last bits of stew into his stomach, unaware of the grim mood the two brought into the room.

## THE WHISKEY BLUES

“Oh gwoo! Glewn can you make some mowr? I’m starving!” Eos asked through a mouth full of potatoes.

Glenn’s jaw dropped. He walked over to the stove to see pot had been completely scraped clean. “Maxima, you sure don’t have to worry about if he wakes up or not. He ate it all! How does one boy eat so much food? I mean that was at least enough to fill four bowls!” Glenn grumbled right along with his stomach.

Eos wiped his mouth and replied lightly, “I’m seventeen, Glenn, that’s hardly a boy. And five bowls actually. It makes sense if you think about how hard I worked.” Eos gripped the spoon in his hand so that it stood straight up, displaying his appetite for more.

Glenn decided that was enough of being corrected by children for the day.

“How hard you worked? How hard *you* worked?” Glenn’s fury boiled over. His veins flared, eyes bulged, and he babbled incoherently for a few seconds before regaining some sense of calm.

“How hard do you think *I’m* going to work to fix your mess? Think of that; and do you see me eating all of our food? I have to make a phone call that I really don’t want to make because of you. I’ll consider being your personal food servant after that!”

Eos stared, taken aback for a moment before looking to Maxima for an explanation. She whispered to him, “He’s calling General Braxton.”

General Braxton’s name lingered like a boogieman.

“No,” Eos dropped his fork with a clatter and closed the space between himself and Glenn in a second. “We haven’t had to deal with him for so long. Things are going fine!”

“No, things *were* going fine,” said Glenn in a quiet irritation, “but somebody destroyed the generator... two somebodies in fact! Now I

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have no other option. You think I want to deal with his reaction to this any more than you? That dictator only causes problems in my life.”

Eos was left silent. Glenn walked to the relic that hung on the wall next to the fridge. He picked up the corded phone and dialed, waiting for the answer with his head in the crook of his elbow which was propped up against the fridge.

The phone dialed in. Eventually Glenn was put through to General Braxton.

A muffled voice was heard coming from it. Eos could only make out Glenn’s side of the conversation as he delivered the news as gently as possible. It was clear it wasn’t being taken well when Glenn, with his head still against the fridge minutes later, held the phone an arms distance from his ear and dangled it while a garbled medley of swearing crackled through the speaker. Eos cringed right along with Glenn.

Nearly an hour passed before Glenn hung up the phone. With the dreaded call finished, he turned to Eos and Maxima who sat sulking at the table like punished toddlers.

“Well that couldn’t have gone any better; a vehicle is on its way to take me to the capitol to chat one on one with General Braxton,” he cocked his head at an angle and put on a clearly false smile, “Yay!” He clapped slowly to celebrate the news.

“But!” he exclaimed raising a finger, “It’s not all bad news. I have company because you two are joining me.” His hysterical anger was evident.

“Why?” Eos and Maxima both said in horrified unison as they got out of their chairs.

“The General didn’t explain, but he did say that you two are currently in need of a new job. Do you understand what that means?” Glenn’s hysteria faded, and his face grew serious. “He could send you away—separate us. As much as you’ve put me off with this disaster,

## THE WHISKEY BLUES

we've been together for almost ten years guys. And it could be worse than just you and me going separate ways; he could separate you two if he feels like it!" He ran both hands through his hair and held them there to support the back of his head as if the stress was going to topple him.

Eos and Maxima turned to each other worriedly, but before they could speak, Glenn continued, "Our ride should be here early in the morning. You two enjoy the tension; I have a date!"

He pulled a half full bottle from a cabinet and sat down at the table. Apparently, he felt no need for a glass—he put his lips around the bottle and drank.

As the liquid warmed his throat, he thought back to the beginnings of his relationship with Eos and Maxima. They were just children, hardly able to speak for themselves, let alone provide. He tossed back another gulp as he reminisced. The light transmitted through the blue bottle and its contents, tinting Glenn's face in a foggy blue pattern of distortion.

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The hazy blue light of computer monitors was disrupted by the silhouette of a stern, broad figure. He stood, peering over two men; one sat in a chair. They all watched the screen. Two children sat huddled together on it.

The thinner framed man in the chair spoke, "At just seven years old...they have this power," his voice was raspy, and his tone wavered with each word. He chuckled. "My research is going to be fun; are you sure doing this by yourself is the best method General Braxton?"

"These children are the key to North American prosperity and maintaining my authority. The more closely guarded this secret

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remains, the better.” General Braxton’s voice was deep and authoritative. “Oh and Kurt, this is your new partner for the next couple of months. His name is Glenn Parker. As a leading plasma researcher and energy engineer, he’ll be invaluable in helping convert this new phenomenon into usable electricity.”

Glenn had a spirited personality that was out of place with the two grim personas beside him. They stifled the room. “I have some theories,” he said, “but first I need to understand the nature of the energy these two produce...what did you say their names were?”

“Eos and Maxima,” Kurt said, his words shaking with excitement, “I agree, let’s see a demonstration. The possible applications...”

General Braxton grunted and walked to a door opposite of the monitors. The other two followed but were halted.

“No. Just me.”

General Braxton entered the adjacent room, a towering figure whose glare appeared to be a scowl to the two children staring up at him. He attempted a smile. “You two have some unique skills from what I’ve heard. I hope you wouldn’t mind showing me what you can do.”

Eos and Maxima looked at each other without exchanging a word. The young eyes came to an agreement. The boy turned a defiant look to General Braxton, though his short gaze only leveled with the man’s waist.

“No, you’re just like everyone else.” His eyes blazed with distrust.

The man got on one knee to speak with Maxima.

“Your brother’s quite a sight there, with a scar under his eye and that arm of his.”

Eos hid his arm behind his back at the mention of it.

“How did he get that? How did you get your powers?”

## THE WHISKEY BLUES

Eos stepped in front of Maxima, “We don’t know why we have these powers! You think we wanted them? Stay back from my sister and talk to me if you’re going to talk to anyone.”

General Braxton laughed. “You’re bold for your age...and very distrustful. I’m going to give you the opportunity to help a lot of people. Would you like that? I just need you to show me.”

“Nobody seemed to want anything, but to get rid of us,” Eos returned.

Maxima rose and tugged on her brother’s sleeve.

“I don’t know Eos. He isn’t scared. Maybe he’s different.”

The General realized quickly which child he was going to get through to, “That’s right; I’m not afraid of you at all. In fact, I just want to help everyone understand. So why don’t you show me what everyone else was so afraid of.”

“Don’t do it Maxima,” Eos urged with his right hand still behind his back.

“I was asking your sister, boy.” General Braxton grew annoyed. “I can make it so your power helps people instead of hurting them. You’d want that, right?”

Maxima nodded and held out her open hand and it shook nervously. A spark of blue light came to life in her palm and flickered for a moment like a strand of flame. Though he tried to hide it, General Braxton’s face betrayed his excitement.

Eos reached out his hand and stopped Maxima’s progress when it fell on her shoulder. “He’s not a good-guy Maxima. We can’t trust him. I can feel it,” he said with his right hand still hidden.

The General stood, “I’m doing this for the good of humanity. You shouldn’t insult my intentions,” his speech rose to a threatening level, “Now Maxima, do it again!”

She shook her head, her dark hair swayed around her shoulders.

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“Not unless my brother does too.” She said as she looked to Eos. Eos shook his head.

General Braxton stepped inches away from Maxima. “You *will* show me.”

Maxima trembled. “I...I can’t.”

“Stay away from her!” The small boy touched a scar beneath his eye with an index finger as he decided what he had to do.

The man reached down and grabbed Maxima’s wrist, extending it out as it had previously been. “You’re wasting my time. Do it again,” he growled.

Maxima let out a cry, “You’re hurting me.”

Braxton lifted her off the ground by her wrist. “Then show me,” he screamed.

Tears accompanied a shriek of pain.

“Let go of her,” Eos roared with devastating conviction, “I won’t let you do that to my sister!” He revealed his right hand from behind his back. It contained a churning red light the size of a tiny marble. It only remained there for an instant before he flung it at the man.

It struck the General’s left cheek with a dazzling flash and a crackling sound, like a small explosion that brought a miniature lightning storm with it.

Instantly, Maxima was released, and General Braxton lay on the ground. He clutched his face. Blood trickled from underneath his clasped hand as he reeled in shock.

The door swung open and a man with strawberry blonde hair rushed to the children’s side.

“Enough! They’re children. What do you think you’re doing?” Glenn hollered. “They’re just kids.” He stood between the two and General Braxton.

## THE WHISKEY BLUES

General Braxton's silent disbelief was followed by a low growl. "We'll try again tomorrow, and you *will* perform. You hear me?"

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"Oh, I hear it coming," Glenn's mind buzzed from his drink, "It's going to be a storm over our lives...a storm of misfortune...knowing how Braxton tends to handle things." His head fell as sleep overtook him and his words drifted off into incoherent mumbles.

He looked up with eyes of hazel sorrow. "And they don't deserve it. They've done everything that's been asked and more...They were just kids when this started, too young for all of it," Glenn reminisced. Though he wouldn't outwardly admit it, he recalled his time watching over them fondly.

The blue bottle was tilted up to his lips once more, but this time Glenn found only a drop rolled to meet his tongue. He attempted to stand from his seat so that he could find another drink, but his body was too far impaired. He spilled onto the floor and ended up spread out on his back. Shards of the bottle were strewn about like blue tear drops that Glenn's pride wouldn't allow him to shed.

## CHAPTER FOUR



### SCREAMING DUNES

**E**os and Maxima were both spread out on their backs, facing opposite directions; their limbs sprawled out on the gritty earth. Sand was carried by the warm wind and it pecked at their faces. Maxima pulled the light tan shawl off sleeveless shoulders and over her nose to protect herself from the pelting. She sunk into its safety.

“I had the dream again.” Eos’ golden eyes stared distantly, recalling it.

“Again? Eos, I’m getting worried,” Maxima turned her chin up to look backwards at Eos, “I...don’t know what to do. We have to be careful. You can’t keep collapsing like that.”

Strands of Eos’ dark hair twisted in the breeze. He completely disregarded her concern.

“Don’t you think it’s interesting how I have the same dream every time?”

## SCREAMING DUNES

“Interesting, to say the least. Also, unhealthy. You need to take this seriously.”

He didn’t respond for a while. A wide smile overcame him, “I almost saw him this time, Maxima.”

She closed her eyes as the ends of her raven hair brushed her face.

“Do you think it’s real? You’re a year older, so maybe you can remember more.” Maxima didn’t remove the whipping hair from her face. It was a layer between her and the harsh world. It made her feel safe to be covered by it.

“I know it’s real. It was him. The dream ended just before I saw dad’s face.” Pure joy was radiating off Eos as he told Maxima of his dream, “I was in an enormous palace as usual. The man with wild copper hair was there again too, but this time he lifted me up and I saw out the window! I know he picked me up so I could see Dad. The man said something too, but the only words I heard were ‘One day you’ll be a great wielder like him.’ I can’t see out the window, but I reach towards it...then everything fades out.” Eos reached through the air with his marked hand, imitating the way he had as a young child in his dream.

Maxima smiled too, but hers was more restrained. “For your sake let’s hope you’re never unconscious long enough to see his face.” Her concerns subsided as she let fascination win over, “Do you think we’ll ever see him or mom?” There was a tinge of sadness that smoldered in the depths of Maxima’s ocean irises.

Eos’ hand closed into a fist of resolve that held steady above him.

“Oh, we’ll find them alright. I’m going to find out why they abandoned us and why we have these powers—no matter what! Their explanation better be good.”

Maxima laughed somberly at her brother’s spirit.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“We have to deal with Braxton before we can get to any of your dreams.”

The wind picked up, and muffled thunder boomed. The infinite sandstorm was moving towards them.

Eos sat up with one arm propped over his knee and gazed out at expanse of the desert’s brown palette. The imminent dark wall of the sandstorm mocked their captivity, a barrier to the world beyond the desert.

“After that...the first chance we get, Maxima, we leave. We take Glenn with us and we get as far away from here as possible. We find home. We find family. They’re probably waiting for us...somewhere...”

Maxima got to her feet, “Right, then we’ll be free.” She reveled in the idea for a moment before thinking that freedom might mean Eos leaving her behind. Perhaps it was better to keep things the way they were. It wasn’t ideal living, but the world beyond the walls of the complex was unforgiving as they both knew. She brought her brother back to reality. “Come on, we have to pack before the escort gets here.”

When the military Humvee rolled up the next day, Glenn had long since finished one bottle of whiskey and opened another while he tried to shower off his drunken stupor. The shower hadn’t helped. He had a greater chance of falling to the floor than getting into the vehicle.

There came a knock and Maxima got up to answer. Outside stood a tall soldier in military uniform—their escort. Desert camouflage covered him from head to toe. He had heavy eyebrows and a stern face that looked like it was frowning at all times. He was led into the main room where Eos and Glenn waited.

“The name’s Lieutenant Jacobs. Long drive. I’m a little stiff,” the driver introduced himself while stretching out his limbs. He reached

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out to shake hands with Glenn who barely managed to get his hand on the same plane as Lieutenant Jacobs.

“Meeee too,” Glenn slurred with a grin.

Jacobs looked at Maxima and Eos, taken aback. He gave them a slightly scolding look, “I’m going to assume you two are Eos and Maxima?” They nodded. “He better be in a more presentable state by the time we reach our destination. General Braxton’s temper is already short...this’ll put him over the edge.”

“I’m plenty presssennagr-presssent-presssentablille.” Glenn slurred again.

Maxima gave a serious look to Lieutenant Jacobs. “I’m used to dealing with him in this state. We can make sure he sobers up.” Lieutenant Jacobs scratched his head, gave a questioning look at the backwards roles the children played for their guardian, but accepted her answer and led them to the Humvee.

Glenn tried to bring a new *date* with him, but Maxima caught him slipping the bottle into his travel bag. Glenn put up a fight. He was on his knees playing tug of war like a child having his toy taken away, but eventually parted with it after Eos helped Maxima wrestle it away.

To their surprise, there were three vehicles waiting for them, two of which had turret stations atop the Humvee roof.

Glenn halted his stumbling. “Thasss a lot of fire p-p-powwwwerrr.”

Lieutenant Jacobs shook his head in disbelief at his passengers, two strange children and a drunk. “We’ve been having trouble with rebel groups when passing through the desert lately. It’s for your safety. They’re getting more and more bold.”

As Eos simultaneously held Glenn up and reached with his right hand to open the door, Lieutenant Jacobs couldn’t help but notice the markings on it.

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“That’s an interesting tattoo you have there. I’ve never seen one that covers the entire hand before.” He stared at Eos’ blackened right hand. It was black all the way to the fingernails. The marks on it twisted in cloud like vines and crawled up his forearm reaching for his elbow.

Eos heaved Glenn into the beaten truck.

With his concentration on Glenn, he only managed a few words. “It’s nothing.”

Despite Eos’ clear disinterest in the topic. Lieutenant Jacobs continued, “About two years ago I got one that covered my whole shoulder.”

Jacobs’ permanent frown managed to furrow further when Eos ignored him completely and fastened Glenn’s seatbelt. Eos turned, looked Jacobs in the eye, and stated bluntly, “Mine’s not a tattoo.” Eos climbed into the back seats with Glenn.

Maxima gave Jacobs a shrug that said not to worry about it.

Not a tattoo? Jacobs had been told the kids he was escorting would be different, but that boy was just bizarre. He jumped into the driver’s seat and started the vehicle.

Howls of winds roared as the doors closed. The dark wall of the infinite sandstorm was drawing near. It was abnormally far south. Maxima worried that it would get too close as spouts of sand churned up outside.

The lieutenant spoke without addressing anyone in particular, “General Braxton isn’t in Washington D.C. at the moment. We are going to a small military outpost called Sires. It’s a shorter drive out west, near the costal islands.”

“I thought the west coast was uninhabited after the war,” Eos questioned, “Glenn told us that everything west of Utah slid into the ocean and the rest was just...what did he call it? A shatter-belt of islands?”

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Lieutenant Jacobs gave Eos an annoyed look to the boy who had an arm covered in *not a tattoo*, but forced out a reply, “The North American Sector is conducting environmental research about the effects of the Fracture War on the living conditions of that region. The point being that you have less time than you may have thought to get the engineer back there in respectable condition.” He gestured at Glenn.

Glenn waved back to the Lieutenant.

The truck drove off with clunky hum from the engine and an unamused grunt from the Lieutenant. The escort left them in silence for much of the drive, unhappy with the way Eos had ignored him, slightly troubled by the thought of the boy’s right arm, and suspicious of how two children could have such classified files.

The semiarid climate of the central North American Sector region faded within an hour. The dot on the horizon that was the generator complex had disappeared. The sight out the window was turning more and more into a truly desolate desert. Plants faded out, and banks of sand populated the view.

It was growing dark outside, but not because of time of day. The wall of enraged desert was closing in, leaving an unsettling feeling in everyone as they watched the shadows cast by lightening bottled in sand.

The truck jumped and bounced over rough terrain as the churn of sand became more difficult to see through. Another hour or so later, Eos couldn’t tell how long it had truly been, the first words of the trip were spoken. “We’re crossing the Arkansas River now.” Lieutenant Jacobs said coldly to himself more than the siblings and the sleeping drunk. Up ahead was a bridge supported by huge, leaning metal beams that had been painted with a thick coat of rust, but even the gusts of sand couldn’t wear it down.

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After crossing the bridge, the full destruction from the Fracture War became apparent. The hills transformed into dunes and the road became nearly impossible to track under the dust and dry earth that blew across it. The skeletons of society were now just partially visible from underneath the sand. Roofs of houses poked out as if trying to gasp before drowning beneath the sand, but they had long since been swallowed by the new era.

The hissing static sounds of the gusts were broken up by an occasional thump as a mass of sand struck a window. The sandstorm had followed and closed much of the distance there had been. An unfriendly air from Lieutenant Jacobs kept the vehicle silent except for the raging storm until Glenn awoke. With some of his clarity returning, so did his desire to hear himself.

He muttered bitterly as he looked upon the remains of the previous society, “It’s gone. All gone. Reminds me of how all this started.”

Glenn turned away from the window and shook his head, pulling his mind back from a time when things were different. The shadows of the storm enveloped the vehicle.

“Did I ever tell you how an...*esteemed*,” he put slurred emphasis on the word, “scholar like myself came to this desert?”

The siblings both rolled their eyes and Maxima said with a grin, “More than once Glenn—”

“Well, let me tell you,” he said holding his finger out at Eos. He had no intention of not telling his story again. “I was the greatest engineer of emerging energy sources in the country, if I do say so myself. So, it was no surprise that when the United States had a new plan for energy production, they contacted...me!” Glenn grinned widely and pointed to himself, reminiscing with pride.

“The project was kept top secret; I was only given hints and told that it would forever change the way energy would be generated.” He

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hiccupped before continuing, “New research on the west coast had birthed an idea for a reactor and power source. It was beautiful...at least until the war.”

Glenn braced himself as the ride rattled his brain, bouncing over dunes. The life was sucked out of the earth in every direction around them, and visibility was fading quickly.

The sound of thunder was right overhead. Maxima rolled her scarf between her lips as she peered out the window. She could barely make out the lead char in front of them through the wall of sand and darkness. Only when lightning struck did she see the outline of the turret station atop it.

Glenn’s story was becoming more coherent as he sobered up. He continued recounting his tale, but now he wasn’t just drunkenly boasting for his audience of two. His words were like a sad reminiscing, “Just weeks before the construction was scheduled to begin, the first war heads struck.” Chunks of dry earth were kicked up and pelted the underside of the vehicle. “The west coast was hit first, and they moved inwards, decimating a large portion of the population, but then came something entirely different. While we had researched ways to produce more energy, the Asian Sector had developed a new weapon. They sent tunneling missiles that could burrow deep into the continent. Before anyone had time to develop a defense, California was sinking, and Nevada followed. All that was left were shattered bits of the states. The energy source was destroyed before it was shipped, and the research became lost along with it,” Glenn sighed. Emotion built up in his eyes as he recalled it all. “Worse, we found no allies in any of the other sectors. The European Sector took the opportunity to attack us in our weakened state.”

The Humvee bounced hard, rattling the frame. Sand beat against the car so hard that the vehicle was being pushed from its path.

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Maxima had long ago stopped listening, but Eos humored Glenn by playing along with the story they had been told so many times, “This is where we come in, right Glenn?”

“Oh, not exactly! You do, but not for another three years. I ended up stranded in an apocalyptic U.S. and my work sat useless, a heap of metal parts. During all this...” Glenn eyed Lieutenant Jacobs carefully before whispering, “*General Braxton* used the chaos to declare the area a military state and seize control.”

Glenn’s whisper wasn’t effective at concealing his dislike to the Sector’s leader. Chances were, Lieutenant Jacobs served General Braxton reluctantly; few were pleased with his take over and restructure of the military hierarchy. Glenn continued, “Soon all of North America became one sector and its military became aware of you two. Then General Braxton took interest. When you showed him your powers, he was hooked on the idea—”

Eos interrupted to grumble sarcastically, “Great. My *favorite* part of the story.”

Glenn replied, “I was the one who got the bad deal here. My life of academic success was permanently roadblocked.”

“You wouldn’t know what to do without us, Glenn. Your life was boring before.” Eos countered.

“Boring? Boring? I was respected. Now I’m...” He didn’t finish.

“You need us. Admit it.”

“Like I need sand in my boots every time I go outside.”

Lightning struck so close that the car lit up inside and the ground shook.

Glenn continued with a ringing head, having trouble hearing himself over the storm. “As bad of a deal as we all got out of it, you were soon providing electricity for much of the population,” he said almost whimsically, “In my genius, I designed a new generator to

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accommodate you and my invention was put to work...” Glenn glowered. “But you had to go and break it.”

*Kabooooom!*

Lightning struck the lead car. Orange and violet sparks sprayed out. The Humvee took a sharp veer left.

Eos watched through the window as the car spun over the dune. As the light died down, he saw it roll over and slide down a desert ridge.

Lieutenant Jacob cursed, jerking the steering wheel to angle into the storm winds. He was just barely preventing their car from being pushed toward the ridge. It was hard to tell if he was losing ground through the darkness and debris.

A gust hit the car.

The passenger side lifted off the ground. For three seconds, the car nearly tipped toward the slope. Eos saw the drop off in flickers through the window. Lightning was striking all around them now as the storm fully engulfed them. They were caught in the middle of a flashing orange nightmare.

The car slammed back to the ground, sending shock into everyone’s necks.

Eos looked for some way out, but it was too dark to see in every direction.

Maxima had her shawl in her mouth. She bit down hard, stomach churning with anxiety. Another flash of lightning let Eos catch his sister’s eye. She was worried—but she was also thinking.

Glenn groaned, “Stop the car before we die!”

Eos realized they had no choice, but to push on. “No—we have to try and get out of the other side before we’re too deep in.”

Glenn protested. “We’ll drive into something at this rate. We can’t seeEEE—” He finished with a yelp as the Humvee was struck by

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another gust and lifted off the ground on the passenger side. It slammed down once more.

Lieutenant Jacobs screamed so that he could be heard over the talking and noises outside, “Everyone quiet down. I need to focus to drive out of this storm.”

Eos heard a *crack-crack-crack* as Maxima’s knuckles popped.

“Eos and Glenn.” Maxima said, “You’re on the wrong side of the car. Get over to my side as fast as you can.”

Maxima had realized in the chaos, that the car was tipping onto driver side where Eos sat. With Glenn sloppily falling over on Eos, it was helping the wind to tilt them. Eos’ eyes widened as he realized.

“Glenn, get over.” Eos ordered as he unbuckled his seatbelt.

Glenn fumbled with his seatbelt, still too intoxicated to be coordinated.

Eos pushed on Glenn desperately trying to shift his body to the other side. It was like pushing on a wall with his seatbelt still fastened and his body limp from his drunken state.

The car was lifted once more as Eos struggled to keep Glenn’s weight off of him.

This gust was stronger than the others. The Humvee passed a thirty-degree angle and Maxima let out a frightened scream. “Eos!”

Then he felt it. The vehicle tipped to the point of no return.

It was going to flip.

Eos coiled back with his feet against the door as the vehicle rolled to a steep angle.

He sprung off the door and launched himself to the passenger side. His torso collided with the back of Maxima’s seat as he reached out.

Gravity pulled him back to the other side of the vehicle, but he stretched out his arm midair.

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His fingers found the strap on the opposite door as his shoulder banged against the tilted floor.

The center of gravity in the car shifted.

It was enough.

The Humvee fell back to the ground so hard Eos cried out as he bounced against the hard floor.

It was several minutes before his breathing calmed. He didn't let go of the door strap until the sound of thunder became muffled and the wind died down.

Light broke through the window as they emerged from the infinite sandstorm. Eos climbed back up into his seat as everyone sat in shock.

"We're alive." Maxima sighed.

Glenn held his head in his hands. "Somehow."

Their driver grunted, noting the other two Humvees had not made it out of the cloud of sand.

Time blurred into the bouncing of the Humvee's suspension. Hours passed in monotonous beige streaks of pallid earth. Their driver's aura of irritation kept the passengers silent.

Eos looked out at the small desert sand dunes tapering off into a more dry and fissured earth. After a few more hours, they were driving over chunks of red-brown depleted soil that fit together in abstract pieces of ceramic tiles stretching as far as the eye could see.

Then, with a sense of dread less sharp but far more threatening than being trapped in the storm, a dot of civilization appeared. Eos knew it was there that General Braxton waited.

It had been well over half a day of driving, but they had finally reached the place. Through the dust caked windshield, they could see Sires come into focus. It resembled a refugee camp more than a military post. They stopped at the checkpoint.

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Lieutenant Jacobs rolled down his window and fumbled for a badge that was clipped to his breast pocket. He flashed it at a single guard who stood watch from a small station. It was connected to a barbed wire fence that ran the perimeter of the outpost—though from the length of the perimeter, it was more like a small city. It was tough to make out anything through the dirt clouded window, but Eos could see small stations like this one dotting the fence for a staggering distance until perspective squeezed them into the horizon.

A single barred gate folded in and the truck rolled through it, kicking up dust in its wake. The trio was being escorted to a crossroad in their life, and they each realized this with a chilled shiver in the desert heat. General Braxton awaited them beyond this gate with their future in his hands.

Sand beat outside the windows of the vehicle, tapping on the glass. It blew from the dunes and shouted at the newcomers, sending a rhythmic and maddening whistle through the air.

It was time to face General Braxton.

## CHAPTER FIVE



### THE PROMOTION

A swooshing whistle followed with the cadence of Ares' pounding feet. They never touched the gold-green blades of grass as he sprinted; he hovered a foot above the ground with a soft glow beneath his boots and was moving at an incredible pace. The sound came each time his foot sliced through the cool forest air, somewhere north of the Great Lakes.

His cloak rippled and pulled tight against his body as he charged forward. His arms moved in relaxed swings as he propelled himself through the air in a supernatural sprint. Trees and foliage flew by in his vision as blurs of mossy olive shades.

Far off through the leaves he could see the European Sector's Canadian base. He did not take his time and approach the gate with a leisurely walk, as he had before. To the new guards posted at the entrance, the cloaked man simply appeared in front of them as if he had teleported. They, unlike the previous guards, had been forewarned

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of his arrival. The gate opened slowly without a word passing between anyone.

General Allenby was prepared for Ares this time; he had no guards around him. He flashed Ares a gleam of composure and said, “I have talked the assembly into hearing your request, but be warned—the generals will not like you making demands. Try to be a bit more... charming.” General Allenby swallowed with a lump in his throat. Perhaps he had spoken too boldly.

Ares was amused by the reply. “No guards and now you’re telling me how I should make my request,” he chuckled from under his hood.

“I realized having guards around me wasn’t the best way to welcome a...” he chose his word carefully, “a...guest, but if you do make a poor decision and try and harm me—there are soldiers on the second floor all ready to take a shot at you for killing their comrade.”

Ares chuckled, unfazed. “Take me to this meeting. I’m in a hurry tonight.”

General Allenby took Ares down a pristinely white hallway with maple double doors at the end. Artificial light filtered down forming arches of shadow along the walls. Ares marched through the white hallway, disrupting the patterned light.

They stopped outside the doors and General Allenby delivered his final words to Ares, “Once we enter the room, General Evetts, the head of the assembly, will address you. Then you are free to make your request. Do not speak until spoken to. You may be capable of whatever you want, but these are proud old men, just like me.” General Allenby removed his spectacles and wiped them. He stared through the glass into the lights in a delaying tactic. They appeared clean to his satisfaction and he slid them back on.

## THE PROMOTION

Ares did not acknowledge the advice, but instead pushed through the double doors and into the assembly room. General Allenby scowled at Ares lack of respect and control.

The meeting room was stiff and tense. Maps full of push pins covered the walls. These walls surrounded a rectangular table. At each side of the table sat five chairs; all but one was occupied by a military uniform and gray hair, or a lack there of. General Allenby filled the empty seat on the right-hand side of General Evetts, who was at the head of the table.

He was stout for a man of his age, and he sat smugly with his hands folded by his chin. The wrinkled forehead above his bushy eyebrows showed his displeasure having an unwelcomed guest in their company.

There were no other chairs in the room. Ares stood at the end of the table opposite of General Evetts, who stared down the thick bridge of his nose at him for a solid minute. He saw an untrustworthy boy, not much bigger than a teenager in frame. Then he spoke in a deep, but aged voice that shook ever so slightly.

“While it is clear you are not welcome here, you have forced your way into this meeting. We know little about you or your cause, except that you are not from our world. You have killed one soldier, you won’t even remove your hood to reveal your face, and yet you still expect us to hear your request...” General Evetts held his arms widely over the table and gestured to the other generals. Each of them except General Allenby nodded and murmured amongst themselves in agreement.

Ares didn’t falter; his gaze, though unseen, remained locked on General Evetts.

The old men all bolstered each other with confidence as they humored themselves over the outrage of the guest. Their leader requested silence by raising his hand and called for a vote, “All willing to hear his request, raise your hand now.”

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The eleven old men babbled bureaucratically amongst themselves. Ares could only make out words such as “outlandish” and “ridiculous” as they all tried to speak over one another. Only General Allenby argued in favor of hearing Ares out.

Ares clenched his jaw in frustration. If they had no intention of hearing him, they wouldn’t have welcomed him in. He tolerated their bantering for mere seconds. Then he tilted his head back just enough to reveal a slight pale smile. When he spoke it was not loud, but it was aggressive; in just a step above a whisper he asked, “Do you bureaucratic fools think there is actually a choice?”

The whole room fell silent at the question. The fact that his voice was still finishing its decent into that of a man only made him more menacing. “Now, I need an aircraft; specifically, a cargo carrier, and I need it as quickly as possible.”

The generals were appalled at his attitude. The visitor before them could not be far beyond his teens and still he stood in front of them making demands and ignoring their voting process. He was either displaying confidence or arrogance; either way it exceeded anything they had ever encountered.

The break from debating was short lived. “It is settled then,” General Evetts said, “Your request is denied.”

“I thought I was being reasonable given your situation,” Ares laughed slightly from behind his hood, “you do understand your situation, don’t you?”

General Allenby tried to reason with the angered man at the head of the table, “General Evetts, you don’t understand what he is capable—”

The second in command was silenced immediately, “The answer is a resounding no, save General Allenby who clearly fears you more than we do.”

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“And rightly so,” Ares said, “I won’t lie, I’m in a bit of a desperate situation for the cargo carrier. I’m willing to exchange services, of course. I’ll lend you my skills and fight on the front lines of your war for a few days of your choosing. I haven’t cut loose in a while actually.”

“What matter is one soldier to us? The topic is not open for negotiation; now remove yourself from this room or we will have you removed!” General Evetts boomed.

Allenby looked nervously at Ares to see what he would do next.

“I played your political games the first time I came to you, but I can no longer afford to...” Ares paused his dialogue to sigh, but before he could resume General Evetts screamed, “Get the guards in here immediately and remove him from this base!”

Ares groaned, exasperated and spoke softly. The words were laced with an unmistakably lethal undertone, “A pity...” He shook his head, “General Allenby...you’re being promoted.” The assembly all looked around dumbfounded at how this young intruder thought he had such authority.

The sound of crackling filled the room and the feeling of static charge clung to everyone.

A grey glow emitted from the sleeves of Ares’ cloak. The murky light pulsed for a few seconds, and Ares brought his right hand around the left side of his rib cage. Then he swung his right arm forward with a flick of the wrist. The light from underneath the frayed sleeve dampened as a strange form flowed out from it.

*Fwum Fwum Fwum.* Whatever had left his sleeve split the space between Ares and General Evetts.

*Squelch!* It penetrated the upper left region of his uniform, slipped through his body and... *Thunk!* Burrowed itself into the wall behind him.

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Chairs scraped the wooden floor as the old men recoiled from the table in a delayed reaction to the violence. Blood splattered the wall behind General Evetts. He sat stunned and let out a wheezing breath, but no words could overcome his state of shock or the hole in his chest.

In his last seconds he observed the strange chain that had torn through him. It was not made of metal however, but instead strangely translucent links that emitted a glow of murky gray light. He tried to raise his hands to remove the object, but his consciousness was fading, and his limbs would not respond.

Every man at either side of the table was shaking in astonishment. The uniforms of the four men nearest to the victim were splashed from the wound. General Allenby forced his head to turn despite his muscles locking in fear.

He saw the triangular point of a chain whip embedded in the map that hung behind the now limp General Evetts. It pulsed in hue as if made of pure energy.

General Allenby turned back slowly to stare at the chain that was stretched taut before his eyes. Ghostly pale blobs of the material gathered at the surface of the chain and wiggle upward like beads of sweat that ignored the rules of gravity.

Ares gave a tug and the chain of energy was yanked back toward the sleeve it came from. With another squelch, it exited the body across the table. The men near General Evetts were once more streaked in red.

Each link of the chain whip weapon dissipated completely into the beads and hung momentarily in the air, casting a dingy light over the table. Blood gleamed under the luminous stream of Ares' weapon.

As quickly as it appeared, the substance was sucked back towards Ares' hand. It returned to him, a march of lanterns into the cave of his

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sleeve. His arms returned to his sides and he said grimly, “Now about that carrier...”

General Allenby cleared his throat as he gathered the courage to speak, “I...I think I, err, speak for everyone here when I say that we will have that for you by the end of this week.”

“Perfect...then you can let me know when you will be in need of my services on the day of my return.”

He *had* warned them that he had no options himself. Why hadn't they made this easy? Ares scowled and shook his head in amazement.

Through splattered spectacles, General Allenby watched as Ares turned his back on the blood-soaked table. His cloak fluttered just off the ground, hiding his feet and making him appear to float with a dark, powerful elegance through the doorway.

General Allenby was still too stunned to have any kind of feelings about his promotion. He just longed for the dangerous presence to leave the building. With his pulse reaching a critically high level and adrenaline rushing through his veins like it was flowing from an open faucet, time moved at a crawl. General Allenby winced until he witnessed the last traces of the black cloak exit the room through the red tint of his newly dyed lenses.

## CHAPTER SIX



### THE ASSIGNMENT

**T**hey drove through the military encampment at a pace so slow it made Eos cringe. He tapped his blackened fingers on his leg anxiously, but it gave him time to make out the scene through the dirt caked window. Rows of tents and shacks lined either side of the road in a dilapidated sense of order. The tents were all similar: made of some white cloth that was no longer the original, clean color. Food trucks were at the end of certain rows. The feeble people of the desert camp lined up at the window of each one. Many had a bandana over their face to protect themselves from the intensity of the desert.

“What is all of this?” Eos asked, dreading what they were driving into.

Lieutenant Jacobs glared at Eos. “After society collapsed from the EMP’s and the west coast sank, there were local survivors as well as the refugees who had followed the new coast line,” he grumbled

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matter-of-factly, “There was nowhere to move them, and resources were scarce across the entire country. So, they became,” he searched for the word, “...laborers for the base. It...functions like a small city. Right now, we’re going through D-Block.” He snapped with the last words as if he found himself saying too much.

They passed row after row of tents. Eos pressed his hand against the glass as he squinted through the gritty window. He no longer wished to be in the truck, but he didn’t want to leave it to meet General Braxton either.

Quickly, he pulled his hand away.

With every rotation of the tires, they came closer to two large buildings that sat side by side at the far edge of the base. Both were multiple stories high and painted a peachy beige so that they nearly blended in with the surroundings. They looked like the watchmen of the camp, peering carefully through their window eyes at each refugee.

The vehicle pulled up to the one on the right.

Eos looked at the other building. “What’s in that one?” He felt a sort of tingling in his skin as he stood in the shadow of it. It must have been the nervous anticipation, but he didn’t feel right. It was as if the red energy was bubbling under his skin and trying to come out.

Lieutenant Jacobs made a small spitting sound. “Pfft. I don’t have the clearance to go in there. Some sort of research for restoring the land. I overheard the geek that runs the show there talking about it once, but they’re real hush hush. Sounded like digging. The weirdo said they were boring... into the ground...the hyper bore ah...or super boring.” He shook his head frustrated at the thought. “Ha super boring is right. Too much smart talk for me. Now no more questions from the children.” He dismissed Eos hastily.

Eos glared back and folded his arms.

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The three were led inside the building and immediately seated on a bench in front of a secretarial room. Without so much as a second glance, the Lieutenant stepped away as if he had simply delivered mail.

“Wait! Are we just supposed to sit here until General Braxton calls for us?” Maxima asked.

Jacobs called back unconcerned, “Getting you here was my business, Major Clark will be here in a minute to take you further. I’ve earned myself a shower.” He disappeared down the hallway.

“Good! I didn’t like him much,” said Glenn sharply. Then he looked to Eos and Maxima seriously. He cleared his throat as if about to deliver a speech. “Listen,” he said trying to sound confident, “I’ve...I’ve come to like you two just a bit. You’re my...er...family, and no matter what General Braxton has to say—we fight to stay together.”

Maxima pulled him in for hug.

“That’s right we’re family,” Eos agreed.

“I see I’m interrupting a touching moment.” A shadow passed over them. They looked up to see that another military uniform had appeared. He looked over them with dark brown eyes and thin, expressive eyebrows. His coffee colored hair was combed back into messy spikes, but a few long strands still fell across his forehead.

He ran his hand through his hair, threw his head back and laughed, “Sorry about that! I’m Major Clark, Bruce Clark!” He said lightly and stuck out a hand. They all shook hands and introduced themselves.

“You’ll have to excuse me. I’m supposed to take you to General Braxton, but I haven’t been here long myself. I’m from the Northern Branch; I was called down here yesterday.” He smiled at them slightly embarrassed and stroked his chin where whiskers would have been had he been back at the Northern Branch. “I’m not much for military formalities as you can see. It’s pretty relaxed up at North Branch

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compared with everyone here.” He gestured all around himself with open arms.

“Good to see there is at least one friendly face around here,” Glenn said relieved.

The major nodded to Glenn in agreement. “You know, I’ve heard rumors about what the three of you do for the sector, but it wasn’t until I was briefed today that I learned what you’re really capable of. I’m having trouble believing it all, to tell you the truth. It’s quite a shame that General Braxton keeps you a secret from the public—you should be recognized for the heroes you are. Then again, maybe it’s best for your safety that no one knows what you can do. I’m just curious what Braxton has planned for all of us.”

“Major Clark, why *did* General Braxton send you to meet us?” Eos asked.

“I don’t know what’s going on myself. So, I guess we’ll find out together!” He laughed again with a hint of apprehension. He led them through the building, “The bright side of this is that I get to stop by home and see my family before I go back north. I haven’t seen my beautiful wife or son in months!” Major Clark closed his eyes, imagining seeing them again.

Maxima kept the conversation rolling as she took two steps for every one of his, “How old’s your son?”

A strange look spread across Major Clark’s face as they walked. He blushed and let a big grin take over. “James is turning four in a month and he’s just so smart. He’s already learning to read! And don’t even get me started on my wife...”

Maxima stifled a giggle along with Glenn and Eos. It was clear that they had found the Major’s favorite topic of conversation. “Why’s that Major?” Maxima provoked him further.

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Despite their new companion's light-hearted spirit, Eos couldn't help but feel fear surrounding him. Every stride closer to their destination turned the conversation further into background noise. Eos could smell the danger hanging in the air. Whatever General Braxton had planned, Eos knew he wouldn't like it.

"She's an angel; I have a picture of them if you want to see!" He didn't wait for their response. Instead, he rustled in his pocket for a wallet photo as they neared the opposite side of the building. When he found it, he stopped their progress to General Braxton completely and flashed it before their eyes, showing off his treasure.

Maxima awed over the picture of Major Clark holding his wife and infant son in a big hug while they all smiled for the camera. "Your son is adorable Major Clark!"

"Isn't he?" He blushed and turned away to put the photo back in his pocket.

A cloud passed by and stopped the sun from lighting the hallway.

"Well, looks like the fun is over." His voice lowered, and his face grew serious. "The door at the end there is where we'll find the General."

A solemn mood grew over the group.

They all approached a pair of intricately engraved white doors that were watched by two guards who stood stiffly at attention. They gave a crisp salute as Major Clark passed before them. He saluted back before waving them off with his hand and said exasperatedly, "At ease!"

He addressed Eos and Maxima before he opened the doors, "I'm supposed to take Glenn in alone first. There's a bench there," he pointed a few feet down the hall, "and in the room right next to it should be some snacks. Hopefully this doesn't take long, but we'll see." He didn't sound confident about the last bit.

## THE ASSIGNMENT

Eos and Maxima obeyed and helped themselves to dry sandwiches and water. Eos nibbled on the bland food. Each bite became harder to swallow.

Then they waited.

Eos impatiently shifted through every possible position one could reasonably sit in. A clock on the opposite wall ticked, rhythmically announcing that the dreaded moment was nearing. The minute hand made a full circle and Eos could take it no longer. He jumped to his feet before Maxima could protest and charged directly towards the doors with a quick choppy pace.

He bumped straight into guards who were well built and a few inches over six feet tall. He tried to push his way through, but they ended up each taking hold of one arm and escorting him back to the bench. Maxima snickered at him, but her amusement was short lived. She brought her scarf to her lips and held it there.

They both sighed and listened to the clock tick.

*Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick.*

Each stroke became more maddening as they awaited news of their fate.

The doors finally opened, and Glenn walked out. His face was pale, and he came to them stricken with worry. "I'm not supposed to talk about anything until after he has his turn with you, but General Braxton is sending me away to get parts for a while. Nothing permanent, but things are looking bad; tread carefully in there!" He warned.

Leaning through the doorway, Major Clark called them in. The bubbly personality that had entered General Braxton's office had now faded. As they passed through the doorway, the sunlight caused them to squint. It blared through a window that spanned the entire back of the room. General Braxton sat in a swivel chair with his back turned

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to Eos and Maxima. He was seated with his elbows on each armrest and his hands folded, thinking pensively. The view he stared at through the enormous window was a bizarre bay panorama. The waters of the Pacific Ocean glimmered between chunks of shattered land all the way out to where the sun beat on the horizon.

There were only two seats before General Braxton's desk. Eos and Maxima moved the chairs together and Major Clark gestured for them to sit. Maxima smoothed her pants and placed her hands underneath her legs, squeezed safely between herself and the chair.

Eos gripped the arm rests tightly.

Major Clark simply stood against a wall to their side.

Tension buzzed in the air like a swarm of gnats that everyone except General Braxton wanted to swat away frantically.

Finally, the General addressed the siblings. "It's been a while you two. I haven't seen you both since you were what...about fourteen?" he paused forebodingly, "I'm sorry it has to be on such unfortunate terms." The swivel chair turned. Dark eyes dialed in on the brother and sister from above prominent cheek bones, the left one scarred with a light pink streak from his first encounter with Eos. His black hair was combed perfectly back. His nose was large and squared; it perched above a thick mustache that ran across his lips and ended turning down in sharp points just below his mouth.

Maxima, not eager for a showdown, tried to bypass the posturing. "How bad is it?"

The two siblings leaned closer together and braced for whatever came next.

"Well, Glenn and my team have done a great deal of estimating over the past couple of days. You've created one hectic situation around here... I'll admit you two accomplished your goal. If we ration the energy correctly, we might be able to stretch it for three or four

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months before falling back on oil entirely.” The stern, square jaw was interrupted.

“We did it! That should be plenty of time to fix the generator.” Maxima exhaled and bounced in her seat at the thought of four months without having to power the machine. The celebration was premature, however.

General Braxton tilted his head down and boomed in sharp contradiction, “*Wrong*. The majority of parts needed to fix the generator would have to be imported; many of them from the European Sector. If you two didn’t know, they are attempting to invade our sector from Canada as we speak!” He punctuated his angry statement by slamming his fist against his desk with a heavy *thunk!*

The sibling flinched. Eos took a deep breath, clenched the leather arm rests as hard as he could, then released them and stood up. “Listen, we’re truly sorry for the destruction we’ve caused, but we’ve provided you energy for almost ten years. There has to be a way around this. There must be some way to fix the generator!”

“With an entire team of workers, and assuming we have the parts, the repairs are estimated to take six months minimum; likely a full year,” General Braxton contorted his face in frustration, “You have just caused the greatest energy crisis since The United States fell apart. Our survival is so completely dependent on that machine that when word gets out about what happened...the European Sector will make a huge push into the continent. That’s the best case. Other continental Alliances may follow their example!” His voice ended in a full and vicious yell.

Eos shifted a foot forward and calmly replied, “While all that may be true, your dependency was on us just as much as that generator...*we* were an imperfect solution to your problem. We’ve spent years of our

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lives working hard for you! It's because of us that this crisis has been held at bay."

General Braxton opened his mouth with a snarl as if he was about to go on the attack again but thought better of it. "That is true," he regained composure, "And for that reason there will be no punishment." He let the false sense of relief settle before striking, "Though, as property of the sector—you two must be given new assignments. I wish I didn't have to separate you, but it can't be avoided."

In a slow primal tone Eos impulsively said, "We won't be separated and we're no one's property!" He took a step towards the desk.

"You are exactly what I tell you to be, *boy!*" General Braxton spat the last word out like a nasty taste in his mouth. He stood as if trying to match Eos, placing his hands on the desk and leaning across it savagely.

Eos moved closer, almost touching the desk. Maxima tried pulling at his arm from the chair to caution him from anything further, but it didn't work.

"Without us, do you really think you would still be in power? You created an illusion for the people, but we have provided for *you!*"

Major Clark moved off the wall knowing that escalation was inevitable.

Eos' heart was thumping so loud, he could barely hear anything else as he shook with rage.

General Braxton leaned across further so that he was nose to nose with Eos. They were so close they could feel each other's hot breath seethe out in struggle for domination.

Mementos, pens, and papers flew from the desk. General Braxton had swiped his bearlike hand across the surface as he lost control and

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brought the hand up into an accusing point that ended pressing against Eos' chest like the tip of a blade.

“You provided *me?*...*You* provided *me?*” the General repeated the sentence twice in disbelief. “I gave you a life! You would be two abandoned children that no one would have taken in, until I came along.”

Eos locked eye contact with Braxton and moved forward a few more inches in a show of defiance until the finger dug into his chest. “You only came along because you wanted our powers. You needed us; not the other way around!”

“Know your place boy! Imagine what the people would have done to you out of fear...it would have been a witch hunt!”

Eos thought back to how they had feared him and his sister, even their foster mother. He remembered how they were alienated because others couldn't understand, but back then neither did he nor Maxima. Even now, he couldn't truly say that he understood his power.

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A green eye peaked through a singed hole in the wall. Through the smoking drywall, he saw Eos standing no more than four feet tall and staring back with his mouth limply hanging open. He gazed incredibly at the hole that had been created.

The boy, peering through the wall at Eos and spoke frantically, “What did you do?”

He rounded the wall to join Eos and Maxima in the living room. Maxima stood next to her brother with a pea sized energy sphere in hand, but her attention was focused on the wall.

The three children all gazed at the same charred space.

“What *is that*, Maxima?” The third boy asked.

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“I...I don’t know,” her young voice whispered full of wonder.

The boy looked back and forth between the hole and the blue sphere in Maxima’s hand. “Cool!” He laughed.

A motherly voice screamed from the other side of the house, “Jace! What was that noise?” She entered the room and joined the three in gawking just before she comprehended the destruction of her wall. Her anger exploded.

“Who did this—” She noticed Maxima’s glowing hand. “What is that!?”

She screamed, frightened by the supernatural glow.

Her foster mother’s scream startled Maxima and she threw her hands out to reject the strange indigo light by pushing it away from her body. It flew into the wall with a small detonation that ruptured the plaster, rendering a second hole.

Everyone jumped. Jace and his mother backed away from Eos and Maxima.

Maxima looked across the room apologetically. Her big blue eyes were watering. The five year old girl knew she was in trouble for this. “I’m sorry Mrs. Lori. I didn’t mean to...”

“Jace, go get Mr. Clevin from next door.” She ordered her son while she looked with trembling fear at the two children she had taken into her home. They had caused few problems during the first few years they had stayed with her, but she had only done it for the copper haired man whom had swayed her so easily with his crazy, yet gentlemanly words. Only a few months he said, but he had still not returned.

“Aizo, *what are* these kids you left with me with?” She asked herself as Jace ran out the front door. He returned seconds later, following a heavy-set man with a pistol in hand.

“Mom, he brought his gun!” Jace yelled.

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Mr. Clevin barged through the door.

“I heard the explosion Lori and was on my way over when I ran into Jace,” he bellowed.

Lori spoke uneasily, “I don’t think the gun is necessary, but Maxima...show us that...thing that you did one more time.” She stepped away as she said it.

“But, I don’t want to get in any more trouble,” Maxima cried.

Eos interjected, “She didn’t mean to do it.”

“You won’t be in any more trouble. Just show Mr. Clevin what you did.”

A dense crackling began.

Maxima timidly produced another sphere with rounded shoulders hunched over her creation.

Her hands shook, held close to her. She was unsure what it was, but she knew what it could do.

Mr. Clevin was in disbelief, “What in the...”

Maxima was mesmerized with wonder and fear at what she held. It vibrated enthusiastically and rotated in her hand. Unexpectedly, it swelled to the size of a marble.

She shrieked and jerked her hand back. The blue energy dropped toward her feet.

Eos hopped back instinctively to dodge the small explosion.

*Boom!*

This one was stronger than the two that had caused holes in the wall. The smell of burnt fiber rose from the blackened carpet. Maxima stood at the center of a miniature crater.

Mr. Clevin let out a cowardly yelp and raised his gun towards the abnormal little girl. Tears poured from her face.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Lori!” she said between sobs. Eos took hold of his sister’s hand as they faced the barrel of Mr. Clevin’s gun. They

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looked into the eyes of the two adults staring at them like hideous fiends. Their panic and horror were projected onto the children, and for the first time the siblings felt something worse than the feeling of not belonging—they were feared. They were looked down on like dangerous beasts.

Lori was paralyzed, but Jace stepped in front of the gun.

“It was an accident, don’t hurt them!” the ten year old begged for the protection of his new brother and sister.

“Jace, get back!” his mother shouted.

Mr. Clevin spoke, “This was my day off,” he grumbled, “Lori stay in my house, I’ll call down to the base and have some of my men come to figure out what ever this is! I’ll be right back with the military police. I’ll keep you safe from these little...monsters.”

Eos didn’t hear Mr. Clevin. He and Maxima simply felt the isolation as they stared down the distance of the room. It wasn’t a distance of feet or inches...it was measured in degrees of humanity and the hostility that dribbled out of the frightened adults. It was a distance that separated Eos and Maxima from nearly everyone they would meet.

Eos knew—they had to run!

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Eos looked across that distance, now in the form of Braxton’s outstretched arm and a finger pointed reproachfully at him. It dug into his chest in a primitive, animalistic struggle to overcome that distance for the sake of control.

“You’ve been using us!” Eos yelled, pressing his nose against General Braxton’s.

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Suddenly Major Clark was between the two of them. He grabbed a fistful of Eos' shirt and forcefully sat him back down next to Maxima. She was in disbelief at what Eos had just done. With wide eyes of bewilderment, the major whispered to Eos as he pushed him into the chair, "What are you doing? Stop bumping chests with him. It'll end worse for everyone." He turned to face the desk. "Sir, please. Let's all regain our calm."

General Braxton's pupils vibrated. He was frustrated. He needed control over these two.

Making sure his hair was perfectly in place, he sat back in his chair with stiff posture. "You don't really think you have a say do you? You have the skills I need, but don't think you have leverage...you're too young." His voice was now steady. "Your powers are dangerous," he put a finger to his scar as he remembered how the boy had put a blemish on his face, "I don't have them, but neither does Glenn and I believe bullets affect everyone just the same."

Maxima squeezed Eos hand tightly.

Braxton continued, "Maxima will be safe here with Glenn. They will work on restoring a power source. In the meantime, *boy*, you will be escorted by Major Clark to the North Branch. The North American Sector needs your powers defending our border from the European Sector's invasion."

A disheartened look fell over Major Clark. He didn't want to have any part in this.

Maxima had to stop Eos from getting to his feet again.

"Absolutely not! Don't separate me from Maxima and Glenn!" Eos failed to have any sense of calm. He would not be separated from his family.

A sigh came from behind the desk. "This is becoming tiresome. Answer me one question, boy. Where is Glenn?"

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“Right outside the doors I’d guess,” Eos said.

“You guess? Well perhaps he is and perhaps he isn’t. Either way he is definitely surrounded by soldiers who answer to me. I have no desire to make things violent and messy, but if you want to keep this little *family* of yours safe...then step in line.” General Braxton had stopped bumping chests and made his ultimatum.

Maxima was startled. She cried out, “You wouldn’t harm Glenn. You need him just as much as you need us.”

A snort of contempt was the reply. “Men like him are easy enough to come by. I have a whole team that could replace him at a second’s notice.” Whether the statement was true or not, Maxima couldn’t tell.

Once again, Major Clark stepped in. He looked at the siblings with sympathetic eyes and stroked his jaw line in a pained manner. “Eos, I understand you want to stay with Glenn and Maxima, but General Braxton isn’t leaving you a choice. You don’t want them in the war zone with you. They’ll be safer here.”

The tension that had been in the air fell as everyone understood that the assignment was final.

Through the window, the sky was painted shades of dark purple and gloomy indigo that overlapped and reflected off the extraordinary bay. Eos was powerless and frustrated. The view of the shattered coast only made him think of separation.

Maxima hugged Eos tightly.

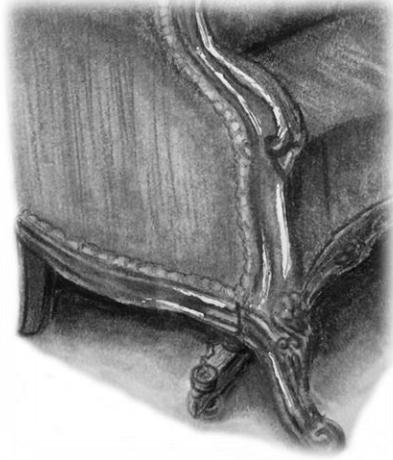
She reassured him gently so that only they could hear, “He’s right Eos. You know I don’t want to be separated. I don’t want you to go, but this is the best option we have for now. I’ll be safe with Glenn. When the time is right, we’ll make our move. Until then we pretend to step in line.”

Her words gave Eos confidence.

## THE ASSIGNMENT

“Only until then,” He agreed and nodded reluctantly. His finger found its way to the scar under his eye and he touched it tenderly as they separated the embrace.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



### SKIPPING STONES

**A** labyrinth of concrete tunnels connected various buildings in the network of the underground desert hideout. Luminescent stones were strung along the walls sparingly, only lighting the paths well-traveled, and only frequently enough so that one did not get lost in the dark. Most of the rebels passed by these lights every day, assuming they were some sort of electrical light source. A few select members of the organization knew better.

Bellia took soft steps through the tunnels as if swimming effortlessly from light to light. The stones lit her fair skin and sharply elegant features as she passed each one; she knew their truth.

She followed the string of lights until she arrived at the sunken, abandoned library. Aisles of dusty yellowed books surrounded her as she strolled from shelf to shelf with one of the glowing stones in her hand. A lantern at the other end of the library let her know that Zolo

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was pouring over books as he often did. The boy spent more time in the library anyone else.

Bellia found herself at the same shelf she often did. She pulled out her favorite book and ran her fingers over the creases of the well-worn spine before carrying it to a nearby table. Rather than take it back to better light outside the library, she sat down and told herself: she'd just start a few pages before going back to her room.

The peaceful quiet of the library surrounded her so that only the delicate sound of paper turning kept time.

The flickering light of Zolo's lantern three tables over caught Bellia's attention once and made her realize that she was fifty pages into the story. She was soon lost again in the words.

*Slam!*

A tattooed hand, littered with rings made of ink and x shapes over the knuckles, came down with a clap over the open pages of Bellia's book.

She jumped in her chair and whipped her head up to see who had startled her. Before her eyes made it to the gaunt face, her brain processed who the tattoos belonged to.

"I thought I'd find you here." Tessio's voice cracked apart the peaceful atmosphere of the library.

Bellia sighed sharply. "Well you found me and managed to interrupt my read." She moved strands of platinum-blonde hair from her eyes so that she could see every slight movement of the man.

Tessio kept his hand on the book and leaned in over Bellia, uncomfortably close.

"What kind of *tramp persuasion* are you using on Ares?"

Bellia was taken aback. "Excuse me? I must have misheard your foul mouth."

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“Ares doesn’t need the distraction of fixing your mistakes. Keep away from him.” Tessio echoed loudly.

Bellia slammed the cover of the book down, closing Tessio’s hand in between the pages.

He stifled a squeal and pulled his hand from the book, massaging it.

“I was just leaving with my book, but I’ll have you know that I never asked Ares to do anything for me. Whatever he may be doing is of his own will.” Bellia said.

Tessio glared. “Right, like I’d believe a hostage like you. Probably trying to distract and undermine any chance you get. Must figure tramping around Ares is your best shot—but I’m warning you now. He can’t afford any *distractions like you*.”

Bellia tucked the book under her arm. “Hostage? How dare you? I joined the Mitad. It was my decision.”

Tessio leaned down to Bellia and mocked her. “Oh, daddy was about to be overthrown because of your decision and it was of your own will?”

Bellia squinted back at him. “I needed a teacher—not that it’s your business. When my powers manifested...I was...” She lost a second to shocked reminiscing. “I was hurting people with out meaning to. I was making people... disappear. Lord Vistomus has taught me how control what I can do.”

“Bellia the siren, making people disappear. Whisking them away. *Tcbb*.” Tessio hissed and fluttered his fingers to mock a magical disappearing.

“If you don’t lose the bad attitude toward me, Tessio, you’ll be the next one I spirit away.” Bellia stepped forward.

Tessio retreated backward, moving to the edge of the stone’s light on the table. “Don’t threaten me with your *little Miss Gifted* powers.

## SKIPPING STONES

Let's just try to focus more on the mission, yeah?" He walked out of the white light of the stone before another word could be said.

Bellia's head stung with frustration. She clutched her book furiously as she turned to leave.

She found Zolo standing behind her with his lantern raised.

"Why do you put up with that guy?" Zolo asked. His golden-brown hair shone as he held the lantern up. He was younger than Ares, but not by much. Bellia saw him often in the library, though they had only spoken a few times.

"Zolo." Bellia said, surprised. "I...well he works for Ares. Ares puts up with him, so I try to as well."

"The guy's a mad dog. Don't give him the attention."

Bellia smiled. "Right. Next time I'll remember that."

"Reading your favorite again?" Zolo asked. He noted the familiar cover in her hand. "Why is it always that one?"

Bellia blushed. "Girlish fancy I suppose. It also...reminds me of home. My father had five daughters and no sons. And I was his favorite, just like Elizabeth is in the book. It's about class, and reputation, and love. You should give it a try."

Zolo shook his head. "I don't have time to read things like that. I'm trying to learn as much as I can." There was moment of pause. Bellia thought to leave, but Zolo said, "Are you really a hostage?"

"It's...it's not exactly like that." She said skittishly and searched for a change of subject. "What are you reading?"

"Me? I'm studying medical books."

Bellia walked over to his pile of texts. Pages of sketched anatomy littered the table and—Zolo stepped in front of the table quickly. "Boring stuff to you I'm sure."

Shrugging, Bellia said, "Not exactly my choice of recreational reading. Why study so much?"

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“I want to be able to help people. It’ll be useful for our injured comrades.”

Bellia peaked over his shoulder. She thought she had seen—Zolo side stepped in front of her again.

He stammered awkwardly. “You, uhhh, you said you had five siblings? I had two foster siblings. We were really close for a while, but they were...different. They didn’t stick around long.”

Once more, Bellia tried to peak at the books. She asked while doing so, “Was your father a doctor or something like that?”

Zolo didn’t answer immediately. “No. My mom said he died of a sickness before I was born.”

“Oh.” Bellia stopped trying to move around him. “I didn’t mean to...I’m sorry.”

“I never knew him. It’s no big deal.” Zolo looked down solemnly. His lantern cast a long shadow over the table.

“Fathers are difficult. They—what *is that?*” Bellia asked. She pointed behind Zolo at an open book and an unlit stone on the table.

“Nothing!” Zolo waved his hands as he denied.

“Oh—that’s not nothing. You shouldn’t have that.” Bellia tilted her head with suspicion as she recognized what she was seeing. “That shouldn’t even exist here.” She looked wide eyed upon a book that she knew from her homeland. It explained the stones and technique of lighting the glass-like ones. The translucent rock on the book was one of them. It shouldn’t have even been possible for Zolo to get ahold of a book like that.

“Please don’t tell anyone, Bellia. No one is supposed to know. I was worried enough when Tessio showed up.”

Bellia gave the benefit of the doubt to her library companion. “Who gave that to you then?”

## SKIPPING STONES

After hesitating Zolo said, “I’ll only tell you because I know he trusts you.” He breathed deeply and braced to reveal, “Ares gave it to me.”

“Ares?” Bellia was surprised. Ares was reckless at times, but only in selfish pursuits. It didn’t make sense. “He...must have his reasons.”

“I thought the same thing.” Zolo agreed.

“So, you know then?”

Zolo nodded. “I’ve known for a long time about people who can do things like you.”

Bellia picked up the lifeless stone from the table. She held it carefully in her thin hands.

There was shimmer of violet light from her palm.

The light swirled at the base of the stone momentarily.

Then the stone shone bright. It lit the table with a brilliance that made the lantern look like a flickering red shadow in comparison.

Bellia held it up and said, “There’s a whole world beyond the one you know.”

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The shattered bay at Sires was the edge of the world as Eos knew it. There had been more to the world here, but it was submerged deep in the ocean, broken apart irreparably. Now, Eos’ life was being torn apart in the same location where the old world had fallen.

“Yeah, I found him. Eos is down by the water.” Glenn gestured around the building. It was time to leave Sires, but Eos had slipped away. General Braxton granted them one more day together as they traveled to Rapid City, South Dakota to stay with Major Clark’s family.

Major Clark had been quick to volunteer his place to keep the trio together a day longer. From there, Glenn and Maxima would go to an

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undisclosed location for the generator parts and Eos would head for the North Military Branch. Maxima had politely protested to Major Clark that she didn't want to intrude, but he insisted that his wife was lonely with him away so often. "The more company the better," he had replied with a smile in his happy tone.

*Bwoom!* An explosion shook Sires and could be heard across the entire area.

Glenn, Maxima, and Major Clark circled around the beige building they had spent the day in. Down on the shore they saw the outline of Eos. He was illuminated by a bright red sphere that he held at his side and the setting sun on the other end of the bay.

The sphere grew quickly. After a few minutes, there was a swirling mass of beautiful crimson light churning in his hand. Eos let out a long, furious yell that echoed across the water. Simultaneously he brought his right arm back and hurled the energy sphere into the bay of tiny islands. The form flew through the sky in a brilliant display of color, like a splotch of paint to be added to the sunset. It flew with furious velocity, until gravity eventually brought it crashing down with an explosive impact.

*Bwooom!* Water and chunks of earth were displaced into the air hundreds of feet from the shore. The three watching Eos could feel the concussion rattle their chests. Major Clark's jaw dropped in astonishment. "What an incredible...I've never seen anything like it..." His voice fell in admiration.

Maxima covered her mouth with a cupped hand in surprise. She had never seen Eos' let loose his rage to this extent.

It wasn't more than three minutes before another sphere of energy was released from his hand. The entirety of the base once again heard Eos' fury!

## SKIPPING STONES

Maxima called out to her brother with a mixture of worry and annoyance. “Don’t over exert yourself so soon! I don’t want you to pass out again.”

Major Clark had to put out an arm to stop Maxima from sprinting to Eos. He looked at Maxima and Glenn confidently. “Let me talk to him first. He’s too strong headed and too familiar with you two to listen right now.”

He walked down the beach nonchalantly. There was enough time for Eos to heave his arm out once more and cause another explosion before Major Clark reached him.

Major Clark didn’t engage Eos at first; he simply stood by his side and silently observed the sunset.

Maxima tried to go to her brother, but it was Glenn who stopped her this time. “Let’s wait. Give Major Clark a chance. We’ll see if he can calm Eos down...Plus it gives it’ll let us get a better read on what kind of man he is.”

“Not a bad view,” Major Clark continued to gaze out at the ocean before he continued. Eos glared at him, knowing he was trying to be calmed down. The sun was almost down, and Eos’ next sphere was a drop consumed in the orange that caged the horizon.

“Tough break,” Major Clark stroked his chin thoughtfully, “You know, I hate saying my goodbyes too. It’s hard... hard as hell to part with loved ones. I know; I feel the same way every time I have to leave my beautiful family.”

Eos gave up forming his next projectile. Sweat beaded up around his forehead and he fell onto his knees. His eyes wavered as if too heavy to keep open. Finally, Eos said quivering raw voice, “It’s not fair. We’re not his slaves! I swear when I get the chance—”

“Slow down. The feelings you have for General Braxton is a pretty mutual thing among most people including myself, but let’s not say

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anything impulsive about my boss... At least not around here. Don't worry he'll get what's coming to him someday soon. There's quite a large group of dissent against his dictatorship. Shhhhh... that last part is our little secret for now." He winked at Eos reassuringly.

Eos cracked the tiniest of smiles but hid it immediately. The two looked silently at the day's last rays of light with a new bond forming between them.

Major Clark continued, "That's quite an impressive power you have. I can see why General Braxton would want you to help up north. You'd be a great asset to our cause."

Eos picked up a round stone off the ground and tossed it towards the water. It skipped a few times across the surface before stopping. "It's not my cause," Eos retorted in a low voice.

"I wouldn't say that. The North American Sector is your home. It's being invaded, and you don't feel the least bit concerned?"

"It sure hasn't felt like much of a home. In fact, I'm not exactly sure what a home even feels like if I'm being honest. I've been used for as long as I can remember. It's been the three of us vs. the world for most of our lives," Eos said as he skipped another stone.

"It's rough isn't it?" Major Clark asked. He picked up a stone and skipped it too.

"What is?"

"Not being in control."

Eos thought a moment and agreed with a sigh, "Yeah."

The silence was a stark contrast to the bursts of Eos' temper.

A comforting hand was placed on Eos' shoulder. "I know me saying that doesn't help much with pain you must be feeling."

Eos looked away, too stubborn to admit his pain.

"I used to be like you, you know. Lost and frustrated with the way things were. That's why my friends and I joined the military—we don't

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care for the Sector's leadership, but we're working our ways up the ranks to change things! You need to decide what you want. Make your own path, find some friends to travel it with you, and when the moment is right... you make your move! You have to be smart about these kinds of things though. With skills like yours," he laughed for the first time in the conversation, "I hope I'm there when you change the world." Eos looked at him and revealed a crooked smile as the wind from the bay blew his dark hair around wildly.

"Why are you telling me this? I'm not going to change much of anything."

"Because you need to know that you don't have to fight your way through everything alone. You can have friends and allies to rely on. A power like yours makes changing the world a certainty. Defy Braxton or provide power for the entire Sector...you see, the decisions before you are huge and you're still only seventeen. You may not realize it, but you've already changed the world for all the people you provided electricity." He patted Eos on the back firmly and turned to walk back up the beach. "Now come on. You have to be the strong one for your sister through this."

A new sense of cathartic confidence came over Eos. "Thanks Major," he said with a little hesitation.

"Don't mention it. Now hurry it up! The sooner we get in that truck the sooner we can get to real beds, a warm meal, and my wife!"

Eos followed him back from the edge of the bay. He glanced at the bayside of the second building in Sires as he walked. It was entirely unremarkable from the one they had been in except for the loading docks with metal rolling doors that were all painted an ugly green and plastered with the number '4'. After one last look at the shattered bay, Eos joined Maxima, Glenn, and Major Clark. The entire group piled

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into another military Humvee along with a pair of escort drivers and a second car following them for when they split up from Rapid City.

Another long car ride began. This one would be overnight. Eos stared out the window, bored, while forming miniature energy spheres in his right hand. With his blackened palm face up, he drew his fingers together. His hand remained like this until the moment a flash of light appeared along with the crackling of manifestation, and the energy swirled in his semi-closed hand. Then he flicked his fingers apart letting the red energy sift through his fingers like a descending fog that faded into wisps as it glided over the floor of the truck. The driver jumped each time he heard the sound, but Major Clark had his head turned the entire time to watch the process with incredible attention and the curiosity of a child.

Maxima, however, was not as entranced.

“Eos after all the energy you used tonight, you’re going to make yourself faint again!”

It was true. Eos was feeling the exhaustion set in. Each display of energy was chipping away at his stamina. He gave in and Major Clark sulked when his entertainment ended.

Eos looked at the black mark that covered his hand and twisted around his forearm. He turned his hand over, analyzing as if it contained the answers he was looking for. It, of course, did not. Eos sighed with discontent and squeezed his hand into a determined fist. He resolved now more than ever, that he *would* clear up the mystery that surrounded his and Maxima’s past, but first he would reunite with his sister. These were the thoughts that filled his head as his eye lids came down and squeezed the light from his vision until he was in a deep sleep.

“Eos, wake up. We’re almost at Major Clark’s house,” Maxima nudged him. He woke up from his second nap during the drive. It was

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late into the morning and the sun was shining over the city. They drove through a suburban area. The sight was far different from what Eos and Maxima were used to seeing. Cookie cutter houses lined the roads, giving the area a cozy feel.

Major Clark gave them a tour guide like speech, “During the war, people fled from many suburban areas like this to refugee areas for supplies and to avoid the looters and anarchists. By the time everything settled down and General Braxton established control, many neighborhoods were left completely abandoned. Their previous owners were either dead or displaced and had abandoned the houses forever. These homes were distributed to the families of soldiers or people with skills the new government deemed useful.”

“And this one is where we live!” Major Clark said with great joy. They pulled up alongside a house that didn’t look much different from the others. It blended in with its brick exterior and green yard. They all got out of the truck and stretched. The trucks drove off and Major Clark explained, “The drivers are staying in a barracks on the other side of town. They’ll pick us up in the morning.”

The front door of the house opened, and a little messy haired blond boy came stumbling across the lawn screaming, “Daddy!”

Major Clark swept him up and lifted him into the air. “How’s my genius boy doing?” Major Clark asked as he spun his giggling son through the air. Then he tucked James at his side and made his way to a woman about four inches shorter than himself with shoulder length blonde hair and gentle green eyes. “Maria,” He cooed as he leaned in for a kiss, “You’re looking more beautiful than ever my darling!”

From over Major Clark’s shoulder James stuck out his tongue scrunched his face to show his disgust. Glenn and Maxima laughed at the boy’s disapproval.

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“Maria, James say hello to Eos, Maxima, and Glenn,” he introduced the guests, “They’ll be staying with us tonight.” James waved, but quickly ran off.

Maria smiled apologetically, “Usually he’s not that shy. Come inside, I’ve made some dinner; it’s in the oven. I’ve even got a pecan pie for dessert.”

Eos stomach grumbled at the mention of food. “Please, I’m starving Mrs. Clark!”

They were taken into the kitchen and sat at a tablecloth covered dinner table. As everyone sat down, James came running into the room with his hands full. He tugged at Maxima’s pant leg and looked up at her with wide innocent eyes, “Miss. Maxima...will you play with me?” He held up two toy cars.

“Not so shy after all,” Maxima smiled.

After dinner everyone sat around the table and talked for hours. Maria brought a pecan pie to the table that made everyone’s mouth water. It was perfectly glazed and had chocolate drizzled over it in splattered perfection. “Besides being absolutely beautiful, Maria is quite an amazing cook!” Major Clark bragged.

She sat down and explained as she served the pie, “Usually things like butter, sugar, and chocolate are hard to come by, but thanks to Bruce being promoted to major recently, we’re able to have things like that from time to time.”

Everyone thanked her, inhaled their pie like it was their last meal, and complimented Mrs. Clark. Maxima smirked slyly. “We’ve been stuck with Glenn’s food for so long, I completely forgot what a well-cooked meal tastes like!”

Everyone was amused except Glenn.

“Laugh it up,” he sulked and began waving around his fork with a piece of pie still on it. “You should be grateful...my cooking skills are

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on par with my engineering skills—world class! Your taste buds are just poorly developed!” He immediately glanced at Mrs. Clark and stumbled over his words as he waved his fork more wildly, “Not to say...err...that I can do better than you...just that they undervalue my,” he swung the fork back at himself quickly.

The piece of pie was sent flying from the tip of the fork and the chocolate covered piece soared into his face with a *splosh*. He tried to wipe it off but only managed to smear it over more of his beard until it appeared like he’d been struck by the entire pie.

Major Clark stifled his laughter as he passed napkins across the table, but Eos was bent over nearly spewing out a mouthful of water.

Maxima raised one eyebrow at Glenn, “You made a mess out of perfectly delicious pie.”

“Really, I think the pie got the better end of it. Made more of a mess out of me, didn’t it?”

The veil of dusk set over the room by the time Eos had calmed himself and Glenn had cleaned up. Light was almost gone inside the house and the taste of dinner had faded from their tongues. The clinking of dishes being gathered marked the abrupt end to their time at the table.

Maxima went to the next room to play with James.

Glenn followed her and soon fell asleep on the couch.

Over a cleared table, Major Clark asked Eos, “So have you thought about our talk at the bay? What will your move be when the time comes and you’re free from General Braxton?”

Eos shook his head to say yes and replied, “We want to know where we come from and why we have our powers...So that’s first.”

Major Clark understood and bobbed his head in approval, “And then, what will you do once you know?” Eos thought for a long time.

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“Go home. If there’s a home and family still out there, then I’m going to find it,” he said with absolute determination.

The major laughed and scratched his head. “You’re such a serious kid, Eos. I tell you what... no matter what you find out, you will have a home with us here; right Maria?”

“Of course. You both can stay here anytime,” Maria agreed.

“Thank you for your hospitality; we truly appreciate it,” Eos said. He hadn’t experienced such kindness from strangers in his entire life.

Major Clark leaned to Maria and whispered something in her ear.

“Excuse me. I’m going to go check on James,” she said and left Eos and Major Clark alone in the darkening room.

Major Clark’s easy-going look left him. “Eos, I want to let you in on something that very few people know about. I know you want to find your answers, but for the next couple of months you have to play good for General Braxton until you make your move. It’s obvious that General Braxton is ruling the sector against public approval, but the group of friends that I mentioned yesterday, believe he is involved with some organizations that...shall we say...don’t have the sector’s best interests in mind. I can’t tell you too much until we get to the North Branch and you meet my superior. However, we both have a mutual dislike for this sector’s leadership. As much as you deny it, North American Sector is your home just as much as mine.” He chose his wording and continued, “General Braxton considers you a valuable asset, so he will be keeping close tabs on you. This will position you close to him. I would like to use this to our advantage. Of course, in exchange we will help you in any way we can when the time comes.”

Eos beamed at the major with a satisfied grin. “You’re asking me if I’ll exploit General Braxton for your benefit?” He laughed in disbelief.

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“Right, while he thinks he has you in his control and that you have no other option except obey his orders...you’re actually working against him.” Major Clark’s eyes gleamed.

Eos stared back for a moment while he decided on his response.

Major Clark worried that he had been too presumptuous in bringing the topic up so early.

The answer was easy.

“Major Clark, do you think there is any way that I would say no to that? While I can’t fully commit to your cause because I have my own goals, I’ll do everything I can to help while I’m with you.”

“Fair enough, you’ll be a huge asset to us!” Major Clark slid back in his chair and sighed with relief, “Even though it was likely you’d agree, I had the biggest fear you wouldn’t. I was really putting myself on the line there! If you said no, I could be in some serious trouble right now. It’s a highly treasonous topic.”

“Don’t stress Major. I’m definitely on your side,” Eos reaffirmed.

“Good. You’ll help us progress much faster than before,” he paused momentarily to celebrate his victory, but it was night now and all his facial expressions were muted in the dusk. “Let’s go to the living room and spend some time with family. I have to leave them tomorrow after all.”

Major Clark went to the next room. Eos followed, but didn’t feel like pointing out that he had to leave Glenn and Maxima as well.

He joined Maxima on the floor next to the couch that Glenn had passed out on. They talked late into the night. By then James was snoring next to his toys.

Sleep was calling to all of them, and Maria offered to show them to the guest room. As they got up, she put her finger to her lips to tell everyone not to wake her son. Despite this James stirred just enough to mumble, “Goodnight Mr. Eos and Miss Maxima.”

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She picked James up in her arms. As she lifted him, he let go of his toy cars and they rolled away from him. One rolled a few feet into the corner of the room and the other bounced before landing upside down and was knocked under the sofa by Mrs. Clark's leg.

Then there was only the sound of footsteps on creaking floorboards, getting further and further away.

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### GOODBYE FAMILIARITY

**W**aves lapped up onto shore beneath a muted gray sky. The repetitive, static foamy noise of the coast echoed off dark rocks that rose from the sea. Naith Lelantos stood atop one rock, which punctured the water just beyond where the waves receded.

Ares detested Naith Lelantos. More creature than man in his mind, Naith was always sure to make others go out of their way to come to him—which was a good thing Ares supposed. It meant he wasn't hunting you at least.

The chilly waves splashed Ares' boots. They slid up the gritty coast towards his toes and receded away from him again and again. Were they beckoning him in or urging him back? It didn't matter. He had only one choice. This was a Mitad matter...and a bit of personal unfinished business.

Ares plunged a foot into the water and then the other. He waded to Naith Lelantos on the rock.

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The man.... or creature, Ares couldn't decide to this day, was a haunting, skeleton mass of black and white. He wore a skull on his crown. It wasn't an earthly skull. It resembled something of a lion, but had ridged, twisting horns that curled all the way back and then around and forward again. The horns had a dead, blue tint in their grey ridges. Even Ares could see from this far away that the animal he had taken it from hadn't been fully grown. If it had, it would have been three times larger than a human head or more. Where a jaw and nostril holes should have been, the bone helm was fractured. Strips of black cloth fell from the broken skull and hid the face behind it. Every bit of the man underneath was hidden. His body was usually covered in a black jerkin that looked medieval with its leather straps in the front and baggy white sleeves underneath. Tonight, he wore a Mitad robe. Atop the cloak was another skull, this one of a bird and its wing bones strung around his neck. Another not fully grown—Ares knew. The only thing not bleached or black about Naith was the red emblem on his shoulder: a snake with a head at either end.

Ares called above the ocean noise, "Two years is a long time, Naith. Lord Vistomus hopes you have some good news for us."

From beneath the fluttering black strips of cloth over Naith's mouth came a hollow, empty voice like a rhythmic rattling of the bones around his neck. "I bring news. Whether good or bad is for Fulmen Vistomus to decide."

That was all Ares would be getting without more prodding.

"Well you wanted me to meet you out here. Let's have it then." Ares stood, irritated as waves came up to his calves. He was so tired from all the traveling lately. He hadn't had a good day of rest in weeks. Now he was on the west coast of Canada under a sky that looked likely to open up and down pour.

"I asked for a Mitad officer. They sent *you*."

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“They did,” Ares confirmed. His voice dripped with annoyance, “If we needed to bring someone to interrogate you for information, you should have let us know.”

Naith growled and Ares could see the rotted stumps of teeth for a brief second as the black cloth strips jumped. “I don’t like your arrogance or your attitude. Don’t think you can hide behind your family name. No one will protect you out here. I’ll send you back in pieces if you keep it up.”

“I have no family name! I am son of the Mitad.” Ares blurted angrily; a glow beginning inside his sleeves. He wouldn’t let anyone make a claim on him. He’d always been alone. No need to give anyone else undue credit.

“*Ha ha hecksb hecksb,*” Naith squeezed out a gurgling, throaty laugh that would make most fall back into the water in cold fear. Ares did not so much as flinch, though he knew the bones Naith wore were symbols of the man’s battle conquests. Each was from a legendary and dangerous creature from their homeland. He could probably handle Ares without much effort. “That is well known, but you can’t deny your own existence,” Naith teased.

Ares let the sea breeze calm him for the sake of extracting the information he had to carry back, but how he’d love to put his chains through the rock perched man. “What information do you have for me?” Ares began again.

After a hissing breath, Naith answered him. “I tracked our turncoat, Carnus, and wounded him. The other brothers of the Voro finished him. They were searching for his body when I left, but hadn’t found it yet. Unfortunately, he disposed of the relic before I got to him.”

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Ares scoffed, “Years away and you have only that to report? They named you appropriately back home. *The Pursuer*. You’re quite good at the pursuing, but not the finding.”

It had been too much of a jibe.

Naith descended from his rock into the water. He was still far from Ares, but his cloth face pieces rose up violently with his labored breath. “The traitor had years to prepare while I *pursued* prey that was much closer to your interests, Ares. The Voro do not fail. Revenge was given for his betrayal. If you don’t like my work, I can practice *pursuing you* on your way back.”

Ignoring the comment, Ares waited for anything more. He was too worked up to continue a proper and delicate conversation that the Pursuer always required.

Naith gave another throaty laugh like crunching bones. “No, I didn’t think so. I have more, but it pains me to deliver information that would please an arrogant child, like yourself.”

A vein flared on Ares’ neck. The only thing that kept him from attacking right there was the one scar of red on the bleak landscape. It wasn’t the fact that Naith Lelantos would have most likely killed him. That he didn’t fear. It was the symbol of the Mitad on his own chest and Naith’s. He forced out a retort, “Then pretend you’re delivering it to Lord Vistomus or else you can find him yourself. Although we know you’re not so good with the finding.”

Thunder rumbled overhead.

“I’d appreciate it if you hurry.” Ares prodded, “We both have long distances to travel...fortunately in opposite directions.”

“Voro take orders from the Master himself; no one else. I hurry because the Master hurries. I’ll tell you what to take back to Vistomus.” Naith came closer until Ares could see the white glazed eyes look him over. “Our Asian Sector infiltrators and allies are not ready to invade,

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but they do spy. They tell me that Braxton's research division has finished something new. It's to be used for... *the Bellator children*. Follow it and you will find them."

Ares blinked away a rain drop that hit his eye lashes. Waves came up to his mid-thigh now when the crests reached him. He shivered with excitement. Eos and Maxima Bellator were once again in reach. The waves splashed up a little higher and Ares had to step back as the water stung his skin with its temperature.

"It seems I found something after all." Naith cooed at Ares' sudden fixation.

Lightning struck and Naith was on the rock again when the flash died down. It was dark, and Ares realized that there was no one on the rock or in the ocean when he batted another drop of water from his eye. He was left alone with his desires and the waves, washing up and beating against him with depths that would soon carry him away if he waited much longer.

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There was a mild chill in the air when Eos stepped onto the concrete porch. The sky was a screen of gray that refused him any pinhole of brightness and the air did not move. It was still and lifeless as if bracing itself for the rest of the day. Eos stepped off the porch and the rubber soles of his boots sank into the wild grass that controlled the yard.

"Goodbye Mr. Eos and Miss. Maxima," said James from behind his mom's leg, "Come back soon." He ran up and hugged Major Clark's knee. "Bye Daddy. Keep us safe!"

Major Clark gave him a long hug and said, "I will James. You be good for mom, okay? Remember she's an angel and you can't disobey

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an angel.” He gave the boy a wink. Then he gave his wife a kiss and a few parting words before turning quickly so that they didn’t see the tear that was forming in the corner of his eye.

Eos found the last seconds of together leaving him. Strange, it was a word that they had always had: *together*. It had gotten them through everything until this point and he had never appreciated it so much as now.

It was as if a vast chasm split the ground and Eos felt himself pulled away from his sister. The earth rumbled almost as much as his stomach and a feeling of sickness took over. Though they stood together the distance he felt grew with every moment that their hearts beat.

She was so far away already. All he could do was pull her in close and hold her.

Words weren’t capable of breaching the expanse of solitude approaching, nor did they come out at all. His world shook apart around him. It was all he could do to hold on; to hold on to his small piece of comfort and family and love.

Where her face buried into his shoulder, Eos felt warm tears wetting his shirt.

“I don’t want you to leave.” Maxima squeezed him tighter and sniffled.

The sight of Major Clark reminded Eos of how he must conduct himself. He viewed the chasm before them, but he did so unblinking. He would cross it back to her, and soon.

“I know Maxima. I’ll do everything in my power to come back quickly. I’ll work as hard as I can, and you do the same, okay? Remember, we step in line only as long as we have to. We’ll be together soon.” Eos gave Maxima a kiss on the forehead, but the moment was interrupted.

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To everyone's surprise, Glenn sprawled himself over the siblings and embraced Eos without hesitation. "Don't worry. I'll take good care of Maxima. I won't let anything happen to her—protect her with my life if I have to...even if she insults my cooking." He managed a half smirk.

"Thanks Glenn. You're the only one I'd trust with the job," Eos pursed his lips and tightened his eyes to prevent any liquid from forming in them. It was a rare sentimental moment with their guardian.

Glenn's voice was choking up, "Just come back as soon as you can and whatever you do—don't make it easy on Braxton."

Eos made his oath.

"I swear to you that I'll be back. When I am, Braxton will have no choice, but to let us live freely. I won't let him manipulate us again!" He declared with both fists clenched.

The drivers were ready to leave.

"Maxima, we have to go." Glenn said. She nodded and placed her tan desert scarf in her mouth as she reflected on the dryness and heat that she would return to. She pinched her lips together as she stepped into the vehicle.

Major Clark approached the group and looked to Eos, "We have to do the same. There's another long trip ahead of us. Let's come back to my house and celebrate when you're all back together!"

Maxima watched Eos get into his car and she bit down even harder on her shawl as a line of tears ran down it and soaked the frays. He put a stiff, straightened arm out at the handle of the door like his body was trying to prevent him from going, but he rigidly forced it to touch his scar as he looked back at Maxima one last time. Then he slipped inside.

Like water breaking at a fork in a stream, each car parted and went its separate way—trusting that they would end up back together downstream.

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James watched the spot on street where he last saw his father's car. He tugged his mother's pants and asked in mumble with his eyes fixed on the spot, "Mom, when's the sun gonna come back out?"

"I don't know, honey." Maria said and leaned weakly against the doorframe.

Eos and Major Clark sat together for one more drive. The vehicle had a wall that separated the front and back seat for privacy. Major Clark began quietly briefing Eos with a few personal details, "General Braxton wants you to report to Colonel Axel Kane for instructions. Luckily for us... he's the ring leader of our group. So that cuts out an extra stop. The two of us go way back."

"How'd you convince a colonel to join the cause?" Eos asked.

"Join us?" Major Clark laughed at the absurdity, "Everything started with him. Me and Colonel Kane fought through the Fracture War together; served side by side in the 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment. He just recently got the promotion to full Colonel. Now he's a fancy paper pusher near Point Edward, Ontario. Not what he likes, but it puts him in a better position for his real ambitions."

As they talked, the hours passed, and with each one gone they were further north. With every hour they drove, the temperature dipped. By the time they reached Point Edward, Eos was uncomfortable in his desert garbs. He sighed against the window. As the moisture shrunk from the glass it revealed an enormous castle. Its outer curtain was built into the light green hill beneath it. The stone wall encircled the castle in a moss-covered shield that allowed for entrance only through one bridge.

Once they passed the bridge, the true expanse of the castle was revealed. Smaller red roofed houses filled the ward inside the walls.

"Those are officers' quarters," Major Clark gestured to the houses.

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The towers were entirely rectangular with notched battlements throughout. Inside the walls it was spacious; full of trees and fields. The humid air smelled of grass, a remarkable change from the sand of the generator complex and Sires.

The car dropped them off at the castle's inner gate.

Major Clark's words echoed slightly through the castle as he spoke, "Believe it or not this whole castle has been converted into a military base for officers. They call the shots from in here. It's a pretty nice gig, but Colonel Kane would rather be out in the field." After countless stone corridors, arched windows, and ornate tapestries—they arrived at Colonel Kane's office.

Major Clark showed him into the messy room. Paper work was stacked in mountains that encircled the desk and leather-bound books lined all the walls. Light shone through three windows on the east side. It illuminated a myriad of plaques, awards, and photos. A frame that hung right behind the desk contained a photo of two men. Both were in olive and navy military uniforms with helmets and rifles. They stood with their arms around each other's shoulders. Though much younger, Eos could still make out the teenage Major Clark. He was just a private in the picture. The man next to him must have been a younger Colonel Kane.

Right above it was a smaller photo of the young Colonel Kane. It was the only one in the room of him without a uniform on and he was with a woman. They stared at each other in the picture with their hands held. If that was really him in the picture, Eos sensed no such emotions existed now.

Major Clark showed uncharacteristic display of respect and convention by saluting the Colonel. "How's the desk life treating you, sir?"

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A tidy brush cut of chestnut hair with the slightest streaks of gray peaked from the other side of the papers. Colonel Kane stood up and exposed himself from behind his stacks of clutter. He had a square jaw, a handsomely pointed nose and chin, but what truly stood out about the man was his tea-green eyes that burned with ambition.

“Major Clark, thank god you’re here! This paperwork is killing me, how does it look like I’m doing?” He grumbled in a friendly tone, “I’m drowning. Find me a secretary ASAP.”

Major Clark laughed and relaxed. From behind the desk a golden Labrador puppy dashed to Major Clark’s leg.

“Hey there Ruger!” Major Clark bent down to pet the dog who panted all over him. He showed a distinct love for the dog the way he ran his fingers through the golden coat—as if it was a family member. “Eos, meet Colonel Kane and his puppy Ruger.”

Colonel Kane sighed, “Why does my dog like you more than me, Bruce?”

The dog wagged its golden tail happily against Eos and then turned around to investigate the newcomer. It wasn’t long until the puppy was licking Eos’ leg.

“He likes you. That’s a rare thing!” Major Clark said with surprise, “He doesn’t usually take to new people. He mainly sticks with Axel and me.” He looked embarrassed as he remembered to introduce Eos, “Oh yes, Axel, meet Eos.”

Colonel Kane squinted and tapped his pen on the desk as he looked Eos over.

“So, General Braxton sent his dog up here to help us out...The problem is we already have a mutt around,” he gestured to Ruger. The dog stopped wagging its tail and put its head down as if he understood. “Eos, meet your competition, because that’s your rank when you start with me.”

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Eos and Colonel Kane locked eyes in a deadly stare. A feeling of confusion and resentment rose on Eos' face. All over again, he felt the feeling of distance grow as it did with so many he had met, but this distance was new. It had nothing to do with his powers or his superhuman qualities, but experience instead.

Colonel Kane held his pen up as if measuring Eos against it. Just as the tension built to a heavy cloud in the room, Colonel Kane couldn't take the façade. He burst out laughing. It was a deep, dignified sound of amusement. Major Clark joined him.

"You're too much Axel! You wonder why Ruger likes me better; you can't talk about him like that." Eos turned his head back and forth between the two laughing men, bewildered.

They eventually settled down. "Relax, Eos. I was only kidding," Colonel Kane said, considerably disappointed that Eos wasn't appreciating the joke.

"You have to stop messing with new guys, Axel. Eos is a serious kid. I could have told you he wouldn't take it well," said Major Clark.

Eos crossed his arms, "Well how was I supposed to know? He was pretty convincing to me."

Colonel Kane was amused by Eos, but he felt a tinge of regret for joking with him. "Stop sulking. Things get a little tense around here with the invasion of the European Sector and my boredom with this upper ranking bureaucracy. So, from time to time we like to have a little fun. Don't take it wrong though, we know how to be serious when the time calls for it. It's the fact that you're a civilian that gives us the leeway."

Major Clark reassured him, "Contrary to what Colonel Kane said, you'll actually be treated closer to an officer than anything. In fact, your biggest problem will be getting other soldiers to not resent you for the special treatment you're going to receive."

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Colonel Kane took over the conversation, “I’ll be keeping you as far out of danger as possible by order of General Braxton himself. You’re getting the real luxury treatment. Down to business though,” he pushed his stacks of paper work to the side and rested the fingertips of his hand on the pile as he stood. Eos noticed that there was an order to what first appeared as clutter. “Major Clark has informed me all about you as well as General Braxton. I’m told you have an interesting power in that right arm of yours.”

Eos brought his right arm up and grasped it with his left hand. “Well, I guess you could say that,” He flexed his blackened finger, “I’ve never used it for fighting before though, always for generating electricity. Actually Colonel, I haven’t—” Eos replied to Colonel Kane, but was cut off.

“Oh, don’t worry about that! You’ll have plenty of time to experiment. First Major Clark will take you through some basic training. It may not be necessary for someone with your special...*skills*, but I want you to do it anyway. It could end up saving you in an emergency.” The Colonel looked Eos over again with a raised eyebrow. His thin, sleeveless shirt left him shivering in the Canadian air. “I’m not sure what you’re wearing, but you’re not in the desert anymore. We’ll have to get you some warmer clothes.”

“Uh...thanks. Colonel, I was trying to say that—” Eos couldn’t finish a sentence before Colonel Kane started again.

“Now, General Braxton’s going to be stopping by periodically to keep a close eye on you. For now, you’re providing long range support with your power. On the other side of things, I want you to keep your eyes and ears open every second you’re with General Braxton. I’m going to have you report to me first every time you come back here. You’ll be on the battlefield often, but I’ll be giving you a few side

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missions because, well, what General Braxton doesn't know, doesn't hurt him...too much," he shrugged with a sly glance.

Eos' stomach grumbled, but once more couldn't get a word in. His mind was overloaded with information from the Colonel.

"Of course, fair is fair. I have a couple of leads that will be of interest to you. Next time we meet, hopefully I'll have something to share."

"Really, leads on what?" Eos finally broke into the Colonel's monologue with a new interest.

Colonel Kane grinned down at Eos, "Oh, I don't want to spoil anything yet. I need to do some more digging, but our interests may be more intertwined than you think. There is a lot of secretive activity happening around Braxton. I've been investigating something called *Hyperborea*. Unfortunately, the closer I get to it, the more my superiors point me in the opposite direction."

*Hyperborea*...the word was familiar. He had heard it recently...but where? His coin! He remembered his struggle at the silo over his coin.

"*That's a Hyperborea coin you got there.*" The man had said to him. Was it possible? Had he known something and how was that possible? Now here Eos was, closer than ever. He was brimming with excitement at the idea of discovering its meaning.

"What *is* Hyperborea, Colonel?" Eos asked eagerly with both hands clenched in anticipation.

Colonel Kane shook his head. "I don't know much myself. Like I said, I need to do more digging."

Eos sighed and accepted that he wasn't going to get any immediate answers. The elusive word was a whisper of an answer that he couldn't make out.

His stomach made a churning noise.

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He remembered what he had been originally trying to interrupt for. “Colonel Kane, I was trying to tell you...I haven’t eaten all day. Is there any way I can get some food?”

“Bruce, take him to the mess hall before training.”

Major Clark led Eos out of the room.

“And find me a secretary!” Colonel Kane hollered.

Eos could have hugged Major Clark he was so happy to eat. He was treated to steaks and baked potatoes in the mess hall. He gulped down the calories without so much as thinking of manners.

Major Clark watched the food travel from plate to fork to mouth like an assembly line being forced to maximum capacity. He let out a sharp exhale of a laugh and slapped his leg, “This food is usually for officers, and we did tell you that you’d be getting the best treatment, but once you’re out in the field you’ll be given the typical rations. With an appetite like yours, I don’t know if you’ll be able to cope!” Major Clark mocked the boy’s hunger.

Eos was led out of the castle gate and onto a courtyard. They walked across the browning grass towards the castle’s keep. In it, the first level had been converted into a shooting range. It consisted of six sectioned off stations with string lines attached above each to reel paper targets back and forth.

Major Clark led Eos to the first station, where a stack of clothing, a back pack, and a pistol sat.

“These are your standard issue supplies. There is an extra uniform in your bag as well as an additional meal ration, blankets, and a few tools you might need. Also, there is a contact card with my number and Colonel Kane’s, should you need to talk to us in an emergency. For the most part we’ll contact you through your commanding officer. Now if you look at your uniform, you’ll notice that you have a patch in the middle of your chest.”

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Eos looked at his uniform top. On the right breast was a patch that read, his family name: *Bellator*. The left breast patch had the words sewn: *N.A. Sector*. In between those, at sternum level was a square of green fabric with a decal of two dark navy, almost black, bars connected near the top and bottom by thin lines. Major Clark wore a seven-pointed leaf in the same place.

“Everyone is given an insignia to display their rank. You have been given the honorary rank of Captain in the North American Sector Army during your time here,” he laughed and stroked the stubble on his cheeks, “Don’t take that for granted. You’re only a rank below me! For officers, it goes: 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant, Captain, Major, Lt. Colonel, Colonel, Brigadier General, Major General, Lieutenant General, General, and General of the North American Sector—that would be General Braxton.” Major Clark rattled off rapidly the slew of titles.

“All of these officer ranks are above the nine enlisted ranks. So, as you can see you rank pretty high. Colonel Kane didn’t want to chance you having to take orders that would get in the way of our interests.”

Eos let the title turn over in his mind. *Captain* Eos, it had a nice ring to it; even if it was only honorary. He was handed the stack of clothes and was left alone to change. He reluctantly put on the uniform. The heavy, olive fabric of the long sleeves fell perfectly at his wrists and he instantly felt warmer, but not more comfortable. Below his shoulder on the right side was an arched banner that read “N.A. ARMY” and underneath that was the North American Sector insignia: the head of the bald eagle on a black shield. His right sleeve held the symbol of his unit: a triangle with a 3 near the top and lighting bolt encircled at the bottom. He jumped into cargo pants of the same color with a vertical stripe down the side of his to match his sleeves and then laced up his boots.

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The Major returned and gave an hour lecture on the formalities of the military. At its conclusion, he picked up the black pistol on the counter.

“Have you ever fired a handgun before, Eos?”

A bit embarrassed, he replied, “Never.”

Major Clark racked the slide with deft hands and demonstrated the functionality of the pistol while saying, “The Beretta M9, official pistol for well over a hundred years and still reliable. It’s semi-automatic and the magazine will hold fifteen rounds of 9mm.”

“What... does that mean?” Eos asked, clueless. He had only seen a handgun from a distance before, let alone learn the technical terms. Clearly, he was in over his head.

“Semi-automatic means it will fire until the magazine runs out as long as you keep pulling the trigger and 9mm is the type of bullet... It’s not that important for you.” He cut short the explanation, “I forgot that you have no background. Now look down range.”

Major Clark pointed through the sectioned off space and down the concrete walled range towards a paper target. After going over the safety training he handed the gun to Eos.

“We’re going to practice a few rounds at thirty meters. Hopefully you’ll never have to use the Beretta because we’re keeping you far from the main action. Actually, your power may be more formidable than this anyway. Still, Colonel Kane wants you to have it as a backup tool.”

He handed the gun to Eos. It was heavy and cold in his hand. The black metal felt unnatural for him to hold unlike the weightless weapon he was used to wielding, but he aimed it down range anyway and switched off the safety as Major Clark instructed.

Major Clark walked him through every step from lining up his sights, all the way down to the slow exhale that goes along with pulling

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the trigger. Eos breathed slowly and let out a steady breath just as he had been told.

He squeezed the trigger.

*Bang!*

Eos fired his first shot. He strained his eyes to see where he had hit. To his disappointment the paper was unscathed.

“Well you missed the target completely with your first shot, but that’s pretty normal. After a little practice with me, you’ll be hitting the center in no time!” Major Clark reassured him.

Major Clark sighed half an hour later, “Reel the target in and let’s see how you did this time...”

Eos tugged the string pulley system and brought the target back to him.

He searched it for some sign of improvement, but to his dismay he found intact paper, unscathed target lines, more intact paper, and only one, two, three, four holes— oh and another hole at the top—no that one was where it had hung from; four holes to show for an embarrassing number of attempts... and a great deal of intact paper. Only two of those holes were within the target zone.

“My son could have done better than...” Major Clark realized he was whispering his thoughts aloud. He awkwardly and too loudly tried to cover it up, “Honestly, you don’t appear to be picking this up, Eos.”

Eos jutted his chin up and threw his hands out, “Well, it just doesn’t feel right to me. I like what’s natural...and that’s using my own energy!”

A burst of red light swirled in his palm. Before he had time to develop his sphere of energy, he slammed his palm into the paper target’s bullseye. The smell of singed paper wafted from the hole, and the countertop underneath had a chunk missing.

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Major Clark threw up his hands to concede. “You like what’s natural—and I can’t deny you’re effective with it. I just never thought I’d pass someone through who shoots so poorly! We’ll call it more of a safety precaution than anything. With your assignments, you shouldn’t ever be in a situation where you need to use it, and if you were, you’d be surrounded by a special task unit. If you feel comfortable with your power as your main weapon, then that’s good enough for me. I saw what it can do in Sires. You’ll have plenty of opportunity to practice in your down time. Let’s pack it up and go meet your team. You’re joining the Third Special Infantry Squad. It’s a small, handpicked group of Colonel Kane’s most reliable specialists. You’ll be safer with them and the way I see it...you’re a specialist-of-sorts, so you should fit in.”

Back in the courtyard Eos was introduced to the head of the Third Special Infantry Squad. Staring down at him was a tall blond with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth and bangs that were mostly combed back, although a large number of them hung over his forehead. This was the leader of the squad, Captain Sean Draven.

“Eos, nice to meet you,” Captain Draven gave a firm handshake.

Eos felt a wave of nerves sweep over him. The gravity of where he was and what he was about to do set in like the unnatural feel of the pistol on his waist. He swallowed hard.

“Nice to meet you too,” he had trouble pushing out the words.

Next Eos was introduced to the much less social First Lieutenant, Olivia Skye. The female sniper gave Eos a cold, yellow-green tinted stare from underneath her side swept brown bangs.

“Well this is where we part ways for now, Eos,” said Major Clark as he gave Eos a firm handshake. He could see how out of place the boy felt, “Don’t worry I was a year younger than you when I enlisted. There is no one you’ll be safer with than this group. I’ll be in contact

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with you and you can be sure you'll be brought back here soon when General Braxton arrives. Captain Draven will take it over from here. I'll see you around!" Major Clark gave him a cool wave of informality as he left.

Eos didn't want Major Clark to leave. He almost reached out; almost called to him. He wanted to stay and learn about Hyperborea. He wanted to take the heavy gun off his waist, but he didn't because he could not appear weak in front of his new superiors. Not here.

Someone new was in charge of him. Eos had been tossed around like a possession all his life, but for once he had actually liked someone that General Braxton had forced him to work with. Once more he would have to adjust to a new personality as Major Clark departed. He was sick of it. For a time, he considered having Major Clark around must be what having a father was like. A father would have stuck around, wouldn't he? Well his didn't. At least Major Clark would come back. Wouldn't he?

Eos was left alone with the Captain and sniper of Squad Three, as they were referred to. Once Major Clark was out of sight Captain Draven put an arm around Eos. With his cigarette in his lips he leaned in to Eos and mumbled out of the side of his mouth, "Relax kid, you're a bit young but you'll do fine. Heck, for some reason or another we rank the same and from what I hear you have some crazy *magical* powers. You might end up *protecting us*." He chuckled gesturing to himself with an open hand.

Eos turned his head from the smoke and coughed before sucking in fresh air.

"It's not magic." He said.

"Sorry, I have one of these things in my mouth so often that I forget sometimes," Captain Draven took his cigarette between his boney fingers and held it away. "Well magic or not, the moment we

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get out in the field I want a demonstration.” He beamed like a child playing with fireworks.

Though he wasn't sure why, Eos was already taking a liking to the Captain's calm, blatant personality. First Lieutenant Skye followed silently behind them. Her eyes caught Eos', but the same friendliness that came from Captain Draven was not found there.

Captain Draven noticed Eos looking at Skye.

“Don't mind her, Eos. She'll warm up to you. She's distrustful of letting others into our ring of trouble makers, if you know what I mean. I am too with everything we have going on, but I'm just more willing to give you a chance.”

Eos was glad that the Captain was easier on him than she was. “Thank you, Captain Draven, I won't let you down.”

“It's only a common courtesy, but as a word of caution: Every one of us in Squad Three would lay down our lives on any given day for Colonel Kane. We all have our own reasons for doing that, but above all we'd do it because we believe in his dream and his ideals. So, if you think of betraying him for even a second...you won't live long enough to regret it.” His words fell upon Eos like a piece of ice melting down his back. The same unnatural, out of place feeling returned to Eos again in a surge that made his head spin.

“With that said, I hope you can become a close ally and friend with all of us in Squad Three,” Captain Draven finished. Eos and Skye stepped into the olive-covered canvas of a troop transport truck.

Captain Draven sucked in one last breath of smoke before flicking his cigarette to the ground. Just before joining them in the truck he rubbed the sole of his boot into the frost covered grass to smother the still glowing cigarette.

## CHAPTER NINE



### DISTANCE OF WAR

**I**t was the kind of dark where specs of floating white and red filled Maxima’s vision. She and Glenn were being led, blindfolded, through sand and sun. That much she could tell as her boots sunk and her brow beaded with sweat after only a few seconds of walking. She’d had too much time to think. Weeks at the generator complex under military guard had given her that. General Braxton had assured that they were under constant watch. There was no way to escape.

Maxima had contemplated it at least every ten minutes for days on end. Every day she felt more like a prisoner. Then she would think—*escape—run!* Each time her mind worried back to Eos. With him separated, it was nothing but risky gamble.

The heat and darkness were making her disoriented as her legs grew heavy.

“Glenn?” She checked that he was still marching with her.

“Yeah?” Glenn grunted back.

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“Making sure we were still together.”

Glenn made a fake laughing noise. “Seems he wants to keep us together...for now.”

Maxima’s thoughts wandered to fearful places again. Worried thoughts flipped through her head like pages of an open book caught by wind. *What if they were about to separate her from Glenn now? What if General Braxton never planned to bring Eos back?* She bit down on her shawl and shook off the what ifs. It was difficult with her vision was taken from her. There was less to experience and distract; only heat and the monotony of her legs carrying her forward.

The sound of a door opening.

A burst of cool air.

The scent of rot.

Maxima’s nose curled up. It was a smell of death, rotting and metallic. She held her breath, only breathing when she couldn’t stand it. It didn’t take long before they left it behind. The blindfold disoriented time and distance, but eventually they were seated on a cold concrete floor.

Their blindfolds were lifted, and light rushed into Maxima’s eyes. Her pupils contracted violently.

When her eyes adjusted, she saw mountains of metal parts in a warehouse.

“Eat.” A soldier gestured to food rations on the ground in front of them. They did as they were told. It was dull, lifeless food. An ugly green sliding aluminum door rattled open, and an eighteen-wheeler truck backed into a loading dock. As they ate, they watched parts loaded onto the truck.

Glenn scowled and stood up.

The soldier over them said, “No. You stay there.”

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“If you’re going to drag me all the way here, you might as well have me review what parts you’re going to be using on the generator fix. So many new toys and I can’t even play with them yet!” He sulked.

Maxima could see stars in Glenn’s eyes as he drooled over the abundance of parts.

The soldier laughed. “Fine come with me.” They all walked to the loading dock. “Boys, the engineer wants to review the parts.”

Glenn’s head bobbed eagerly.

There were a few jeers from the men loading. “Well he better look quickly, this pallet is going on the truck.”

The soldier nudged Glenn. “What do you think, does that meet your review?”

A pallet of curved metal sheets was being loaded without pause for Glenn.

“As if I should know. I need calipers to measure thickness and a parts list and schematics to know what they’re for. It’ll require a full design review.” He threw his hands up.

The soldier called to the loaders, “Hear that? He approves. Load it.”

Glenn fumed as rolls of power cable were carried to the truck.

“How about those cables?” The soldier asked with more mock in his voice.

After observing the cable for a few seconds Glenn said, “Well I don’t know the rating, but the gauge looks large enough to—”

“That’s a yes, boys. Get it on the truck.”

“You didn’t even let me finish!”

A bizarre part that Glenn had never seen before was being hoisted up next.

“I don’t even know what that is or what we would need it for.”

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The soldier slapped his leg. “We need to get this man a stamp for all of these approvals. It’s a yes to everything.” He entertained the other soldiers with his antics.

Glenn gave up feeding the man’s jokes. All around him were some sort of machine prototypes. It was a forest of metal tubes large enough for multiple people to fit into each.

On the other side of the room Maxima saw General Braxton arguing loudly with a man in an all-white suit. She could only make out some of the conversation from so far away.

General Braxton echoed into the open second story of the warehouse. “I can’t have a high probability. I need you to be sure it’ll work!”

“Well I need time to test it. Leave them here for me.” The man in white hissed.

“We don’t have time to build it, tear it down, and build it again over there. It has to ship today!”

“There is one test I can use to verify the design.” The man in white’s words were lost in the sounds of a pallet being dropped in the truck. “The prisoner would never let me test on him. Quite resistant.”

General Braxton acknowledged him. “That is why I brought them. I want some sort of verification.” He walked across the expanse of the warehouse. “Come with me.” He grunted and turned with full expectation that they would.

He led them into the doorway the man in white had gone through. They passed through windows of laboratories filled with beakers, exotic colored liquids in glass containers, vacuum chambers, and other chemical tools.

They arrived in a much less pristine room. It was a place of research, but much less organized and pristine than the ones they had

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passed. This one was more mechanical and dirtier. Dusty blue metal branched out all over the room.

Glenn finally blurted out, “Are you not going to let me see what I’ll be building? How does that make any sense?”

General Braxton smiled with an underlying pompousness. “You’ll understand the plan in time. It has already been decided. Right now, I just need Maxima to help us with a quick test.”

A foreigner in a lab coat entered the room. He gestured for Maxima to step up to a small tank filled with a neon green liquid. There was a cage around it, but the top was open.

“Your hand please.” The man held out his own.

Maxima looked around for some reason not to participate. She knew if Eos were here he’d be screaming by now and refusing. But Eos wasn’t here.

She took a deep breath and then raised her hand. The man wiped her skin with a cotton ball. It had a strong scent and left her hand feeling frozen. He placed a patch on her and then gestured to the tank. Inside the cage there were wires running all about and interfacing into the glass.

“Please. Hand in water.”

Maxima looked around again for some excuse to not put her hand in the toxic-waste-like liquid. Glenn had a guilty look on his face for not intervening. He ran his fingers through his strawberry blond hair and decided to make the effort.

“General, what are you doing to her?”

“I am simply making sure the theory behind the generator fix will work. This is a crude but harmless proof of concept. If it doesn’t work nothing will happen.” General Braxton responded.

Glenn sighed. “Geez. Doesn’t look like you have a choice, Maxima.”

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“Quite right you are.” General Braxton said.

A white suit watched through the window. Glare obscured his face, but Maxima shivered. There was something vile about the one watching them. She knew intuitively. Without closing her eyes or hesitating, she plunged her hand into the tank as if jumping into a cold pool.

There was a tingling at her finger tips first. The sensation grew every second. It was like she was manifesting her energy, but not at her own command. Blue glowed around her submerged arm. It overwhelmed the green tint of the tank.

Bubbles like carbonated sapphire formed on her skin and swam to the walls of the tank.

Maxima jolted at the feeling and reeled her arm out.

“What was that?” She asked, holding her hand as if it had been wounded.

General Braxton said with excitement overwhelming his voice. “That was validation.”

∞ ∞ ∞

Smoke flowed from underneath Captain Draven’s boot as he snuffed out another cigarette. He held a phone to his ear while he watched Eos spar with a brute of a man in the middle of the camp named Sergeant Malin. Colonel Kane’s voice came through the phone.

Captain Draven nodded as he scribbled notes on a small pad of paper with thin fingers.

“Right, sir. Tonight?” He jotted down Colonel Kane’s orders awkwardly with one hand, “You sure know how to make me popular

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with the squad, moving them out in the middle of the night without warning.” He chuckled dryly and hung up a few moments later.

He observed Sergeant Malin correcting Eos on how to deflect punches inward and counter strike. After two months of carrying gear, moving supplies, and working with Malin, Eos had thickened up a noticeable amount. His shoulders were a bit broader and his neck thicker—though his slim frame had needed it. Now he looked a closer fit to his seventeen years; closer but not entirely there.

Captain Draven lit a new cigarette, “So it’s time for Eos’ first real mission.”

For the past two months Eos had been throwing his energy spheres at maximum range to suppress the European Sector from advancing further. Daily he fought off advancing forces like hordes of wild dogs.

He noticed an improvement in his skill. Spheres the size he was generating took at least three minutes to create in the beginning. Now he had the routine down to just under two minutes per projectile. Of course, he couldn’t keep it up for too long before he began to feel the curse of his right arm.

He enjoyed his company well enough—everyone had taken a liking to him except First Lieutenant Skye, but even she had lost some of her icy exterior. Still, his enjoyment of the time was sparse and his longing to be with his sister was just the opposite.

Sergeant Malin had been instructing him in the art of hand to hand combat in every spare second. He was getting better, but he still earned new bruises with every round he sparred the brute.

Sergeant Malin’s tree stump of a forearm thrust forward like a spear. Eos drew his composure and concentrated on overcoming his natural instinct to flee backwards. He slid into the punch just as he had

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been taught and glided down the outside of the man's dark-skinned arm while deflecting it with his own, considerably darker, marked arm.

He threw a jab to Sergeant Malin's ribs immediately. It was like punching a sheet of metal.

"Not bad Eos, you've gotten better for sure, but you have to punch with conviction!" The burly voice rumbled. He pulled his punch down in a hook that clasped onto Eos shoulder and brought his knee viciously up to Eos' midsection. With an inch between knee and stomach, he halted the blow. "Never expect only a single attack! I could have ended you right there. Heck, if I didn't like you so much I would have. I've done it with less cause."

Eos laughed at his friend's loose mouth, "Malin what could be less of a cause? We're sparring!" He called the strong man's bluff.

Malin stroked his dark sideburns, which flowed forward an inch onto his cheek bone as he thought for a second with his pug nose flared. A goatee had been growing over the past month and, combined with his bushy eyebrows, he was quite the hairy man. He smiled dimly with an answer, "I'd end a man for starting a fight with me, or because he looked like he was gonna start a fight with me, or over money, or a woman I liked...or...especially money."

Eos shook his head, "Malin, I'm glad you like me."

Captain Draven clapped his hands together twice and let out a whistle.

"That's enough for this morning, you two. Roll out in ten. They need your support on the battlefield, Eos."

"Just tell me what I can shoot, Captain!" Malin hawed like cowboy.

Eos obeyed. He ran to grab his backpack and his pistol. Then he made the trip to his first outpost. It was a thirty-minute hike, but Captain Draven wanted him to be in the most strategic and safe locations possible. When he got there his partner was waiting. She

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greeted him with a nod that could have been easily missed. If Eos hadn't worked with First Lieutenant Skye daily, he would have sworn the wind had simply caused her brown bangs to bob above her pear colored eyes. Though few words ever passed between them, this was actually a step forward in their greetings since the beginning.

The spot was a grassy plateau top that overlooked much of the surrounding area but didn't have enough strategic value and was too high for the European troops to try and take. Skye took her post at the edge of the hill and peered with an eagle eye through her spotter scope which rested in the tiny window of a sandbag barricade. She was not searching for a target of her own, however.

Eos was nearly ready with a fully developed, scarlet sphere three feet in diameter. It throbbed and swelled as if constricted by some unseen container. He focused on pushing himself faster. It was all he could do since he had learned of his limit. Two weeks ago, he realized he couldn't make the spheres any larger. The only thing that continued to improve from his daily assaults was the time in which it took to build the powerful weapon.

His heart beat with the rapid *pum-pum-pum* of a war drum as he finished his work. It was so different from his work with the generator. He no longer wielded his energy over long periods of time, but instead willed them into a rapid succession of attacks.

"There's an infantry unit marching east one thousand meters ahead at twenty-five degrees east of north." The experienced sniper called out for Eos. Eos wound back his arm for a throw that had been honed by hundreds of hours over the past two months. Not only his ability had developed, but his perception and intuition had also soared to unimaginable heights as he launched his spheres at targets based only off Skye's instructions.

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He considered the wind into Skye's coordinates and hurled his blackened arm forward.

A distant explosion rose above the pestilent gun fire in a furious warning to European Sector soldiers. Smoke splattered the sky in rising puffs where Eos had struck.

The blaze of red light was a simple thing to correct compared to the vapor trails of sniper rounds. It was almost insulting for Skye to be doing such simple work. "You led them a bit too much. You caught a few and the rest scattered. Our boys are picking them off as they run though." Skye said.

This continued for another half hour as Eos cratered the paths of enemy troops. *Bwoom!* The explosions continued. They had a psychological effect just as much as a physical one. The fantastical and violent blasts were inexplicable. They intimidated enemy units from advancing into supernatural attacks.

After Eos' fifth throw, Skye disassembled her weapon with habitual speed. This was the rule given by Captain Draven: no more than five shots before changing location.

Eos jogged through misty northern woods to the next post. He squinted through silvery veiled air. There was a pinching sensation in the black strands that twisted around his arm. The pain was setting in earlier than usual today.

The second outpost was similar to the first, only hidden in more trees. They continued.

*Bwoom!*

*Bwoom!*

Another mesmerizing orb traveled across the sky. The mass plummeted down. All the enemy saw was an unearthly red glow descend upon them before they were engulfed. A blazing fury was unleashed on them that left a hole in the ground and an even larger

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one in their ranks. The damage was a well over twenty meters in width, and a putrid burnt smell was left to flavor the air.

The pinching in Eos' arm became a scorching sensation as he produced each successive sphere. The marble sized ball in palm grew, absorbing his life force. He worked in near silence with only the background noise of far off gunfire.

He clutched his forearm. His vision blurred. It was happening again, just like on the night with the generator. He struggled with every ounce of resolution he could muster. He couldn't afford to pass out like this...not when Maxima wasn't around to wake him from his—

*Crack!*

Skye fired a round from her sniper rifle. Eos lost his concentration on the sphere and let it dissipate.

Why had she fired? She had specifically been ordered not to by Captain Draven.

*Crack!*

She fired again.

“Eos, move now!” She cried and fired again, “They found us!”

Though he knew his life was being threatened, he could only focus on the fire that roared within his arm. It unleashed a demonic pain of emptiness.

Skye scrambled against the barrier and drew her pistol as a European soldier brought his rifle over the plateau. She was protected from his vision, but Eos was not. He stood out in the open— paralyzed between consciousness and a void of darkness.

Eos tried to move for his pistol, but his body wouldn't respond. He couldn't get away. He couldn't even shake properly as he contemplated how his life was about to end.

Skye closed her eyes in an angry scowl and made a split decision.

## CHAPTER NINE

She spun and turned the corner of her barrier to face the edge of the hill with her own pistol ready. She came face to face with a European Sector barrel.

*Crack!*

Eos tried desperately to discern what had happened.

The rifle barrel spun as its bearer tumbled down the plateau from a fatal wound. Skye turned to Eos, full of adrenaline and on the attack.

“Let’s go! That’s all I could see, but more are probably on the way.” She hollered.

With each breath and passing second the pain eased from Eos. Slowly, the ability to move came back to him, but it wasn’t fast enough.

“This is no time for shell shock, Eos!” She grabbed her rifle and bag mid-stride and headed back towards base. “Now!”

Comfort partially returned to Eos, but Skye already a few paces ahead. He pushed through the overwhelming desire to rest and dashed after her with stiff limbs. With her heavy rifle slung awkwardly over her back, Eos soon caught up.

She gave him a furious look once they were safely away from the outpost.

“Get it together soldier. It may be my job to be your eyes and protect you, but I will not throw myself in front of a gun for you again! You don’t belong here if your fear endangers your comrades.” She spat bitterly.

It was everything Eos could do to just comprehend the words as he ran, but he felt his strength returning. As it came in tiny inklings, so did his anger for this woman who judged him like everyone else had, who held such disdain for him. She understood nothing about him.

“I was paralyzed! I had no control over it; it’s a side effect...” He fought with his clashing pains to understand why he had to deal with such displeasures on top of each other. “What do you have against me?”

## DISTANCE OF WAR

You've had a grudge..." he gasped for breath with deprived lungs, "...since the first second you saw me."

They were close to camp now. Skye stopped running through the mist and looked Eos in the eyes with a deadly intensity, "You show up out of nowhere, enter our group of specialists, and expect me to respect you immediately? You have no experience, you haven't been trained properly or tested, and still you are given an honorary rank above me—a rank you don't deserve. Why? All because you possess some power, and even that you didn't earn. You are a privileged boy being spoiled by superiors, and I can't figure out why. Therefore, I can't trust you." She glared contemptuously at the boy with a scar under his eye and a ink colored right arm.

It fell on Eos like taking his first punch to the nose from Malin. She thought he hadn't earned it? "You think I want to be fighting this war? You want to talk about unearned..." he burst out, "How about unwanted? You think I asked for this? Any of it? I have the power to wield this energy..." He recalled all of the alienation he had ever felt ...all the hardship. "I have the power to be hated by everyone I encounter, the power to be used as a tool my whole life. *That's* my power. Now you tell me how privileged I am as I sit here separated from my only family member who's held hostage so that I stay here and play soldier; and I never know when I'll see her again!" He delivered the sad truth of his life.

Skye's stare was weakened, visibly jarred by the boy's burdened response.

Eos looked into her eyes, but he saw something he didn't expect. She didn't hate him like all the rest had—they hadn't recognized his humanity. Instead, she resented him because he was given status above her though she considered him on the same, human, level. He was an aggravating puzzle that she didn't trust. Suddenly the distance that

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separated him in degrees of humanity... in worlds of infinite space shrank within an arm's reach. Eos had never felt this before, but as he looked into her proud yellow-green eyes, he decided it was a distance of earned respect.

She looked away and nodded with a new understanding.

No more was said as they returned to camp. No more was needed.

Captain Draven let a cigarette fall from his lips when he saw the two come into camp, "What are you doing back here? You should still be providing support!"

"The site's been compromised, sir. We were lucky to make it back here alive." Skye said.

Captain Draven looked with a worry in his eye at the clouds and contemplated. He cupped his lighter from the wind as he lit a new smoke and finally said, "You weren't followed?"

"Not as far as I could tell, sir." Skye assured him.

"Well you're both alive and won't be needing those locations anymore. I just got off the phone with Colonel Kane. New orders; we're moving out tonight."

## CHAPTER TEN



### UNLEASH THE DIVIDE

**I**n a void of black, Glenn and Maxima braced themselves against stacks of metal for the periodic jump and lurch that accompanied their ride back to the generator complex. They were surrounded by machine parts and coils of wound cable in varying sizes. Maxima felt as if she was in a boxed scrapyards. Glenn couldn't have felt more at home.

"If only it wasn't so dark in here, I just want to get a look at these beauties! The cruelty, putting me in charge of rebuilding and not even letting me take inventory of what they loaded. A tragedy is what it is!" He fumbled about in the darkness, feeling out the parts that surrounded him.

"It's more like they're keeping an eye on you than putting you in charge," Maxima sighed, "You think either of us would be riding in the trailer of a semi-truck with the parts if they actually wanted a contribution from us?"

"I'm trying to see the situation in a positive light—"

## CHAPTER TEN

Before he could further justify himself with a wise response, the two were lifted three feet in the air as the semi-truck bounced over decaying roads that had nearly disappeared over the past decades. Glenn let out an undignified yelp. If the metal that surrounded them wasn't tied down, they would have been crushed.

Maxima continued, "...And it's strange the extent they went to, to keep the location of that place a secret."

"Well between being blindfolded like hostages again and riding in the trailer, I think we definitely made the right choice. I mean at least I get to be with the new toys even if I don't know what they are yet," he gushed over the machinery in the darkness like a child holding a wrapped present. He hugged a spool of thick electric cable and as his fingers drew the picture his eyes couldn't. His noisy antics dropped off and he muttered to himself, "Wait...this couldn't be right...these wouldn't even fit the generator...maybe with an adapter. They aren't the right kind of..." he felt his way to another spool.

"Maxima give me some light."

She obliged him. A blue light was cast over the trailer, emanating from palm.

Glenn squinted at part numbers. "Neither are these... All of this stuff is useless, unless I started building from scratch."

Maxima continued pondering aloud from the floor. "To think, there was a whole laboratory ready with parts. It was definitely dedicated to researching our powers...it creepy the more I think about it." Maxima wondered what Eos would have made of it as she hugged her knees to her chest and chewed on the ends of her scarf.

"Nothing like that existed, back when Braxton had me modify the generator for you and Eos, so it must be a fairly new research division. Not that it matters because none of these parts will work!" He pounded his fist against the thin sheeting of the trailer.

## UNLEASH THE DIVIDE

He sat back between the large hubs of the spool and rested his head against the cables in defeat. For the first time in days, he faced reality for what it was.

“We’re prisoners, Maxima. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

She gave a murmur of agreement. “I wish Eos was here.” Her thoughts left the dark cage they sat in. Her worries shifted away from the desert and drifted north, to the war.

“I hope he’s safe...” She hugged her knees tighter.

Glenn grumbled, “Compared to our hostage situation, I’m sure he’s living like a king up there! He’s probably dining with the officers and sitting pretty; far away from the action.”

Maxima trembled. “Glenn, seriously, I’m worried. For all we know, he could have bullets coming at him all day. We don’t even know if—”

“Hey! Hey, let’s not overthink things we can’t control,” he sensed Maxima’s depth of distress. “You know he’s doing just fine. I’ve never seen anyone as determined as him in my life and with his powers, he’s likely a hero by now. Don’t you worry, he’s strong.” Comforting had never been a strong skill of Glenn’s. Maxima’s short head bob of acknowledgment and the way she let the shawl almost slip from her mouth let him know he must have done a half decent job.

Outside the trailer, the semi-truck followed two more in a convoy that rolled through the desert. The trucks were coming on an ancient bridge that was flaking with rust. It led into a valley of dunes on the other side.

If the lead drivers were more aware, if they had scanned the surroundings as they drove instead of puffing on cigarettes, they would have noticed the slightly darker brown specks that poked over the peaks on each side of the valley.

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The men didn't move from their position, peaking over the top of the sand peaks. Their desert attire only fluttered in the wind...waiting on the opposite end of the bridge. Behind the dune, one of the figures slid down the slope some and moved towards the bridge from behind the cover of the sand. He turned back to a dozen men.

"Remember, on my signal," he said confidently and then scurried across the sand with ease.

The convoy approached, bouncing its way over the old rusty bridge towards the ones who waited on the hill. After the last car had passed the leader, he dropped his hand in a signal to act. The dozen men on the leader's side, and a dozen more on the other, peered over the top of the sand with bows and a handful of beaten rifles.

One pointed sinisterly at the lead car.

The shooter lay on his stomach looking down the barrel.

*Crack!*

A single shot rang out through the desert and echoed off the valley.

The lead truck swung left wildly; its tire punctured. The trailer skidded across the road and spun ninety degrees. It jugged away from the cab like a broken bone. The truck behind it slammed to a halt, but the loose grit beneath the tires and its momentum carried it forward. The lead trailer was smashed by the second semi-truck, puncturing its side in a melody of crunching metal. The third managed to stop with nothing more than a rough knock against the vehicle in front of it.

Soldiers swarmed from each truck and quickly took cover behind the first, side-spun vehicle. They peeked carefully around it. The attacker's mix of guns and bows were all pointed over the ridge, drawing the soldiers' fire to the front of the convoy.

The smell of gun powder peppered the warm air.

## UNLEASH THE DIVIDE

The man who had given the command to attack slipped unnoticed behind the third and final trailer. He moved across the sand so effortlessly it was as if he was just a grain of the sand being carried along by the wind. He climbed nimbly up the trailer and lifted the roll-up door with his right hand. In his left was a small square object.

Light flooded the metal prison containing Maxima and Glenn.

The young man stared in at an assortment of hurriedly packed metal parts. He scanned the space with his green-blue eyes for the proper candidate. He had to be quick. Using two fingers he pulled down his shawl and uncovered his bronze face, tanned from the desert sun. He took a deep breath and picked out a sheet of curved metal.

Maxima had landed on top of Glenn during the ambush. They were tossed behind the stack of enormous spools, hidden from the view of the newcomer.

Glenn groaned and squinted at the bombardment of light.

“Get off me, would ya?”

Maxima stood up quickly, “Sorry, Glenn.”

Glenn brushed his light red hair out of his face and sat up with the embellished moan of an old man. The moment he did, he brought his head up into the hub of the spool that he had been thrown under. He hollered with good reason this time.

The newcomer turned at the noise to see Maxima standing across from him. They stared at each other.

There was something about the boy before her. She judged him shy of twenty and there was a certain hue in his golden-brown hair that reminded Maxima of a time gone by. Their gazes locked for only a moment. Her eyes quivered as Glenn got to his feet.

His green eyes stare back into the sea of hers.

Glenn’s body ached from being thrown around the trailer. His temper flared, “What the hell is going on out there and who are—”

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“You...” Maxima let out unintentionally.

A tremor of curious reminiscing was shared between them. The young man broke away and removed the covering from a small square adhesive containing a sliver of blue stone. Out of view from Maxima and Glenn, he slipped his hand behind a sheet of metal he had been eyeing before the raven-haired girl had stolen his gaze.

He smirked devilishly at Maxima and the man beside her and stepped backwards.

With two fingers, he gave a lazy salute and dropped from the trailer with an arm reaching above him. His hand caught the door handle, and the door closed with him as he fell, leaving Maxima and Glenn startled in the darkness.

“So, who...?” Glenn brushed strands of hair from his brow, distressed.

“I’m not sure myself, Glenn. Hurry and help me get the door open. Let’s find out what’s going on out there.” Gunshots continued, and a soldier’s scream filled their ears.

The scene outside was an outright battle with the soldiers pinned behind the spun semi-truck. Their enemies held control from atop the hill and a single soldier lay moaning on the ground with an arrow protruding from his thigh.

Shots fired back and forth, and bullets burrowed into the sand. The soldiers’ attentions were focused desperately forward as they scurried for protection.

Maxima scanned the ridge and quickly took in the situation. Just above her, unnoticed by the soldiers was the one who had so mysteriously entered and exited the trailer. His shawl was drawn over his face now, but his eyes gazed down, thinking calmly amidst the bullet storm in the desolate desert. Glenn was distracted by the battle

## UNLEASH THE DIVIDE

ahead, but Maxima looked up at the boy who gave her a vague feeling of familiarity.

His steady gaze disappeared over the crest of the sand.

Unconsciously, her own shawl had ended up between her lips again and each gunshot made her pinch down on it so hard that her teeth cut her bottom lip. She winced. A strong gust blew. It lifted sand from the ground and caught Maxima's shawl which hung mostly unwrapped around her neck from being tossed during the crash. The fabric rippled at first and then a *whooooosh* ripped it entirely from around her neck and out of her mouth.

"Maxima, what are you staring at? Get back in the trailer now!" Glenn urged without a trace of courage, but Maxima watched her shawl whip through the air and hug itself around Glenn's leg. Maxima felt a brief nakedness without its protection. Its comfort was gone, but she knew at that moment she didn't need it. Something she could only describe as *wholly Eos* came over her.

She wasted no time defying Glenn's order.

"Glenn, I've never shown this to anybody..." She placed the tips of each of her fingers together and formed a sphere of space between her hands. Glenn watched, confused.

A blue wisp flickered and sparked to life in the frame of space her fingers had created. It filled with her energy, imitating the color of her eyes. The initial droplet squirmed in a twisting pattern within the fingertip cage before swelling violently into a sphere. A familiar hum of crackling energy resonated.

Glenn watched in astonishment at the speed she manifested her power.

Maxima drew her hands apart carefully.

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It stretched, drawing into two perfect orbs wielded in each hand. They were connected by a thin tail that stretched like a piece of gum. The energy snapped apart!

The orb fissured into two churning weapons.

She danced forward with careful steps, dually armed for the battle. As she neared the soldiers, she released a sphere towards each dune ridge. They struck the ridges and exploded in a rumbling tune. A dust storm rolled into the valley and draped between the two attack points. The assailants on the hill tops were blasted down the other side like toys being knocked off a ledge.

The firing stopped.

Maxima quickly touched her finger tips together again and the indigo light separated once more into two orbs. She breathed heavily and realized the confidence she had summoned in response to the danger. Doubt had left her in those seconds and she could scarcely believe her decisive actions. Clouds of sand hung over the area and Maxima hurled the energy in her hands one final time to ensure that no one would be around to attack after the dust cleared. It settled slowly to the trough of the valley.

Soldiers stared at Maxima in bewilderment.

Glenn's eyelids were sealed to his forehead. His jaw hung loosely.

Maxima knew that it was not some part of Eos that had taken over then. It was something entirely Maxima. Not the scared, nervous girl that she showed to the world...no this was the Maxima the situation had called for. The one that had been waiting to surface.

"Since when could you do that?" Glenn asked.

Maxima looked away shyly and bit her bottom lip.

"I...I've honed myself much more than Eos has. Around a year ago I discovered I could control it like this and so when I was alone, I practiced. I never talked to you about it because I didn't think you

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would understand.” Glenn looked disappointed as she said it. “And with Eos, I didn’t want him to feel like he wasn’t as good as me. He’s older and so stubborn. I know he’d be angry with himself. He’d train until he went into a coma again.” Maxima rounded her shoulders clasped one wrist with her other hand. The danger was gone, and her normal demeanor returned.

For once, Glenn had no response.

Soldiers surrounded the two before the silence had a chance to grow. Although, a few stayed back to attend to their injured comrade.

“I’ve never seen anything like that. Looks like the cargo is protecting us,” the highest-ranking officer said astonished.

Debris still obscured the scene ahead.

Glenn snapped, “*What* is going on?”

“Those were a team of rag tag rebels that oppose the military. They hide out here...somewhere in this wasteland.” The soldier gestured to the vastness around them. “Now, we appreciate whatever it was you just did, but our orders are to protect you. I need you to get back in the trailer. The rebels could attack again at any moment.” He held his pistol tactically pointed towards the ground and turned to the hill.

Maxima was perplexed. “Usually people want to know what I just did, but not you?”

The soldier spoke without glancing away from the hill, “I know better than to dig into anything that involves that laboratory we came from. Now get in the trailer! We leave as soon as we change the tire that was shot.”

Glenn raised an eyebrow nonchalantly, “Alright, let’s go, Maxima.”

Once in the trailer Glenn asked, “Why did you jump in and help? If you wanted to get away, that was your chance. Besides, I have a

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weird feeling nagging me about all of this,” he gestured to the contents of the trailer.

Maxima was only half listening.

“We don’t make our move until Eos comes back.” Her concentration was locked on the sand blowing off the hill peak. The small impressions of footsteps were already being smoothed over. She traced them up to where the young man had stared down at her, “Glenn, don’t you think there was something funny about the way the rebels ambushed the trucks? They left too quickly.”

“I would have fled from your monstrous strength too!”

With the door open, Glenn could finally see the contents of the trailer. It was mostly spools of cable, thinner runs of wire harnesses, and connectors. There were a few crates. The rest were panels of curved metal leaned up against the side sheeting. All of it raised a flag, but there was one panel in particular.

Maxima shook her head, “That’s not what I mean. They didn’t even attempt to fight back, and if their goal was to steal or kill...then they didn’t accomplish it.”

“You’re overthinking it. That boy who popped in here must have intended to steal something but was scared off when he saw us.” Glenn brushed off her concern as he examined what was troubling him. He hopped onto a crate to get a better look.

A single rounded panel lay on top of a stack. It was five feet by eight and the mountain of metal it sat on took up nearly half of the trailer. Unlike the others, it was made completely of glass except for the outer edges that framed it. He looked down at Maxima.

“Who was he?”

She didn’t respond for a while.

“I’m not sure, but for some reason I feel like I’ve known him for a long time.”

## UNLEASH THE DIVIDE

“Try to be less melodramatic.”

A soldier appeared before them and grabbed hold of the rolling door.

He spoke plainly, “We’ll be arriving at the complex before sundown.”

The door shut. Glenn watched as shadow consumed the light that had been reflecting off the glass. A sinking feeling came over him. There was something horribly wrong about the metal contents around him. When combined with General Braxton’s experiment with Maxima’s hand in the tank... Glenn had a theory, but he decided to keep it to himself. No use scaring Maxima until he was sure.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



### THE TWILIGHT MARCH

“Would someone mind telling me why we’re up in the middle of the night?” Malin complained as he cleaned the barrel of his disassembled rifle, “There are few things I enjoy more than shootin’, fightin’, or getting paid... or getting paid for fighting, but my sleep ranks a little higher,” he shook his head as his list nearly distracted him from his original point. “Does it have to be a night job? I can’t do my best killin’ on a night job.”

Captain Draven flicked away the remaining scrap of his cigarette, “You don’t have a choice, Sergeant. The mission is from the Colonel. However, it’s actually a morning job. We travel until first light.” He smiled tauntingly at Malin. “So, you get to do your killing at the crack of dawn.”

Malin folded his arms over his barrel chest, “Well ain’t that convenient?” He sulked silently to himself while cleaning his rifle.

## THE TWILIGHT MARCH

All six members of Squad Three were gathered. A middle-aged man named Corporal Devers shook his grey-haired head and gave a sly look. “The enemy is going to follow your trail of cigarette butts and get us while we sleep,” he teased Draven, “I mean I smoke too, but you have a real problem. It’s going to kill you and you’re half my age.”

Captain Draven pulled out another as he said, “Yeah well you have some real problems of your own Corporal.” He went to his pocket for his lighter, but he found it was missing.

“Oh yeah? What’s my problem?” Devers asked.

After a demanding stare from his superior, Corporal Devers reluctantly gave him a light. Its light was the brightest thing in sight as it burned in sharp contrast to the blue and purple twilight that hung darkly over the sky.

With a grin Captain Draven put the freshly lit paper to his mouth, “Your problem is that you’re beginning to sound like my girlfriend, but you’re not quite pretty enough.”

Eos snickered at the men’s banter. It had been like that since he had arrived. Corporal Devers would harass Captain Draven and the Captain would give it right back to him in equal measure. It was an endless cycle.

Eos sat shivering on a wooden crate in a circle with the other five members of the Third Special Infantry Squad. He braced tightly, trying not to show discomfort around the others. They were in a half-assembled camp. Captain Draven had them drive half the night away from the last campground to freeze without a fire in the middle of the Canadian plains.

His thoughts ran wild about their mission and he spoke in a sleepy, worried yawn, “Is the full invasion force coming? Braxton said the European Sector would make a final push once they found out we were running low on fuel sources.”

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Captain Draven took a great inhale of smoke, “As far as I know, they don’t know. If...” He corrected himself, “*When* that happens you’ll be evacuated far away from here. Until then we just deal with the daily hazards of fighting for boundary lines and all the tactical games that come with it. I will say this though: you have made it much safer for us. They’re claiming the European’s movements have been cut down by at least half. They don’t know when the next blast of magic is going to hit ‘em. So, they keep their heads low!” Draven pretended to throw an imaginary weapon like Eos. Malin played the part of the European Sector by covering his head as the imaginary sphere descended upon him. The reenactment ended with Malin flailing back as if he was hit. The squad chuckled.

Eos moved his black fingers and studied them as if controlling a marionette. He had learned not to correct Captain Draven about the fact that magic wasn’t real. He had tried to explain countless times that, though he didn’t know how he acquired the ability, it was as natural to him as eating and breathing.

The team linguist, Corporal Grant, was usually quiet during their short break periods, but today the boyish face had something to say. “Have any of you heard the stories going around about a European super soldier?” He spoke so softly that it took a few seconds for anyone to pay attention.

Captain Draven continued, “When a full-fledged invasion happens they’ll be coming on shore by the thousands, at least.” He had barely heard the heavy-set young man. “What’s that Grant?” He scrunched his nose as he realized what had been said.

“Well I was on the radio with my buddy from the thirty-first company to stay updated... since you brought us way out here to the middle of nowhere.”

## THE TWILIGHT MARCH

Rolling his eyes, Captain Draven sped up the story. “Look, you go where I tell you to go and I tell you to go there because Colonel Kane tells me. So, what was this you were saying about stories?”

Corporal Grant continued, “Well, the European Sector supposedly has some kind of super soldier. I guess just like we have Eos.” He put his hands in his pockets bashfully at the sound of it.

Sergeant Malin gave a grunt of interest, “Well that’d be disappointing as hell. I don’t want anything like what Eos makes raining down on us.”

Even Lieutenant Skye became engaged in the story and looked up from her solitary trance.

Captain Draven asked, “Eos...do you know about others with these abilities?”

“None, except my sister.” He shook his head. Though the others were interested, the story had captured Eos’ attention far more—he was captivated by the thought. Eager for more details he wiggled to the edge of his seat and asked, “What else did they say about this... super soldier, Corporal Grant?”

“Hold on,” the story teller backpedaled, “I didn’t mean it like that. They have a soldier who is as effective as our boy, Eos, is.”

Lieutenant Skye rolled her eyes.

“It’s true Olivia! My buddy said the guy single handedly took out half his platoon yesterday. And by single handed I mean it. He told me the guy fights lone wolf and doesn’t even use a gun!” Corporal Grant threw his hands up. He was suddenly so enthralled in his own story it began to sound embellished to the rest of the squad.

Olivia Skye flashed him her cool, yellow eyes and gave him a snort of disbelief, “C’mon Grant, you can’t possibly believe that.”

“That’s what I thought at first, but then again we’d have said that about Eos two months ago. Ever since he joined us, I’ve suspended

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my disbelief about anything. My buddy assured me, and no one just makes up stories about their platoon being wiped out. Apparently, the super soldier moves faster than bullets and has some powers of his own. My friend was lucky to live through it. But this is where the story gets crazy. Last night, this super soldier led a regiment to push through a weakness in our southern line and into Sherbrooke—that's right up against the United States border!"

"No..." Lieutenant Skye finally gave the story some consideration and stood up as she realized they were marching in the exact direction of Sherbrooke.

Sergeant Malin looked worried. He licked his lips while struggling to wrap his head around the idea, "If that were true, Captain Draven would know about it, right? Right, Captain? I mean you wouldn't be marching us straight towards that area if you knew it was controlled by the European Sector..."

Captain Draven nodded with a far-off stare.

"The bit about the lone soldier sounds like a well-gossiped tale to me but," he paused to finish his cigarette, "Colonel Kane did radio me about our defeat yesterday. That's why we're here."

"Wait, why are we here?" Eos asked. All five members' heads turned in unison.

"Colonel Kane confirmed that Sherbrooke has been overtaken and what's worse is that some gutsy platoons even ransacked and overtook small villages in the neighboring area, literally putting them on the U.S.'s doorstep." Draven rolled his cigarette between his fingers, clearly pained by delivering the news.

"What are five of us supposed to do against an entire regiment? Does Colonel Kane expect us to retake Sherbrooke on our own?" Corporal Devers asked frantically.

"Six of us." Eos added.

## THE TWILIGHT MARCH

The sun would be breaking over the horizon in a few hours and Captain Draven rose from his seat. “Alright, it’s almost daylight and we’ve already wasted enough of it. It’s time to get moving.”

“But Captain, where are we going?” Eos asked.

Captain Draven turned to him, the relaxed manner from before was gone. He closed his eyes and shook his head as he delivered the news. “Orford— it’s one of the small towns that was overtaken west of Sherbrooke. The Second Special Infantry Squad was there last night investigating how far past Sherbrooke the Europeans had made it. They’ve been able to barricade themselves in a building, or so were told, but they’re going to need our help to make it out alive...especially yours, Eos. A weak radio message was received, and we think they’re in one of the buildings at the edge of town. We haven’t had contact from them since.”

The entirety of Squad Three fell into the same hauntingly grave mood as they continued their march east. The twilight colors turned a darker blue of vast, heavy openness. First Lieutenant Skye became still and dropped back from the group.

Corporal Grant leaned into Eos, “That’s the Colonel’s other handpicked squad. They’re close allies and on top of that—.”

Captain Draven put a hand out, signaling for Grant to not say anymore. “That they are,” the Captain agreed, “Close friends as well. We are currently about to enter an abandoned town called Eastman. From there it’s about ten miles until we reach Orford. Let’s get a move on.”

Skye followed them from a distance.

Eos had marched for shorter distances before, but for anything as far as this he was previously transported in a vehicle. He was in better shape than when he had arrived in the North, but by the time they passed through the ghost town of Eastman, his breath was short, and

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his legs were beginning to ache from the strain of the supply pack and gear that he carried.

The town was eerily quiet as they passed. No birds sang, or wildlife moved.

Skye still hung back from the squad.

“What’s wrong with her?” Eos gestured to Skye.

Captain Draven glanced down and evaded the question, “She’ll be okay. Just give her time. She was trained to endure. Third Squad pushes forward no matter what.”

Eos thought about the meaning of Draven’s words as he stood still to rest his aching legs. The other four forged ahead and soon even Lieutenant Skye passed him. He was determined not to fall behind Skye and continued his march toward Orford.

Skye hadn’t spoken to Eos since their confrontation the day before, but she mumbled softly now, “You said before that you never knew if you would see your only family again, but you’re not the only one. My brother, the last surviving member of my family, is captain of the Second Squad.” She let out the words in a low steely voice. The thought of saying something consoling crossed Eos’ mind. Skye saw the beginnings of it and, with only her eyes, made sure Eos knew she wanted no pity from him.

He no longer knew what to say so he asked her a question he had been meaning to ask every member of the squad. “Why do you fight, Lieutenant Skye?”

She carried on with her march in her own clouded mood for so long Eos gave up on getting an answer. He called it a good attempt that was more effort than he owed her and moved to catch up to Malin and Devers.

“Do you mean why I fight against the European Sector or under Colonel Kane?” She caught Eos before he stepped too far away.

## THE TWILIGHT MARCH

“Both, I guess.”

She closed her eyes and brought back memories that clearly pained her, “My family had farm in the Midwest where I grew up. Small town, clean air...that kind of thing. We stayed relatively safe during the war, but...Braxton ordered all crops to be confiscated during the Fracture War for redistribution. The way he ran things, it was impossible to make a living. Then he declared farming families were to become workers for his government so that he could better control the flow of food. Before the plans fell into place, we ran to the Eastern Coast of Canada to escape his grasp.”

She paused her story. Eos waited for her to continue at her own pace.

“We hunted up here and my brother taught me to shoot...gave me my eyes, I guess you could say...” She realized she was getting sentimental and, almost embarrassedly, put up her wall. She finished the story quickly. “Not too long after we moved, the European Sector made its first invasion attempt.” Though she wasn’t crying her voice cracked, “My town was one of the very first hit. My entire family was killed. My brother managed to get me out before the soldiers found us, but...it was too late for the rest of them. Eventually we took refuge at a new North American Sector base. That’s where we met Colonel Kane, he was just a major then.” She stopped again.

Eos waited to see if he would get any more of Skye’s tragic story, but she had said all she was going to. Before, she had not known what to say in response to Eos when he had refuted her with his story of being wronged by Braxton and separated from his family. Now it was Eos who was at a loss for words. He simply marched with her through Eastman.

Houses with collapsed roofs and chunks of street missing were a common sight from a previous battle in the town before the North

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American Sector had reclaimed the territory. Now nothing was left except the memories of those who once lived there and the bullet holes that splattered the buildings like pin pricks in the fabric of the town that let through the morning light.

Lieutenant Skye noticed Eos struggling to carry himself the last three miles.

She eyed him with a patronizing look. “Need me to carry your pack for you?” Skye teased with less disdain than she would have used a few days before.

“You’re the one who fell back and can’t keep up with the rest of the squad.” He jabbed in the same half joking, half headstrong manner.

Eos burst forward on their march with a second wind at the thought of letting Skye think he was unable to handle the task. He charged to the head of the group. They left the town of Eastman long behind and were passing through the humid forest just outside of Orford.

With Skye straggling out of earshot, the rest of the squad stared at Eos with their jaws hanging open. Eos met all four stares with confusion, “What?” he asked.

“She doesn’t open up to anybody...about anything. I don’t even think I’ve ever talked to her for that long. I didn’t know any of that,” Malin pointed back at Skye with a thumb.

Draven snickered, “Of course you didn’t know that. Skye thinks you’re a big meat head despite your attempts to impress her.”

“Point is,” Malin ignored Draven, “How’d you do that? Her lips are closed tighter than her le—”

“Malin let’s be civil,” Draven interjected.

“Aw come on, Captain, I was going to say her rifle grip.” He felt the doubtful looks coming from the rest of the team. “What? I was.”

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The Captain put out a hand to halt everyone and a finger to his lips as the squad huddled together.

The near silence was disturbed by distant *pop pop pop* of shots being rattled off.

“Lieutenant, scope out Orford from a distance and try and get an estimate of soldiers in the town and the location of Squad Two,” Captain Draven ordered in a whisper.

Lieutenant Skye nodded and without a word, unslung her sniper rifle and ran off through the brush.

“Corporal Grant, stay here with Eos and radio Colonel Kane that we are just outside of the town. Devers, Malin, you’re with me. We’ll go around with the Lieutenant and try to locate any of Second Squad taken prisoner. Eos, be ready to work your magic. When I radio Grant with instruction you’ll move closer to town and provide long range support just like you’ve before. Alright, the top brass only sent in an elite few, now let’s show them why!”

The other three men dashed off.

“It’s not magic,” Eos said, but the men were already too far from him to hear.

“That’s sure what it looks like to the rest of us,” said Corporal Grant.

Eos warmed up his powers. He flared small bursts of energy in his right hand.

It was a half hour before Captain Draven’s voice came through the head sets attached to everyone’s ear.

The signal hissed with static. “Skye estimates there are fifty-some men in the area. I need you to move forward until you’re just behind the tree line.”

They did exactly as he said.

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Eos observed the setting. Past the small valley that separated him from Orford, there were only six main buildings in sight. One was made of brick, another was four stories tall, and the others were residential houses. No more than half a mile away, European soldiers lined the street behind cover.

Their earpieces came to life again. “Do you see the four-story building to the far west? The brick building beside it is where Squad Two is held up. Skye is in the woods. We’ll take cover on the lip of the valley and try to draw fire from some of them so that you can get a clear shot, Eos.”

“I’ve got them in my sights Captain, give me the word.” Lieutenant Skye’s voice came through the radio.

The Captain replied, “Wait for Eos to surprise them first with a blast. Then you pick off the rest.” At the bottom of the valley, the three men crawled towards the lip and prepared for the chaos that was about to consume the area.

Eos pulled the neck of his jacket closer in a jittery motion to shield himself from the abrasive wind that bit at his skin. He cleared his mind of his temperature woes, focused on his hands, and began forming his weapon as he was accustomed to. He was used to the process, but he had never been so close to a fight before or played such a crucial role where others relied on him. His helmet fell over his eyes enough to hinder his vision. Irritated, he removed it and threw it to the ground. Corporal Grant watched him intently.

Eos squinted his eyes shut and focused on his creation. “Hold your shape,” he both spoke and thought it. Then he brought his hand back behind him in order to propel it forward.

The stunning ball of red flew across the valley and through the dull gray morning sky. Gravity did its work as the sphere of light descended

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over the street. For an instant, the shots halted as the soldiers marveled at the brilliant orb that was moving through the sky.

*Slam!* A huge impact was made, and soldiers flew in all directions. Debris scattered in a perfect ring of destruction. The few soldiers who got up from the blast knew better than to stare into the sky again.

They moved wildly through the street. Soldiers poured out of the houses.

Eos watched from the tree line as the wind tossed his hair around and made his eyes water. *Slam!* Every two minutes red explosions consumed the barricades in the streets, scattering the soldiers. This left them in plain view for Lieutenant Skye to pick off with the distinct *crack* of her sniper rifle.

The shivering Eos was gone. Drops of sweat formed despite the cold.

Gunfire amped up fivefold as Draven, Malin, and Devers were discovered at the edge of the valley.

Sergeant Malin unloaded magazine after magazine across the street at the enemy.

Eos continued to launch a barrage on the European Sector soldiers, hurrying to a new location each time. The enemy's numbers diminished quickly, and his exhaustion grew. His dark hand was shaking as he formed another energy sphere.

"You better take a second to rest, Eos. You'll be nothing but dead weight out here if you're exhausted." Corporal Grant urged as the signs of fatigue became apparent. He scanned through his sights for any soldiers who might be able to find their location. Eos' eyelids were falling heavy over his eyes.

Eos nodded, but stubbornly slung one more projectile over the valley. He watched the soldiers scatter chaotically at the sight of his orb drawing near. His aim wasn't accurate, but it didn't matter. The

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missile of energy exploded, leaving another section of the street in rubble.

*Crack!*

The sound of a sniper shot rang out between Eos and Corporal Grant as a bullet shot past them. Eos was dizzy from his work and now his head rung with a high-pitched thrumming from a bullet that had just missed his ear.

Corporal Grant looked at him from behind the cover of a tree, “That couldn’t have been Skye!”

Panic swept over them.

Eos noticed there were only two men in the valley now.

Suddenly Eos took a blow to the ribs. His body was whipped from underneath him. As he fell he saw Captain Draven tackling him at the waist.

*Crack!*

The bullet of a sniper spun through the air with furious velocity. It came directly at Eos like a buzzing hornet leaving a vapor trail in its wake.

*Thud.* Something large crashed into Eos. He fell to the ground, his body twisting on the way down. His left shoulder was turned to exactly where his chest had been.

A warm, liquid-burning sensation filled his shoulder. The pain remained there, but the warmth trickled down his whole arm.

While Eos lay on the ground in shock, Captain Draven grabbed Eos’ helmet from the ground and slammed it down on his head. “You’re supposed to be wearing this you idiot! And you should have hidden further behind the tree line,” the Captain screamed with urgency as he dragged Eos back into the woods.

Eos tried to sit up, but the mixture of exhaustion, dizziness, pain, and adrenaline overwhelmed him; he was drowning in sensations.

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“They have a sniper on the fourth floor of that building.” Captain Draven pointed as he lay on his belly next to Eos. “I needed you to take him out for us. He’s suppressing all our fire, but...now look at you...this turned into a fiasco!”

Eos looked to see what had happened.

Blood flowed down his arm, soaking his sleeve around the wound.

He inhaled sharply as he realized that he had been shot. Draven’s words were an echoing garbled noise to his ringing ears.

“Devers and Malin are trapped in the valley until we take out the sniper and I haven’t even heard from Skye.” He yelled into his headset. Just then the radio crackled on.

A female scream was heard on the other side.

“Skye...Come in Skye...are you okay? Answer!” Corporal Grant yelled into his headset urgently.

Lieutenant Skye gasped from the other side, “I’m fine. The sniper spotted me. He barely missed. I can’t get a good shot off while he’s in the building, so I’m on my way back to you.”

Captain Draven yelled to himself as he dug through his bag. “Soldiers are going to come over that valley any moment now to gun down Malin and Devers. They’re sitting targets!”

He removed a roll of gauze from the bag.

“Corporal, give me a hand,” Grant helped remove Eos’ shirt and clean the wound. Captain Draven tried to keep Eos calm with conversation. It was critical that he keep conscious during the blood loss. “Stay with me, Eos. Talk to me. You know...hey kid, stay with me! I’m surprised you’ve taken everything so well. Eos, you’re one hard kid. You get thrown out here and you can deal with it all.” Draven was breathing so hard, he sounded like he could have been the one shot.

Eos sat motionless on the brink of consciousness as the two men dressed his wound.

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Captain Draven continued his efforts. “Tell me, how’ve you been dealing with it?” he wrapped the gauze in a frenzy, “I’m surprised the killing hasn’t gotten to you yet. It gets to everyone eventually.”

A small fire burned in Eos eyes. The words called him back to the cool air, back to his Captain, and back to the battle. He wouldn’t let them mistake his actions.

He forced himself to spit out a few words, “I haven’t... killed.”

Both men pause. “What?” They asked simultaneously.

Lieutenant Skye charged through the trees. Her eyes quivered as she saw the bloody body laying before her. The words burst out of her violently. “No, he can’t be... This isn’t supposed to happen! Our top priority is to protect Eos...” Her momentary sentiments were pushed away. “Captain, where are the other two?”

Captain Draven continued wrapping Eos’ shoulder, “In the valley. Provide them some cover fire,” he said sickened. “Eos, stay with me. What do you mean you haven’t killed anyone? What about all the soldiers today?”

“I...didn’t,” he contorted his face in pain, “I can control my energy. Wound...not kill.” Eos saw the look of anger come over Captain Draven and tried to ease it. “But they won’t be able to fight again.”

“Two men are sitting down there, waiting to be shot by men that you didn’t kill? That’s your job! What’ve you been doing?” The Captain was furious.

Eos tried to explain, but his mental state wouldn’t allow for a proper explanation. He only managed to say, “They won’t be able to fight again. I won’t...be a killer...for Braxton.”

Lieutenant Skye came to Eos’ aid as she lay down with her rifle, “I’ve spent the past month watching the soldiers he’s hit. If he says they won’t be able to fight again—then they won’t. We don’t have time

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for this nonsense. They're going to be on top of Devers and Malin in seconds. We have to provide cover for them!"

"We'll be shot by the sniper if we do that," rationalized Corporal Grant as he fumbled the gauze onto the ground.

"Then what are we supposed to do, let them die?"

Through the holes in the brush everyone watched as soldiers moved towards the valley.

"I'm not going to let them die alone!" Lieutenant Skye cried out. She loaded her rifle and dropped to her belly just behind the tree line. She fired the first shot. It found its target in a European Sector soldier as it crossed over Malin and Devers heads.

Devers was prone on the grass as soldiers descended on them. He pulled his trigger again and again. His targets fell one by one. Bullets came within inches of his and Malin's large body. *Click*. Devers pulled the trigger once more, but the rifle was out of ammunition.

"I don't want to die down here. Not now!" He panicked.

Malin yelled while rapidly shooting down all who dared peek down the valley with perfect accuracy, "You think I want to die down here with you, Devers?"

"Then what's your plan? We can't get out of here until they get the sniper. We need to buy more time," he said hysterically.

"Captain, what's the plan?" Devers stammered into the radio.

"Skye's providing some cover. I'm working on it," Captain Draven said through grit teeth.

"In case you didn't notice, we're in a bit of spot here Captain!" Malin growled.

*Click. Click.*

Malin pulled the trigger, but nothing happened. His gun was now empty. It was his least favorite sound.

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“A plan, Malin! We need a plan now!” Devers said. Usually any of the tactile men would have come up with something, but there were no options to be had.

Malin smiled crazily and reached for the back of his belt with both hands. They returned with two green, metal objects in each. “Grenades,” he responded with childish whimsy.

Above, Eos cleared his mind of all the pandemonium. Sergeant Malin and Corporal Devers were trapped. Only he could get them out of the valley. Despite the pain he sat up with a grimace.

“Eos, what are you doing? I’m not done,” said Captain Draven, “You’re undoing the dressing.”

Eos panted dizzily, “No...time...”

He formed an energy sphere with his last remainder of energy. It was with a weak body, but a strong will that he worked faster than he ever had before. His teammates were not going to die on his account. He channeled his pain for just a few seconds.

Captain Draven gave him a nod of respect.

Though he couldn’t feel his body from the numbing overload of everything that was happening, he brought his arm back out of habit.

Captain Draven, Lieutenant Skye, and Corporal Grant fired on soldiers moving towards the valley. “I know you’re not in the ideal mental state, but we need precision, Eos. Take out the fourth floor of that building!” The Captain ordered.

In a clouded state, Eos summoned everything he had into one last throw.

He gathered every bit of clarity left in him and targeted the top floor. For just a moment, all was still around him. The pain faded, the gunfire silenced, and he could only see his target. Then, his mind slipped away. He succumbed to the agony...but his body knew its purpose. As he sent the blast, he fell back, and the sounds and

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sensations of the world cascaded away from him. His body gave out and his legs went limp.

Through the slits of his closing eyelids, he watched the fiery red sphere strike the top of the four-story structure, just before he hit the ground. Chunks of the building crumbled down, falling to the street. Eos sunk, heavy, into the forest floor. He stared into the black abyss of his eyelids that wavered with thoughts of returning home to Glenn and Maxima.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



### UNEXPECTED GUESTS

Glenn collapsed on the familiar springs of the corner couch in the generator complex. His legs hung off the arms of the couch as he spread across it. Maxima sat beside him. Through the open door that connected the generator room to their living quarters, came the sound of unloading and workers being ordered about.

Glenn stroked his face. It had been a month since they had separated from Eos. In that time, his stubble had become an inch longer. He was haggard; the lighting emphasized the bags under his eyes and the beginnings of creases that had set in on his forehead.

“Now that we’re back, you can finally get rid of that red thing growing on your face,” said Maxima. Her joke was met with a smile.

“Not a chance, Maxima,” he said in a mischievous tone, “I told you I’d let it grow out, didn’t I?” He gave her a wink.

“Please don’t.”

With his eyes closed, Glenn took a deep breath.

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“These past weeks have been stressful. It feels great to just relax here, doesn’t it?”

“I can’t. Not while Eos is out there, fighting in a war.”

From down the hall, came a third voice, deep and foreboding.

“You can’t afford to relax for long, I have a great deal of work in store for the two of you.” The source stepped down the hallway in long powerful strides. In his right hand, he clenched rolled papers.

He took a seat at the center table and stroked his dark hair into perfect placement.

Maxima tried to overcome the lump in her throat as she swallowed. The restful mood plummeted with her saliva, splashing in the pit of her stomach.

The man in the chair brought something terrible with him. Glenn’s suspicion from the semi-truck trailer was supported by the uninvited guest. The single overhead light at the table created a strong contrast on his face, a spotlight for the scar on his right cheekbone.

“General Braxton...we weren’t expecting you.” Glenn said with his lips turned up like there was a bad taste in his mouth.

“No, I don’t imagine you were...”

Maxima shuddered, “Why are you here, General?”

A pompous smile answered, “It’s time you understood the plan. I’m sure Glenn has figured it out.” He sat the paper on the table and unrolled it. “If you didn’t, Glenn, you’re not fit for overseeing the job.”

“What exactly are you planning to build? None of the parts in the trailer are for repairing the generator...so what are they for?”

“Glenn,” Maxima struggled to overcome the dread that filled her. She remembered the feeling of placing her hand in the neon green tank and shuddered. “Wha...what are you talking about?”

Glenn shook his head, frustrated.

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“Well, come take a look,” Braxton motioned them over to the table.

Maxima poured over the mechanical drawing that lay there, trying to discern their meaning. She looked to Glenn, ready for him to interpret the sketches. He was fixed on the plans; unable to deviate his gaze.

Braxton continued, “You are correct. Those parts aren’t for the generator you once knew. This is something different all together. Doctor Kurt Fleischer designed this new... generator. I’m sure you remember working with him all those years ago, Glenn.”

Glenn’s stomach heaved as he understood what was before him. He heard a crunch beneath his boots as he shifted uncomfortably. Blue shards of glass were still scattered on the floor from the night before they had left the generator complex.

He analyzed the drawings.

Two large tanks were to be constructed. They were connected by multiple pipes. The first tank served as the host vessel with a large glass paneled door on the face, just as he had seen in the trailer. Hundreds of cables and conduits came out the back of the vessel to transport the energy from the machine.

He spat the words at Braxton, “It’s more of an engine or battery than a generator. Instead of Maxima converting her energy...it creates electrical power by draining a fuel source.”

Maxima observed the drawing closely. A detailed schematic of the inside of the machine contained a mask that would hang down from inside it along with numerous wires for monitoring the power source. There was so much going on inside that Maxima couldn’t decipher it all, but she got the basic idea, and it made her quiver in fear. She chewed on her lip, shifted her feet until her toes touched, and let her knees buckle until they barely held her up.

## UNEXPECTED GUEST

Glenn pointed to the first chamber and explained, “It looks like he would have you enter here,” he pointed to the glass door and then moved his finger to the other chamber, “and then some kind of insulating fluid would be pumped from here to suspend you while you were...”

“You don’t actually expect me to be a power source for this *thing* do you?”

General Braxton looked at the blue prints, lost in thought.

“This is wrong, General,” Glenn pleaded.

“It’s more than wrong! It’s inhumane,” Maxima cried. Before speaking again, she reflected on the situation. Her helplessness became obvious. “Is there even a choice?” Her voice fell into a hopeless echo of thought.

Braxton finally spoke. “No matter how you look at it, the North American Sector will run out of fuel sources for a sustainable amount of electricity in a matter of months. Our estimation before was generous. Now we have less time than we thought. I need you to understand the situation. It’s desperate.” He was looking off into the distance.

“No desperation could justify this!” Maxima said.

Braxton’s deep bellow gripped the room. “Maxima, we live in a society that fears its own inadequacy. A society that fears it can’t fulfill its purpose—survive. People scrape by in terror as it is now with rationed power. We are on the cusp. This is the breaking point. We either develop back into our previous level of greatness as a nation or we fall back into the depths the war left us decaying in. Without you, the population would dwindle out of existence. We can’t support the people and our military defenses without this...without you.”

She shook her head, rejecting the idea.

“Then why don’t we rebuild the generator?”

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Braxton used both hands to slick back his dark hair before clasp- ing them together and resting his elbows on the table. “Don’t be foolish; it could never be rebuilt. We don’t have the parts, or the capacity to repair it. Not to mention it wouldn’t be half as efficient as the new solution.” He brought down a thick finger on the blueprint.

Glenn sat at the table with his head in his hands. He was shaken by the disturbing idea that was so innocently sketched out on paper. He searched the room for another option but found only one question instead.

“Then how do you even have the parts for something like this?” he asked with a hollow voice.

Braxton put on a half-smile, “You got me there. This has been in the works since the beginning, but this fiasco has forced me to reveal it ahead of schedule.”

“I won’t do it.” Maxima refused in a devastated whisper.

Braxton closed his eyes and frowned with frustration.

“Come again? I’ve played the humanity card. If you can’t do it for the sake of others—”

“It’s not that I don’t want to help out the Sector,” Maxima exclaimed. “I just can’t accept that using me as a human battery is the only method. If it is...then the people need to rebuild what they lost for themselves and not rely on me or my brother! If I didn’t care, I wouldn’t have spent the past eight years powering the Sector. So, don’t you question my concern for humanity!” A rush of boldness swept through her.

Braxton let out his signature growling rumble of annoyance.

“As you said before, there is no choice in the matter. You *will* do it; If, for no other reason than the fact that I hold your brother’s life in my hands. Eos is surrounded by warfare...it would be a shame if he

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caught a stray bullet. I prefer to have you both, but I only *need* one of you.”

The threat dangled in the air.

Glenn stood from his chair in fury. “Braxton,” he screamed. “You can’t do this to her! You’ve already broken up this family once, I won’t let you break it down further by doing this.”

A bored expression met Glenn.

“The same threat goes for you. Construct the new machine in three weeks. That is all.”

A single salty tear of helplessness fell onto Maxima’s cheek.

“At least let me see Eos before I power this...thing.”

Braxton paused, then said, “Very well. I can agree to that.”

Droplets fell and were absorbed by the paper containing her future. Maxima’s eyes swelled with tears that distorted the room into a shimmering, liquid view.

∞ ∞ ∞

Drips of blood were absorbed greedily by the sand and heat shimmers created fluid distortion all around the desert. The leader of the rebel attack on the convoy had his arms hooked under a young man’s shoulders. Another rebel carried him by the legs. His boyish, gaunt face was soaked with sweat—a combination of shock and desert sun. His damp hair was matted to his forehead. His shirt had been stripped from him to examine his wound.

The leader spoke with firm reassurance, “We’re going to get you back. Don’t worry, Reeve! I’ll fix you up as soon as we get to base.” He couldn’t take his eyes off Reeve’s rib cage where he had taken a large portion of the strange, blue explosion. Most of the wound was seared closed, but a decent sized gash was still bleeding at an alarming

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rate. The blood smeared over most of his exposed body and it was pooling in his soaked pants.

“What was that, Zolo? I’ve never seen...agh,” the boy choked on pain. He put his fingers to the wound and brought them to his face. His eyes rolled back as he comprehended the crimson liquid that dripped from his hand.

Zolo’s deep green eyes were strewn with helplessness. In this situation, he had to be decades older than the others—even if he was the same age as Reeve and even younger than some of the rebels that followed him.

“I...I don’t know, Reeve. I don’t know, but you have to stay with me!” He said almost believing himself, but he knew. He had seen something similar to the blast that injured Reeve, but that was a long time ago.

“It doesn’t look too good for me...does it?”

Zolo back peddled furiously over the sand. Behind him, he saw the dot of a five-story building that peaked from a large dune.

“No! Look, there’s base. As soon as we’re there, I’ll fix you right up.”

“I can’t see...everything is so....”

The two carrying Reeve picked up the pace. Their legs were burning as if made of the scorching sand they were crossing. With each thump of their feet, the pain increased.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

With Reeve barely conscious, they reached the building drowning in sand. One of the windows had been removed. Reeve’s slack body was carefully passed through it. They entered the sand buried tomb of the rebel base.

“Ward, hurry and bring me the medical kit!” Zolo yelled to the other man, “We aren’t going to be able to get him downstairs like this.”

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Ward helped Zolo set Reeve on a yellowed, dusty office desk and sprinted from the room.

Zolo tried to entertain Reeve's consciousness. He spoke softly holding Reeve's head.

"We made it back, man. You're going to be alright now," Reeve's eyes were fading, and his eyelids were sinking. Zolo searched for something more to say and slapped lightly on the boy's face. "You should have seen...she was something else, Reeve. When I went into that trailer to complete my mission, there was a girl inside it, and she was beautiful! I got the strangest feeling from her. I felt like I've known her for years. That's not normal, you know?" He leaned in close. "My face was uncovered, and I swear...she looked at me the same way..."

Reeve's eyes closed.

Zolo tapped his face repetitively.

They reopened. His dry lips moved slightly. "She...saw you?"

Ward came from behind Zolo and spread a medical kit on the table.

Zolo immediately wiped antiseptic on Reeve. Then he grabbed a needle and suture. He looked at Reeve apologetically. "Sorry Reeve, we don't have any pain killer."

He punctured his friend's abdomen with the needle. Reeve let out a cry, but it was weak and barely conscious. As he frantically stitched Reeve the way had learned only from books, he noticed Ward had not returned alone.

In the darkness of the doorway stood a pale man, nearly as tall as the door frame. He had a rigid and grisly presence with grey eyes that bore emotionless holes in his skull. They sat above a thick and slightly unsymmetrical jaw. His thinning remains of dull hair were half combed to the side, pointing in a similar direction as his broad nose.

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The emotionless gaze was now barreling at Zolo as he finished the sutures.

“Would you stop staring at me like that, Niall? I can’t finish the suture properly if I have you acting like you’re about to reprimand me for something. After today, I’ll be an officer anyway.” He tried dismissing the man with that. It didn’t work.

Niall strode forward in black, knee high leather boots with slow, particular steps. He watched Zolo tie the knot on the stitch and spoke with a slow rasp at the end of each word and heavy breath, “Yes. Lord Vistomus does have his favorites, but that depends now, you say you wur seen. Is dat true, boy?”

Zolo regretted speaking the words to the now unconscious Reeve. He laughed dryly as he wiped his hands on a towel, “I don’t see how that matters as long as I got the job done.”

“But you *wur* seen?”

For a few seconds Zolo tried to understand what was being thought behind Niall’s gloomy eyes. When he realized the void face would reveal nothing he said, “Yes. I was.”

“Mmmm.” Niall nodded.

“How does that have any effect on me becoming an officer?”

Niall turned his back and walked away with the same slow clunking of his boots.

“I’m not sure. Today, for a mission dis important, it’s not me you answer to.” He gestured to the doorway with a bony index finger. “It’s him.”

Lurking in the doorway, was a cloaked man around the same age as Zolo. His form had nearly blended with the shadows except for a red clasp at his neck and the crest shaped like a snake with two heads facing away from each other—the uniform of an executive in Lord

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Vistomus' rebellion. That was taught to every rebel when they first arrive.

“Master Ares,” Zolo said respectfully and bowed his head.

Ares chuckled.

He spoke in a cool conceited tone. “No need to scare him, Niall. He’s right. After today he’ll be promoted. It doesn’t matter that you were seen, Zolo. Only one thing matters.”

Zolo signaled his understanding with a nod.

Ares continued, “Did you plant the tracker?”

“I did, and before the girl ever knew I was there.” He assured Ares.

“Excellent. You are always reliable, Zolo. Lord Vistomus will want to talk with you soon about your promotion.”

Zolo’s eyes lit up with excitement at the words.

“We have a... different proposal in mind for your role in the organization. However, that can wait until my return. I am needed on a mission in the North.”

Ares was gone.

Zolo could feel the pressure in the room fade like a phantom presence had left it. He cleaned his tools under the watch of Niall. Carefully, he disinfected the needle so that the tool would be ready when it was needed again, but it slipped from his hands. The sharp point landed first as the needle fell onto the blood smeared table.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



### RECKLESS AMBITION

“**Y**ou’ll be staying here a little bit longer, I’m afraid,” a heavy-set female nurse said. Eos was unhappy. His limbs were stiff and his muscles felt like they were withering away. “*Why?* Call Colonel Kane at Point Edward headquarters. He’ll tell you that he needs me somewhere else right now. Besides, my shoulder feels great, I can move it like I was never shot.” He demonstrated his range of motion vigorously.

There was a hitch in the rotation as he completed a circle with his arm. The scabbing in his left shoulder opened and red seeped through his bandages like a drop of spilled juice expanding on a white table cloth. Eos put his arm down and made sure not to show even the slightest inclination of pain.

“You’re lucky,” the nurse flipped through papers on a clipboard, “No bones were hit. A perfect flesh wound. It should be healing up nicely by now...however, you’ve been in a coma for over a week.

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Blood tests were fine; no head injury; in fact, everything looks normal. There's no explaining it."

Eos noticed some arrangement of beef and mashed potatoes at his bedside. There was a pull that resisted him as he reached for it. Something was attached to his uninjured arm. His forearm resembled a telephone pole: wires were attached to him and draped across to various machines and sensors.

"We're going to have you stay for a few more days until we can determine why you entered the coma. I'll have another nurse come in to feed you so that you don't undo any of the sensors." She turned around to write on her clipboard. Beeping monitors spoke repetitively to each other and filled the room with artificial noise.

Eos had given up trying to talk his way out of the hospital. Getting out would be his next mission, but the task at hand was to eat. Hunger clawed at his belly with the fury of a week without solid food. He yanked out the IV first, then the sensors. By the time the nurse turned around, Eos had gulped down the last bite.

She blinked in disbelief.

"You...now were going to have to reattach all of those! Couldn't you have waited?" She said irritably.

"Actually, that won't be necessary. I told you—I'm ready to leave now. Before I go though, can I get some more of this? It looks like a lump of mush, but it wasn't too bad," he shot an innocent smile at the nurse.

"You can't just leave without being released! And this is not HQ. Food is rationed so, unfortunately, that's all you get until the dinner rations."

Eos squinted at her resentfully.

"Can't you give the guy a break?" An upbeat voice traveled through the doorway.

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Eos recognized it immediately.

“Major Clark!” he shouted, overjoyed.

Major Clark swayed into the room with one hand in his pocket and the other pointing at Eos with his thumb. “The guy is a war hero after all. He saved an entire Special Forces Unit!”

The nurse was unsure whether the statement held any truth and she didn’t appreciate the up-beat mood that Major Clark brought with him.

“I’ll see what I can do...” she grumbled.

As she wobbled towards the door, Major Clark leaned in to Eos and whispered not so quietly from behind his hand, “Don’t worry. I’ll give you my meal rations on our way out. It’ll stop me from putting on the pounds anyway,” he patted his belly, “I’ve got to impress Maria when I see her!”

A warm smile spread across Eos’ face. He laughed at Major Clark’s clear disregard for proper protocol. “Our way out?” he asked.

Major Clark put a finger to his lips.

The nurse eyed the two as she left the room. The second she was gone, Major Clark shot a cunning look to Eos, “C’mon! We’re sneaking you out.”

Eos hopped out of bed, smirking like a child who got to stay up past bedtime.

Major Clark tossed him a stack of clothes.

“Put on the uniform and we can get out of here. Colonel Kane needs to talk with you urgently.”

Eos raised a brow at Major Clark to remind him that he was forgetting something.

“Yes, and I’ll get you more food on the way out,” he shook his head, exasperated. “You’ll have to eat on the go because we’re under a time crunch. Colonel Kane has a mission for you and it relates to what

## RECKLESS AMBITION

he's been investigating—Hyperborea. That's as much as I know, so don't try to get anything more out of me.”

Eos' heart jumped at the word. He knew it was the answer to the piece of him that felt missing. Wild thoughts of what the mission could be overtook his conscious as he was handed his food in the cafeteria.

He had grown so accustomed to the antiseptic smell of the hospital that the air shocked him with the scent of freedom when he stepped outside. Eos pulled up his sleeves to fully enjoy the mild weather.

“What were you doing here today, Major Clark?”

“I stop by every day to check on you. I've been worried...we all have. I got a call that you woke and headed straight over on Colonel Kane's order.”

Eos was comforted by the concern, but something else won his attention. “Major, what happened on the mission?” Eos asked the question that had worried him since he woke. “Did Squad Two get rescued?”

“The mission was a success thanks to you, Eos. Like I said you're a real war hero now. However, Major Seth Skye and another member of Squad Two had already been captured while scouting ahead. We're trying to locate them still.” Major Clark opened the door of the vehicle that was waiting for them, but paused before stepping in. His face grew serious and full of remorse. “There's one more thing I forgot to mention. Braxton's on his way to headquarters. He'll probably get there before we do...and he's all sorts of mad that you got shot. So are we. It should never have happened.”

Eos' daydreams of Hyperborea evaporated, and the presence of Braxton condensed in his mind. Considering exactly what this meant for him, Eos simply said: “Good. I have some things to say to him myself. Major Clark, I'm going home,” he announced, “I can't be away from my sister any longer.”

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They both got in the car and departed to headquarters with a breakneck speed.

“That’s something you’ll have to clear with Braxton as you know. We don’t want to keep you here against your will, but Braxton is in control of your assignments. I’d send you back to your sister if I could. More important than anything right now, is your health complication; being in a coma for a week is no small issue. You’re needed as soon as possible for this task, but Colonel Kane isn’t going to want you to do anything else until we understand what happened.”

Eos was suffocated by everyone’s telling him the way his life would go. If he had to endure being ordered around much longer, he was going to lose his sanity. Luckily, he knew the cause of his week-long nap.

“Actually Major, I can explain that. It was more of a recharge really.”

Major Clark was taken aback.

“You *know* why you were in a coma? How’s that possible?”

“It’s happened before. Eight times to be exact. The first two lasted a couple hours. The next few were longer, but Maxima figured out how to fix the problem using her powers...” an idea formed as the words left his mouth, “That’s it! I’ll use that to let Braxton release me back home. I’ll tell him that I need Maxima to heal me!” He sat back in his seat proudly that he might have cornered Braxton into letting him return home.

“Hold on, explain to me why it happens in the first place and how you’re going to use it to get out of here.” Major Clark couldn’t keep up with Eos’ thoughts.

Eos stroked his face as he thought about how to explain the phenomenon. “I don’t fully understand myself, but I guess the best way to put it is that I over exert my powers.” He held out his right arm

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for display. “When I use it for too long, I begin to feel this burning sensation. Then everything becomes like a dream and I pass out. Maxima learned to use her energy to help me recover when it happens.”

“I think I understand...” Major Clark said, but obviously did not.

By the time they reached the castle that served as headquarters, they had thoroughly exhausted the topic of Eos’ tendency to over spend his abilities.

Eos found himself staring at war pictures and plaques that hung on the stone walls of Colonel Kane’s office. He danced around to avoid the tickle of Ruger’s tongue on his leg. Major Clark bent down and cupped the dog’s face in his hands and gave it a hug. Even with the relaxed relationship between the two comrades, it was too informal. Eos waited for a remark from Colonel Kane, but he said nothing.

A different picture called his attention from the last time he was here. It was of a younger Axel Kane, with fewer traces of gray in his hair than he had now. There was a girl in the picture; about ten years old with the same side swept bangs she wore today, but perhaps a few shades lighter. Still, the eyes were unmistakable. The photo must have been during the time when Lieutenant Skye and her brother first took refuge with Colonel Kane.

Then Eos found himself looking at the same photo as during his first visit: the only other picture with a woman in it. The woman that Colonel Kane held hands with looked so familiar. Her features were like someone he knew, but he couldn’t reach the connection and his brow gave a restless twitch in annoyance.

The Colonel had a look of shame that daunted him. His prideful ambition, which usually filled the room, was wounded. “Bruce, I have

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to ask you to give me a moment alone with Eos. Come back after I talk with him. I need to ask a favor of you.”

Major Clark obliged.

Colonel placed his hands wide on the desk and stood. With a head bowed he said, “I know I have no right to ask this, but please...forgive me.”

Eos was perplexed. The Colonel was asking for *his* forgiveness?

“Sir—” he began, but Colonel Kane wasn’t finished.

“No, I pride myself on executing a mission perfectly. I stake my reputation on it—no mistakes. My mission was to protect you,” he grimaced with a sad, internalized pain. “I have failed. I’ve spoken with Squad Three about new tactics to ensure your safety in the future.”

“Really, Colonel, it’s ...” Eos sputtered. He had no experience reacting to a superior apologizing to him, but then again, he was nearly killed. He might as well make it worth the pain. “My arm is almost healed...but since I did get shot, I hope you have something to tell me about this Hyperborea that you’ve been investigating. We did make a deal after all.”

Colonel Kane nodded. “And you have definitely paid your side of the deal, but all I have for you is a history lesson. Are you well versed in ancient mythology, Eos?”

The mere uncertainty on Eos’ face was answer enough.

“Let me tell you what I’ve found while reading up on my ancient history. There are several *lost lands*. Lands that are mythological in origin and legend, but that were never discovered once man had the capacity to do so. One of history’s lesser preserved lost lands was called Hyperborea. The ancient Greeks believed it was hidden far north, beyond the source of the north wind which they called Boreas. The people were called *Hyperboreans* and they were fabled to have superhuman powers. The few encounters that are recorded, have these

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people descending from the far North. Their super natural powers sounded familiar to me because of you, Eos, but unfortunately beyond a few passages from ancient writers like Herodotus, I only have more theories to go off right now. Hyperborea could be anything, but I have a suspicion the power that you wield has been seen on Earth before...a long time ago. Everything is speculation, so I won't guess Braxton's stake in this myth. The best I can do is give you a tip off. I have learned that Braxton is holding a meeting in a few minutes about the classified topic which he calls '*Hyperborea*'. Your mission is to get in there whatever the cost."

Eos' hopes were dashed immediately. "That's going to be impossible! Braxton would never allow me to listen to that kind of meeting."

"How bad do you want to learn what Braxton is hiding from you, Captain Eos?" Colonel Kane appealed to him, "You'll find a way. Any information you bring back will aid me in digging deeper. Oh, and one more thing—General Braxton will undoubtedly want to reassign you now that you've been shot. If you truly intend to follow this path with me, if you want to work against General Braxton and learn whatever it is that he keeps secret, then you must refuse!"

Eos hesitated. If he had to stay, he'd want nothing else than to work with Colonel Kane—although preferably with no more injuries. But Eos wanted to return to Maxima. He was going make Braxton know that and accept it if possible. He touched the scar under his eye and then lowered his hand to the empty holster at his waist. All men checked in their firearms in the headquarters.

"I'll do my best, Colonel."

The Colonel gave a forced laugh, "Look at me, asking for more favors when I failed at my own mission and still haven't paid you back

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fully on our deal. I'm hopeless." He scratched his head and diverted his eyes.

Eos brought his hands together behind his waist at attention. "No matter what you say, sir, or how you feel that you've failed... I'm in this all the way now. Either we outsmart Braxton, or I'll never find out what Hyperborea is. I've been here long enough. It's time I learned what he's hiding and get back to my family. You can pay me back later." His chest swelled as he said it.

With a smile, Colonel Kane looked up at the driven boy before him. The enthusiasm was contagious as the fire began to burn again in Colonel Kane's green eyes. He burst out in a genuine laugh this time. "Sometimes the youth inspires the adults. Perhaps that's the way it should be," he mused. "Exactly what I wanted to hear. Now, we need to move quickly; here's what you're going to do when you get to the meeting..."

A pair of doors was all that stood between Eos and the meeting two floors above Colonel Kane's office. He repeated the Colonel's plan in his head. It meshed well with his own plan to convince Braxton to let him return to Maxima. If he mixed the two together, he might just pull everything off. As it was, there was already a twist of fate: no guards were stationed outside the doors. Light shone from a slit between them and Eos put an eye to it, hesitant to jump into Braxton's den.

Through the sliver of vision, he saw a meeting table with generals on each side. The table had a golden trimmed, navy colored block embedded in the center. Eos strained to see the far side of the room with a fluttering heart and a jarring anxiety. General Braxton sat in a chair, facing away from the other generals, at the head of the table. Each olive and navy striped uniform faced the same way, all staring at

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a large presentation board that was framed by two massive, hanging tapestries bearing the North American Sector crest.

The board had blueprints pinned up like wall paper. A blond man in a white suit and glasses was presenting...something. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't see what was on the blueprints and papers. He pressed his ear to the door.

Eos recognized Braxton's voice. Only pieces of the dialogue made it to his ears, "No chance of...another generator...Doctor...designed this."

The man standing before the room spoke in a raspy, mechanical voice that was greased with a crazed drone. "Exactly, that's why I need more testing...turn the Hyperborean over to me."

Braxton refuted him with words Eos could barely discern, "Mind your place! Besides, we have no control...the Hyperborean prisoner...a wonder he remains confined. We already...the artifact to you...that should be enough for your research."

Eos reeled at the words. What prisoner was Braxton keeping?

Voices shouted in the room.

"...Far too dangerous!"

"He...and could escape again!" the outcries denied the strange man dressed in white his request.

He shrugged them off, "...Your decision...will remain unproven until its first use...risk is yours...her life...not that it matters to me," the man snickered from behind his glasses.

"It's a risk we'll take if...now—your research in weaponizing the..." Braxton snapped more indiscernible words.

"I've had a breakthrough on the Hyperborean power...further. The fourth lab needs...more bodies...using prisoners of war." The voice danced in a hysteric frenzy. The topic excited him.

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Eos pulled his ear away from the door and looked through the slit again with unrestrained curiosity. All this talk had completely distracted him of any plan, but he was learning more than he could have hoped for. He watched as the thin, blond man swayed his six-foot-two frame over to the table.

A painfully tight pressure clamped down on Eos' neck. He turned. A cold rush came over him as if the coming winter wind had traveled inside the castle and enveloped him. A dark brown hand gripped Eos. His vibrating pulse stopped for a beat as his heart became lodged in his throat.

"I've never seen you around here, little mouse. What are you doing scurrying around?" A towering, bald man beamed down at Eos with a heavily contoured brow that hung over his small eyes. His head was attached by an intimidatingly thick neck. "If you wanted into the meeting why didn't you say so?" He smiled fiendishly and led Eos by the neck through the double doors before there was time to think.

Eos was paraded in. General Braxton whipped around and squinted at the intrusion with an icy look of annoyance. His voice boomed through the room with unnecessary volume, "General Guren, did you bring the records I requested? What else did you bring with you...?"

"The record clerk was not there to unlock the room, but I will try again in a few hours. I found him, sir. He was spying on our meeting outside the door." General Guren answered.

"Not very stealthy for a spy, are you Eos? Is this true?" General Braxton asked with viscous undertones as he leaned forward in his chair. "If you heard anything you shouldn't have...it would be unfortunate for you...and your sister."

Eos accepted that his heart rate was out of control. He breathed deeply, remembered his plan while fighting with the panic, and

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immediately redirected the conversation as planned. “No General Braxton, I was told you were in a meeting, and despite being told to wait, I came to find you myself.”

General Braxton pointed at the board and motioned for the man in white to clear it. He unpinned everything from the board. Eos wanted desperately to get a glimpse of what they had been discussing but knew it would give away his true intentions.

“Doctor Fleischer, the presentation will have to wait.” He turned back to Eos, “Well boy, if you have something to say, you have your audience.”

Eos stood alone amongst the silent anticipation of the generals. He summoned his reserves of courage and shouted, “It’s time for me to go home!” It blurted out more demanding and confident than he had even intended.

“You’re bolder than our Doctor here,” General Braxton spoke calmly and gestured to the man rolling up the blue prints. “What makes you think you can tell the head of the North American Sector, in front of his generals no less, that you’re making the decisions? I still have plans for you. In fact, after Colonel Kane’s clear failure to protect you, you’re being reassigned to new leadership. Eos, you will now report to General Guren.”

The big man grinned, his hand still on Eos neck.

Eos grasped frantically for the correct response.

He tore forward and broke free of General Guren’s hand.

“It was not his failure! I made a choice to protect the Squad, and that is the reason I must see Maxima. I was unconscious for a week. It wasn’t because I was shot—it was because my powers put a strain on me. It was because of this!” He pulled up his sleeve and flashed his black arm before the room. “When it happens, only Maxima can help me to recover. I could relapse at any moment,” he said not knowing if

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the statement was true. It very well could be for all he knew, for he had never passed out without Maxima present. He would tell Braxton whatever he needed to so that he could return to Glenn and Maxima. “She can heal me with her energy,” he finished.

Braxton’s king was put in check. In this game of chess, this jockeying for position, he was being cornered by Eos. He was quickly running out of moves. All he could do was stare down the boy with fury as he struggled to analyze his options in front of all the generals.

“You seem healthy enough to me. Am I expected to believe this story? You’re going to stay here and you’re going to help us retake Sherbrooke from the European Sector.”

Eos’ bluff was called, but he continued with it. “Are you willing to let me fight on the battlefield when I could fall unconscious again? I thought you needed me alive to help power the Sector.”

General Braxton eased himself back in his seat, “I’m not going to play games with you. You will help retake Sherbrooke; by then the generator should be completed. I can’t have the European Sector so close to the United States border. After you have aided in this, I will allow you to return home. Until then... you do as ordered,” Braxton said, thinking he had successfully evaded Eos with a small compromise.

Eos heart leapt. He was going to be with his sister soon! In his excitement, he barely remembered the last important detail. “If I’m going to fight one last battle for you—then at least let me do it my own way. I want to continue to fight under Colonel Kane in Squad Three.” Though General Braxton may have appeared to dodge any damage to his appearance of authority, it was merely a disguise for a tactful retreat.

“Hmm...” He pondered the idea while slicking back his hair, “If your injury was truly a sacrifice because you decided to soldier up...then I don’t see a problem with that. I’ll speak to Colonel Kane

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about increasing his safety precautions.” General Guren started to protest, but General Braxton yanked the rug of privilege from beneath him. “I don’t want to hear it Guren! This is my decision and it’s final. I have something else in mind for you.” He put the finishing touches on his misdirection that made Eos’ victory appear like his own.

Eos almost let a gloating grin show as he walked from the room, but he decided not to pull back too hard on Braxton’s curtain of illusion. He had discovered key hints about Hyperborea, was fighting under Colonel Kane for the remainder of his stint, and was going home to Maxima and Glenn after just one more battle. He had won, and for a brief second, the eagles on the North America Sector banners were proclaiming his victory over the room.

∞ ∞ ∞

A gleam shone off a small golden object as it was lobbed across the room. Colonel Kane reached out and caught it without breaking his focus on the paperwork before him. He continued filling out the form until he signed his name on the last line. Then he looked at the small piece of metal in his hand and set the key on his desk.

“Alright, Axel, I managed to get it for you, but that’s as much as I can do. It wasn’t easy might I add.” Major Clark stood in the doorway with a nervous aura. He kneaded his fingers together and looked past his superior with a glassy stare. “I had to flirt with the clerk to get it so better appreciate the sacrifice. I want extra leave for this. I’ve been meaning to take Maria and James on a vacation.”

Colonel Kane smiled weakly at Major Clark.

Bruce Clark sent Kane a doubtful look. “If you get caught looking into what you’re about to...I can only imagine what they’ll do to you.”

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Kane stood up confidently, looking at the key. “Don’t be concerned about me. I’ll just have to not to get caught. Go take a break Major. After the info Eos gained at Braxton’s meeting, I know exactly what to look into. Now that I know they’re moving war prisoners to a laboratory and holding ‘the Hyperborean prisoner’ in—”

“Ah ah ah,” Major Clark shook his head. His eyes focused again as he warned, “I don’t want to be in the know, sir. I have a family that relies on this job. I’ll do everything I can to support you and Eos from behind the scenes, but I can’t be on the chopping block when it all goes wrong.”

Colonel Kane put his head down and was quiet. “I would never let you go down with me, Bruce. You know that...I couldn’t...” His throat tightened. “Ruger and you are all I have to remember her by. Lailah would...” He tried to say more, but only sounds like a choked cough came out.

Major Clark entered a similarly pained emotional state. He turned away in case any tears came, “You know that’s why I say it, sir. I share your hopes and ambitions, but for that reason I don’t want you to endanger yourself to this extent.” The Major let his head fall. He looked through his drooping bangs at the picture of Colonel Kane and Lailah. They held each other’s hands in a happy memory, but it only brought sadness through the coffee brown filter of his hair. “I’m glad she left you Ruger before she passed. He’s reminded you not to do anything foolish so far. But she deserves that much, sir. Don’t be sticking your neck out so recklessly!”

Colonel Kane did his best to restore his speech to normal. He understood. “Of course; thank you Bruce. Your sister’s watching over me. You don’t have to worry about my neck.” He tucked the key into his breast pocket over his heart. “I’ll have it back to you in an hour.”

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Below the castle, Colonel Kane unlocked *the cage*, as it was called, a highly-classified area of the records room kept under lock. He opened the door into the room of dangerous answers. Prisoners of war, a Hyperborean prisoner...it all lead to one possible place: the research division, but even he didn't know where such affairs could take place or what exactly the affairs were.

He turned the corner around row after row of archives, snaking through the aisles. He had to be quick. Getting caught was unthinkable.

There! He found the aisle containing the research division archives.

He thumbed through files until he reached a folder that was relatively thin compared to the ones surrounding it. Its heading read: *Hyperborea*.

Everything that Braxton kept secret, everything he suspected the man was doing to undermine the North American Sector had to be on these pages. The temptation of skimming the documents instead of taking them back to his office won him over.

His head spun as he glanced over the first few pages. Someone within the Sector had been meeting with a group referred to as the Hyperboreans...and from the looks of it they would meet again. A sickening feeling rose as each word revealed a new, disturbing detail, but something was wrong. He flipped to the third page. Thick black lines were strewn throughout each paragraph. The content was incomprehensible. He clenched his fist and crumpled the edge of the folder in defeat. *Why?* The document shouldn't have been redacted! He knew a little bit more than before, but it wasn't enough. He had a date that was still to come and a location. Everything else he needed to know to prove his theories was covered up already. They were steps ahead of him.

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

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Heavy footsteps entered the room.

His anger transformed to worried fear at the sound. He fumbled about, placing everything back in proper order. He returned the folder to its shelf. He may not have gained all the answers he wanted, but he had an idea of where he could catch Braxton's plans unfolding.

He walked swiftly towards the door.

It was occupied by General Guren.

"You shouldn't be down here, Colonel."

The Colonel bore down. There could be no back peddling now. Playing coy would win him no pardons. "I had research to do. Can't a man educate himself, General Guren? I accept all punishment for doing my job."

"You know, I've never liked you much Kane. I never liked that General Braxton lets you have your own Special Forces units to play with either. Sure, you get the results better than anybody, but you're too ambitious for your own good. Luckily for you, I've made sure all the classified documents relating to your recent snooping were redacted. So, there's not much for you to find, but still...someone let you back here without our permission. I'm going to find out who." General Guren closed down on Colonel Kane.

Colonel Kane stared the caveman browed general down and directed all his ambition and disdain through the man. "Good luck, but I do have a question for you," he said as his stomach simmered in disgust, "Kurt Fleischer...what is that sadistic man doing in the research division? What is he doing to our own citizens?" There was no point in trying to hide anything. "On the record, there are three laboratories under the North American Sector Military, but I'm going to guess there's one more. Am I right?"

General Guren's pupils bulged. How had Colonel Kane determined so much?

## RECKLESS AMBITION

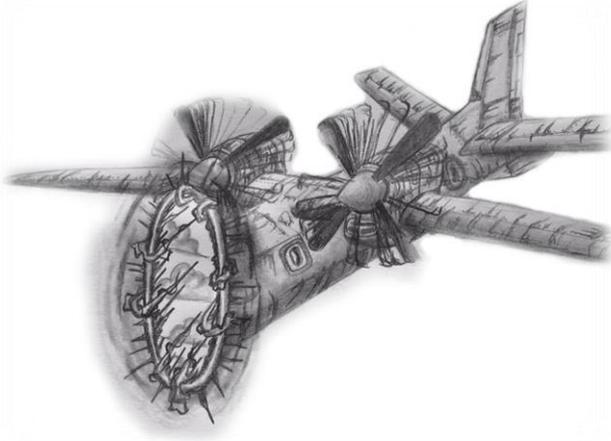
“That’s all the answer I needed.” Colonel Kane said and walked past the furious man.

“Always too ambitious for your own good. I’ll be watching you. You won’t be General Braxton’s golden child after he learns what you were snooping into. You won’t be able to breathe funny without me knowing!” The big man howled as he watched Colonel Kane walk off.

Colonel Kane strutted away with long calculated steps, knowing that critical events were going to unfold soon. He wasn’t sure how his rank was going to hold up. He smiled to himself. *Good, keep watching Guren, because Eos, Major Clark, Squad Three...those are my secret weapons—my subordinates. The closer you watch me, the less you will see.*

“Oh, and I think you’ll want this.” Colonel Kane tossed the key over his shoulder and onto the ground in front of Guren.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



### THE TEARING

**S**taring, lost in the black abyss of undulating cloth, a middle aged European soldier was entranced with the man before him. There were whispers through the camp about his legendary feats—and he had only been fighting on the front lines of the war for six days, aiding the invasion into the North American Sector from Canada. Still, after that short amount of time the whispers were heard and retold by every soldier in Canada. They talked of a cloaked man who slew his enemies with a flash of light; who walked through the North American soldiers as if they were simply weeds to be cleared from his path. He would disappear in a burst of speed. Foxholes that once contained enemy combatants would only be ditches of death mere seconds later.

Now he sat in a rickety wooden chair that had been pulled out of one of the destroyed houses from a village not far from the camp. The wood was splintered; the spindle legs were about to separate from the seat, but in the eyes of the men who all kept their distance and tried

## THE TEARING

their best to appear like they weren't conversing about him—the chair was a throne that this god of war sat in. The man, as far as they could tell it was a man, appeared human underneath his cloak. He had single handedly revived the invasion effort. Each soldier was in fearful awe of the rumors, or what some had seen with their own eyes.

The savior of the European war effort sat watching the soldiers who surrounded him; they never got too close or made eye contact. He heard bits of their gossiping conversations.

“I heard he’s called Ares by the generals.”

“They say that he cleared a village of sixty North American soldiers yesterday,” one chimed in.

Another confirmed it, “I fought alongside him; or at least I tried to, but there wasn’t much I could do before he had cleaned the little town of the North American’s presence.”

“Doesn’t even use a gun... imagine that!”

“It’s strange enough that he disappears every night.”

“He has powers that are beyond human!”

“The cloaked guy flies across the ground without so much as touching it!”

“He must be some new government project,” the wild rumors continued with no restraint. Some were fairly accurate to Ares surprise, while others were so outlandish that they nearly made him crack a smile. He was particularly amused by the notion that he was a *government experiment*. He remained in his throne and basked in the praise and awe.

“I know a higher up who told me that tomorrow is the last day he’ll be here. Says he’s doing all this in exchange for some kind of plane...a cargo aircraft I think I heard. It doesn’t make much sense to me; I wonder why he would need that?”

Ares heard these words and clenched his fist in frustration as he recalled exactly why he needed it so desperately. His mind was

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transported back in time. As he went back to the event that had caused his circumstances, an icy northern breeze blew through the camp and nearly pulled Ares' hood off.

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Ares clenched the cloth of his hood in his hand to prevent it from being torn back with the gust caused by the turbines of a twin-engine transport aircraft, an Antonov An-32 is what the European Generals had called it when they made the deal.

Its propellers both spun with increasing ferocity after the plane rolled outside of the metal air hangar. The walls of thin aluminum rattled, and the blast of air fought Ares' efforts until finally his hood whipped back. Only Bellia was near enough to see his face. Not much older than Ares, she too wore the same dark cloak that all members of the Mitad wore while on missions. Unlike him, she had not attempted to keep herself covered. She let her long blond hair flow back in golden waves behind her high cheekbones.

"I'm not ready for this," she told Ares with thin pursed lips. It was not the first time she had said it today, but her voice was more uncertain than ever.

"You are ready Bellia," he tried to reassure her. "You have to be. Lord Vistomus is keeping us on a tight schedule. We need the aircraft to be on Hyperborea soon. You don't have a choice and neither do I. If you can't get it off Earth then we need to know now before he's here to witness our failure," Ares said just as unhappy about the situation.

"I just...it's too much," her voice cracked, "I've never had to open the gate for more than one person at a time. Now you're asking me to keep an entire ship intact?" Bellia pleaded with Ares.

## THE TEARING

“You know I wouldn’t ask you to do it if there was a choice, but there isn’t. Only you have the ability. You know you’re our bridge. You’re the only one. Consider this training,” he yelled over the roar of the plane.

Dread fell over Bellia and it became impossible to swallow as she thought of the life of the pilot in the aircraft. *If she couldn’t hold the portal open long enough...* his chance of survival was in her hands. She knew her own abilities and had little faith it could be done. When she brought this problem to Ares, he had replied that pilots were replaceable, but the transport aircraft was much less so.

Through the window, the pilot gave Ares the thumbs up. He returned the gesture and moved down the runway. Ares nodded to her to begin opening the gate.

Bellia entered a sturdy stance outside of the hangar and stretched her arms out before her with open hands. She turned her palms away from her body while concentrating. With a life on the line she focused with more intensity than she had ever before. In the distant sky, there was a crackling, but it was not thunder—a purple energy formed high above the runway. It shook sporadically; little purple strands of the unearthly power waved in the air.

As Bellia focused, the plane charged down the runway. At the same time, the purple energy expanded into an oval shape and flattened out. The crackling grew as loud as the propeller engines and ripped apart the fabric of the sky.

“Good! A little more,” Ares ordered.

The plane left the ground and headed towards the great tear in the sky.

Bellia’s arms shook with stress and her body drained itself to expand the gate. It was now just a couple meters smaller than the wingspan of the Antonov An-32. Like some kind of abstract picture

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frame, the ring of lavender light frayed into waving threads of hissing energy at the edges. Inside the ring was a portrait of the sky, a mirror to another world—Hyperborea.

Tears formed in Bellia's eyes and she cried out, "I can't do it," with a choked sob.

"You must."

Her arms fell involuntarily from her shoulder level to chest height.

The plane soared towards the gate. With every foot it neared the portal, Bellia's arms slipped another inch. The nose of the aircraft passed through the picture frame-like portal, but Bellia's arms had already fallen near her thin waist line. The gate to Hyperborea was shrinking.

"It's too much...for me to handle," Bellia warned in exhaustion.

A tear fell from Bellia's cheek and plopped on the ground with a splash.

The portal contracted further until the ring closed in on the wings' propellers. With a burst, the gate fizzled into the size of a quarter and then disappeared. The plane was cleaved in two—each half fell to the ground of a different world.

The fuselage of the plane fell to Earth, rotating uncontrollably on its way to the ground. It twisted round and round, whipping through the sky before plummeting into a sheet of fire. The fire raged over the wreckage, sending smoke into the sky that scraped at the air with wispy fingers. It faded into the clouds like the departing ghost of the pilot who had fallen on the other side.

Bellia fell into Ares' arms. He silently embraced her tears with his chest and stared at the blaze down the runway.

"I'll make sure no one finds out," Ares tried to comfort her.

She sobbed, "That pilot died because of me!" Her tears created even darker stains on his black cloak.

## THE TEARING

He ignored her concern and continued, “I’m leaving for a while. Make up any reason you want for why I am gone. I’m going to make sure to protect you from any consequences, but you must be ready to keep the gate open when I return. The shipment must get to Hyperborea.”

Bellia shook her head on his torso. Her golden hair danced back and forth. She pounded a delicate fist against his chest.

“Think, another pilot’s life will be on the line again, Bellia,” he tried appealing to her.

“With what?” she asked with words muted from her buried head. “There’s no plane anymore.” She pounded on his chest with her pale palm again.

Ares detached her from his body, looked into her tear glistening eyes and said, “I’m going to take care of it.”

He departed from Bellia; the fire from the crash reflected off his eyes in a bright shade of red-orange.

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The light of a soldier’s match shined off Ares pale amethyst eyes and emphasized the amber flecks in them. Ares was still sitting in the same position when the match snapped him from his recollection. They had dared to stand closer to him than the rest had, and he caught a piece of their conversation that interested him.

The soldier cupped the match as he brought it to his cigarette so that the wind would not put it out. He puffed and then leaned into his friend and asked, “You hear about Orford?”

“Hear about it? I don’t even know where that is,” the friend snickered.

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The soldier blew a ring of smoke into the air. “You’ll be hearing about it soon. There are a lot of weird things going on in this war. Orford’s a tiny village here in Quebec. It comes right up to the United States border. We took it over two nights ago,” He paused for another inhale.

“Yeah, I heard we had made it to the United States Border,” the man returned.

“Well story goes that a few Americans had dug their heels in and held their ground when we took the village. Small village, less than one hundred people left there. No big deal, but these Americans barricaded themselves well enough that they survived a few days.”

“Let me get a light,” the friend said, half listening. “So, what’s the big deal? Did we finally get ‘em?” He leaned in to light his own cigarette.

“No, the North Americans took Orford back...” he said as if he was telling a ghost story.

“So what? We’ll retake it soon.”

“Let me finish would ‘ya?... So, they take Orford back, but how are they going to do that? We have the town pretty well secured.”

“Ok, so how’d they do it?”

A mixture of condensing breath and smoke filled the air around the two.

“The story is mental. I thought the guy telling me was demented! A single Special Forces unit did it. Turns out they have a secret weapon of their own. He goes around causing explosions with his bare hands. People are saying that he’s got super natural powers. Kinda like,” he threw his head back in a slight nod to Ares. “I mean he creates these spheres of light in his hands. You know what I’m saying? There’s something weird about this war; there’s more going on here than they’re telling us.”

## THE TEARING

Ares turned his head towards the two men with a newly piqued interest.

“You,” he stretched out his arm and motioned for the soldier who was telling the story, “Come here.”

The man stared, wide eyed, at Ares. “Me?”

“Yes, you. What was that you were saying?”

The soldier took a few steps forward but didn’t dare get any closer to the one that had been nicknamed *the war god*. “I...was ah...saying that Orford was retaken,” he stammered nervously and fumbled his cigarette to the dirt.

Ares got out of his seat and moved uncomfortably close to the man. “Yes, but what was that about their secret weapon? You said he creates spheres of light with his hands.”

The soldier stepped back to create space and put his hands out to try and calm down any situation that might break out. “I know. It sounds crazy to me too, but I’m just repeating what everyone’s been saying,” he lifted his gaze from Ares’ feet and looked into the shadows underneath his hood. The darkness trapped his line of sight and he couldn’t break away his stare.

“What else are they saying about this... super powered man?” Ares’ voice had an intimidating overtone of interrogation.

The soldier stepped back to ease the uncomfortably close conversation. Fear came over his eyes, but he couldn’t look away. “I don’t know. That’s what I’ve heard. Everyone is saying he’s like you.”

“Think hard with whatever you have inside your head,” Ares said slowly, “Did they say anything that stood out about him? Think.”

The man stuttered after thinking hard, “Well, he causes bright red explosions. That’s all I heard...err and that he has a black hand like a tattoo or something. That’s everything I can remember. I don’t even know if he’s real. Could be stories that bored recruits made up.”

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“Yes, could be...” Ares was deep in thought again. “What’s your rank soldier?”

“Private, sir,” he finally broke his fearfully entranced eyes away from the shadowy face.

“Bring your commanding officer over here.”

Ares fell back in his chair with disbelief. After all this time...he had finally found him! It had been so long that he had nearly written him off as dead. The message from Naith Lelantos had rekindled his belief...but now...

Finally, the long lost boy had revealed himself. Ares drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. Looks like Naith had been wrong about at least Eos’ location. Not that it surprised him.

The Private shook his head and ran off obediently. Minutes later a Lieutenant Colonel stood in his place. “You asked to see me?”

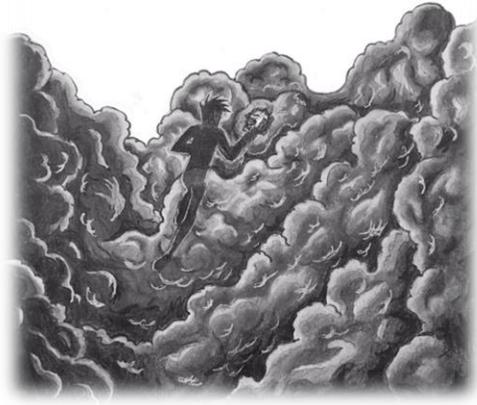
Ares barely heard the Lieutenant Colonel through his own thoughts. How long had it been? At least twelve years, he decided. Twelve years it had been since the toddler, Eos, had disappeared from Hyperborea.

“Did you request to see me or not, Ares?” The Lieutenant Colonel demanded impatiently. “These men may treat you special, but I will not. Don’t waste my time.”

His head shook with astonishment. An uneasy smile grew on his face at the thought of finally finding Eos. The officer in front of him only saw a shaking head and so he turned to leave with displeased grunt.

“Wait,” Ares said in a low voice as he became aware of the world around him again, “Tell General Allenby that, free of charge, I’ll be staying here a little longer.”

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### BEAST WITHIN

“Is this what you want?” A long nosed, European Sector Soldier with a pointed chin and large teeth jeered at two men tied to chairs while holding the chrome key to their hand cuffs in front of them.

“Forget this! These two hostages aren’t worth guarding while all *that* is going on outside. If the North Americans retake this area, we’ll be trapped in here. I’d like to trade them for some of our captured men too, but at this rate...” Another European Sector soldier jittered about frantically among his four comrades. The weasel faced man walked to the side of the window and peeked over the edge to see what the others were going on about. He watched from a third story window as a skirmish ensued in the streets below. A lone squad was advancing down the road on the south end of Sherbrooke while the main battle was being fought on the west side of the city.

“Shut up, Private!” The commanding officer hollered from the other side of the room.

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One of the prisoners had a split chin from being struck with a rifle stock during their capture. He turned to the other prisoner: a brunette man with bright pear colored eyes. They spoke quietly while the European soldiers all watched the streets below. “Pretty pathetic aren’t we Major Skye? I’d say this is the worst scouting Squad Two’s ever done,” he joked dryly as the ropes around their chest constricted their breathing and the handcuffs gnawed at his wrists.

Major Skye shrugged the best he could. He had a green and blue bruise that discolored his entire cheek and a scab over his right eye. He forced words from his dehydrated lips. They were barely audible, “Bad intel, not our fault really. Last we heard they had entered Sherbrooke. Next thing we know they’re taking over the neighboring village,” he licked his lips as he struggled to speak, “Just our luck...to run right into ‘em.”

*Bwoom!* Explosions sounded close by.

Four soldiers stood at the window in their tan uniform coats and maroon canvas, knee high boots. They were fascinated by something outside. They fought over cover space on the wall while taking quick looks out the window shouting in frenzied surprise. “Did you see that? What was it?”

“It’s got to be him! The North Armerican’s secret weapon!” The weasel faced man moaned. “We can’t stay here; we’ll be killed!”

The commanding officer was just off to the side of the door. His arms were folded, and he was struggling to make a decision. “Enough! No more talking any of you!” he barked at the room.

The four soldiers at the window ignored the orders.

The prisoner next to Major Seth Skye spoke again. His condition was hardly better than his squad-mate. “Think Colonel Kane is coming for us?” he wondered optimistically.

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Major Skye dropped his head. “We’re lucky if he thinks we’re still alive. Someone from our side is fighting down there...” he strained to pick his head back up, “probably don’t even know we’re here.”

The other man smiled the best his cracked lips would let him. “I can dream, can’t I? Maybe he’ll send another squad? He wouldn’t just abandon us.”

Major Skye gave up his fight and let his head fall. “Yeah...maybe.”

The European Sector superior stood from his chair. “Silence! Everyone!” he screamed with authority. The room fell silent, but the man couldn’t quiet the gunfire or get the full attention of his men. They carried on, gawking out the window. “*What* are you staring at?” he asked, grabbing one of the men by their collar and tore them away from the window to get a look.

The prisoner with the split chin was still awake. He contorted his neck to see what had distracted the soldiers from keeping watch over their captives; not that they had enough stamina left to try and escape. In his peripheral vision, he caught a glimpse out the window. At the end of the street, a handful of soldiers climbed over and took refuge between two walls of concrete road barriers.

*Bwoom!*

A red flash shone through the window and rattled the glass.

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Eos’ breathing was labored, and his arm was burning.

Sergeant Malin sprayed blindly over the barrier next to him. His eyes were wild with the thrill of battle. “Eos, you remember that sniper in Orford that you took out?” Malin asked.

An energy sphere was growing in his hand as bullets chipped away at the concrete barriers. The searing pain he endured in his shoulder

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was reminder of the event. He gritted his teeth as he pushed through the throbbing of his left shoulder. The pain in his right arm was far worse.

They were almost to their objective. All they had to do was make it to the end of the street. Just a few more blasts. Just a few more.

“How could I forget? I took a bullet to get him.” Eos replied with a grimace. He wasn’t supposed to be this deep in firefight. The sounds of battle were on him—far closer than he had ever planned on getting to them again.

Malin let out a war cry and jumped above the barrier. Scalding hot brass ejected from the side of his machine gun. Quickly, he got back under cover. “Well, turns out your pretty good at that whole non-lethal thing you have going on. We found him alive in the rubble. Well, mostly alive.”

“I knew he would be,” Eos said calmly as he flattened himself as close to the ground as possible. “What’s your point?” Each gunshot he heard made his shoulder wound twitch and reminded him how closely death courted everyone.

“Well,” Malin threw his arm over the barrier while still looking at Eos and spraying in bursts to keep the enemy at bay. He roared over the deafening sound of his own gun, “Now would sure be a good time to break your little misplaced sense of warrior code! I wouldn’t mind a few less of these guys shooting at me.”

Eos ignored him. He was doing things his own way for the rest of his time in the North and nobody was going to convince him otherwise. He looked around. Corporal Grant and Devers were busy laying suppressive fire as well. First Lieutenant Skye was being more specific. She risked being partially exposed as she picked off European Sector soldiers without mercy. Each shot filled her with more blood lust. They had her brother, and she would kill them all to get to him.

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Every brass casing that dropped from her gun was a piece of her silent, bottled up fury that she let loose with a precise vengeance.

Draven crouched pensively.

“Stop!” He ordered, “Cease fire! We’ll run out of ammo at this rate. We’ll need enough to make our exit. Don’t forget that.” The five members of Squad Three halted their fire. “We’ll never last like this.”

Captain Draven was interrupting Sergeant Malin’s blood maddening spree.

“Then what do you suggest, Captain? Should we invite them over to have a smoke with you so that we don’t waste any ammo while we kill ‘em?” He spat hot headedly.

“Just give me a few seconds. I didn’t expect for things to get this messy right away.” Draven tried to appease Malin.

“Oh, let me guess we can’t go with that plan because you smoked your whole pack! Let me give you some of mine to buy you a little more thinkin’ time.” As he spoke, a shard of concrete splintered off the barrier and stuck in Malin’s hand. “Oooow!” he moaned and pulled out the shard, “See? Their getting real close! Now let me do my job!”

For the first time, Eos witnessed Captain Draven lose his level head.

“You’ll do well to keep that mouth of yours shut.” he threatened without raising his voice, but that made it all the more cautionary. Malin was too bull headed to keep silent and would have run his mouth off again if it weren’t for a bullet that penetrated the roadblock just inches from his ear. Concrete shattered into chunks, scratching Malin’s face and drawing blood. His eyes opened wider than his mouth possibly could have.

“Switch to the other side for cover!” Draven screamed gravely as he realized that the enemy had surrounded them and fired from their flank. Squad Three dove to the road blocks behind them. Now they

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were just as susceptible to shots from their original opponents. They were trapped and without proper cover.

Eos remembered the last time he was in a desperate situation with Squad Three. It had nearly gotten him killed. An unsettling, acidic feeling gnawed his gut. He was only seventeen. He wasn't a soldier. At Orford he had been fighting from a distance, but this was different. They were trapped in the heart of enemy lines. Eos' hands shook visibly to the rest of the squad as he touched the scar under his eye. He feared for his life. Eos was scared. Not just a fear, but a sense mortal danger overwhelmed him. He shouldn't be here. He should be with Maxima and Glenn...and...home...home. Where was that?

Captain Draven was the only one in the squad who didn't look disoriented and frightened.

"Eos, I can only see one way out. I need you to create a cover for us. If the enemy can't see us and is sufficiently distracted...we might be able to escape." Captain Draven pulled Eos close and explained what he needed.

He looked at Skye, who had left her rifle on the other side as they had dived for cover. She was so full of dutiful revenge that she was falling apart under the pressure. Eos wondered if he would be able to keep it together if it was Maxima who had been taken prisoner. He imagined that he would rampage through the street and destroy everything in sight to get her. Was leaving Maxima alone with General Braxton much different? Lieutenant Skye's brother needed to be saved...and then he could go back to get Maxima. He scratched the scar near his eye as he planned his next move.

"Lieutenant, I still owe you for saving me when that soldier found our post. After this we're even!" Eos held a fully charged sphere in his hand. Sweat glistened from his face with a crimson glow. The red flooded his golden eyes with a war colored glaze.

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From his huddled position, he searched for a suitable candidate. It had to be tall and relatively close. He spotted the perfect building, jumped to a crouch, and poised his weapon. It was brimming with destructive power. He focused every ounce of catastrophic energy into the blast and acted impulsively.

“What are you doing?” Skye asked, “You don’t owe me—” she was interrupted by an explosion and the sound of structural failure. A sloshing of bricks and building material collapsed. The materials crashed down in a tumult of debris filled chaos. A waterfall of stone, sheetrock, and metal crashed down as clouds of dust rose in plumes.

No...he wasn’t doing this as repayment, or even to prove that he earned his place to Skye. Skye’s situation reminded him of his own. He was proving something to himself. He could take control and succeed through his own methods—no matter what. If he was going to turn the tables on Braxton, return to his sister, and escape—he was going to have to at least finish this last mission alive. They were surrounded, pinned from both sides. There was no other way that he could envision to get her brother out.

The debris cloud closed like a curtain on the area as the building finished crumbling to the ground. The gun fire slowed. Eos held his breath, hurdled over the barricade, and charged into the cloud!

No one had time to stop or even react to the reckless action. Captain Drave called out, “No, Eos. Don’t!” But his scream only reached a shadow disappearing through the dust screen that had been created.

From behind the squad, the opposite direction which Eos had left in, the gunfire picked up. It sounded as if three times the amount of men were firing now. Screams filled the dirty air. Squad Three lay low, with their mouths tucked inside their uniform to filter their breathing. Captain Draven’s mind sifted through the available options. How

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could he get his squad out safely and go after Eos? Was it even possible to do both?

*Crack! Crack! Crack!*

The shooting surged to a climax through the distorted air and then...all fell quiet.

Suddenly, boots mounted the road barriers that Squad Three was huddled against. Twenty-two pairs of boots pounced on the ground around them! Every gun was raised.

A newly arrived voice commanded, "Hold you're fire Third Squad!" and then asked, "Captain Draven, was that Eos who just ran into the enemy's territory?"

Draven looked up to see that the boots all had olive pants tucked into them with a bold, navy stripe down the side. He lowered his gun and scanned in front of him with scrunched eyes to keep out the dust. He found a man with greying chestnut hair that led the newly arrived reinforcement troops.

Afraid to report the news to his superior, Captain Draven swallowed, "Unfortunately it was, Colonel Kane," He rose to his feet in a salute. "Eos acted without an order."

Colonel Kane pierced through the dust with his gaze.

"What an impulsive boy...at ease Captain. Take your men with the reinforcements I've brought and let's secure the area around the hostage building." The dust began to settle. Colonel Kane searched it for movement in the direction Eos had disappeared. A faint rose colored pulse glowed within the thinning cloud.

Eos held his hand out, with a small sphere lighting his way. The light did little more than keep him from tripping in the dense, unbreathable cloud. A strangling pain tightened around his skull as he ran, like a metal headband that was shrinking on his crown. He kept low as he ran, until a burst of fresh air greeted him.

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Out of the cloud, he found himself at the opposite end of the street—right where he needed to be. Before him was the building where Major Skye was being held hostage. The European soldiers had left their posts near the building in their attempt to surround Squad Three.

With a cautious approach, he twisted the door handle. He kept his body pressed against the wall in case any bullets came through the door. He shoved it open.

No bullets came.

Eos entered a small, empty floor. Quickly he found the staircase and ascended the linoleum stairs with a resolute advance. He was going to save the Squad Two members and demand his return home.

The second floor was just as empty. Any extra soldiers must have been sent to fight in other parts of Sherbrooke. Eos moved on to the third level with an ache in his arm as he carried his red sphere. The nearly weightless energy in his hand felt heavy; its burden was growing.

The third floor was all that remained. Could it be this easy? Were the members of Squad Two really here? He turned the flight and ducked back immediately, clenching the railing with his free hand. A rush of surprise cooled his body. A guard stood between him and the top floor!

The guard pointed his gun where Eos had peaked around.

“Put your hands up and show yourself, kid!” The guard called down the stair case.

Eos froze and thought carefully.

*Crack!*

A warning shot was fired down towards Eos. “I mean it, show yourself now!” he yelled.

Eos squeezed his blackened fingers together and contracted the sphere in his hands. Little trails of energy leaked off the edges in a mist

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of exotic red vines and dissipated away. He now held a golf ball sized sphere. That would be enough to only wound the guard if he threw it at the wall nearby.

He flung the blast up and curled it around the railing blindly.

The burst echoed through the stairway. A chunk of wood tumbled down the staircase.

*Thud*, came the sound of a body slammed against the wall with bone breaking force. Eos cringed and closed his eyes in a silent plea for forgiveness.

Voices spoke hysterically from behind the door. Eos watched through a large hole as tan and maroon uniforms shuffled about the room. He readied another weapon, but the burning curse returned in his arm, and lightheadedness overcame him. The weapon was feeble in power and refused to grow as he commanded it. His vision was fading in and out of white fuzz.

A dark blur entered the fuzzy picture.

The muzzle of a European rifle was suddenly staring him in the face, greeting him with the familiar smell of grease and gunpowder.

“You’re going to march up the stairs, into that room, and you’re going to keep your arms at your waist you...freak!” the soldier spewed the words to a disoriented Eos.

Eos only saw a blur of a man that wobbled in his frame of vision. He did what he was told to the best of his ability. Slowly, agonizingly, he climbed each stair with a gun barrel prodding him along. Between the pain that filled him and the danger presented by the soldier, he felt an overwhelming desire to crush the man with his power, but he pushed out the dark thought with a shake of his head.

His passionate and spontaneous charge towards glory may have saved Squad Three, but he had given himself up too easily to the enemy

## BEAST WITHIN

in his weakened state and was no longer in position to rescue the members of Squad Two. He couldn't even save himself now.

Eos tightened every tendon and muscle in his hand to bare the pain and not crush the small orb he hid in his fist. Frustration only blinded him further, but his vision did return momentarily.

Five enemy soldiers surrounded him like wolves around injured prey. They eyed him harshly and sniffed at him with the nostrils of their guns. There was one at his back, three to his front, and one more, just off to the side of the door—in his blind spot. He nearly missed the man in his count as he entered. There was no way he could attack one without being shot down by the other soldiers. Five was just too many. Amongst the spasms of exhaustion and strain he could only wonder: *why hadn't they killed him?*

A bullet exploded from a gun in front of him.

*Crack!*

It buried itself in the floor near his feet. A second shot followed. Eos jumped back in time to dodge a third.

A weasel faced man jeered in a nasally voice, “Not so tough now are you super soldier? What kind of experiments did they do to make a freak like you?” He fired again near Eos for fun.

“Enough!” The man in the corner ordered sternly, “Ares ordered that the North American's secret weapon be kept alive if he was captured.”

“Sir, a bullet in the leg is still alive! Imagine how many of our countryman he's killed.” The nasally man pleaded.

Eos stared viciously at the weasel.

The leader in the corner considered as his subordinates wriggled with an uncontrollable desire for blood stirring amongst them.

“Come on, sir,” another begged.

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“Well, if you consider how many of our brothers he killed, I can overlook any nonlethal wounds so long as—”

*Crack!* A shot interrupted his speech.

*Crack! Crack! Crack!*

Eos accepted the delayed response his nerves were about to send through his body. He braced himself for the pain to come like the first time he was shot— only magnified many times over... This was it. He tried to chastise himself mentally for failing Maxima as the end flashed before him. He was scared; scared like the young boy that he still was and terrified like the man he wouldn't grow up to be.

He waited for the pain.

It didn't come. Instead the European soldier behind Eos and the three in front of him fell to the ground in crumpled heaps.

“I told you I'd protect you, Eos, but you can't go volunteering yourself for danger.” A voice teased Eos. He turned to see Colonel Kane pointing his pistol just over Eos' shoulder. Four shots found their targets in two seconds—a perfect job. Never had Eos been so happy to see the Colonel.

Eos almost let the tiny energy sphere he hid in his clenched hand slip away into nothing, but a motion in his peripheral vision convinced him otherwise. He watched the European soldier who stood in the corner of the room—Colonel Kane's blind spot. The enemy officer lifted his gun from his waist. It came up past his hip, past his rib cage, and almost to his shoulder level. Eos had no time to warn Colonel Kane, no time to shrink his weapon...no time fix the situation. In the time it took to draw in half a breath he realized: Colonel Kane was going to die. He had just exchanged his life for Eos'.

Without hesitation, Eos pushed his hand forward from where it rested. It was just an inch, but it created enough momentum. He didn't

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have enough time to even regret what he was about to do. Pure instinct controlled.

A pulsing marble of energy flung towards the soldier. He wrapped his finger around the trigger. It was a race of milliseconds.

The soldier's finger squeezed.

The molten energy shot towards its victim.

In a cacophony of violent noise, a shot was fired like a dreaded executioners axe falling on its target and Eos' power exploded in the corner of the room. It was a culmination of death.

The tan uniformed arm was ripped backward just before the bullet left the muzzle.

Eos had stuck first!

The bullet pierced the wall harmlessly, but all was not well.

Eos couldn't bear to look at what he had done.

Colonel Kane stood breathless. It took a few seconds for the quick exchange of attacks to settle in on him. Eos stood, equally stunned. The Colonel let out a stale laugh, "I came to save you and look what happened...looks like I still owe you, kid. I just can't stay out of your debt."

Eos couldn't argue the fact that he wasn't a kid, or that Colonel Kane hardly owed him, or even focus on the pain that smoldered in his arm and body. The deed he had performed was all that weighed on him.

"I just...I...that soldier...he's...he," Eos uttered. He was drawn to look at the scene but turned away immediately and covered his mouth with his innocent, unmarked hand. The splattered gore and human demise revolted him. There was no scream... no cry of pain. There had only been death: quick, messy, and permanent. His body gave in to exhaustion and shock.

Eos dropped to the floor and thrust his torso forward. He heaved.

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Colonel Kane's attitude softened. He went behind Eos and lifted his retching body up. Sometimes it was easy to overlook that he was just a boy who took on a great deal for his age. A reaction like this was long overdue.

"Breathe, Eos. Relax and breathe."

Eos wiped chunks of guilty grief off his lips and coughed, "I killed him, Colonel...he's dead because of me. He—"

"Shhhh," he quieted the panicking boy. He helped Eos to his feet and put a hand on his shoulder, "Thanks for saving me," he said with a sincere humbleness. It took a moment to find the proper words, "If you hadn't made that split decision, I'd be dead. Killing is never a decent thing, but if you have to do it to protect the one's you care about...I'm no expert, but then just maybe you'll get a pass." Eos shook his head as he wallowed in revolt. His eyebrows quivered and sweat mixed with tears

"But Colonel—"

"Eos, look into my eyes. Search for the darkness within them."

Eos stared at them slowly and searched without understanding. It took a while, but eventually he caught a glimpse of it. Usually Eos only saw the tea green, gleaming with bright ambition. It was Colonel Kane's drive that shined so bright, it blinded everyone from the darkness that hid below it. It was hard to put into words: like dark bags under the eyes that weren't there, like a slight discoloration that hid within the eye itself, like a beast that stared out from his pupil—imprisoned there. It was a beast that screamed in agony. It reached towards the light from within the tiny black portal to the world, but it was a beast that could never come out. It could never be erased. It was the culmination of years of fighting in war and rising through the ranks; the faces of those lives he had taken and even some spared, morphed into one ugly beast.

## BEAST WITHIN

Colonel Kane knew immediately when Eos had recognized it.

“Those are the eyes of a murderer. Never forget what that looks like because I hope to never see that in your eyes. You’re not like us soldiers yet. We’re all damned killers, but you’re still pure of heart. Stay that way. Get on your feet and move forward because you have people to keep moving for. Never forget that.” he urged.

Eos agreed solemnly. He had to get home. He couldn’t let anything keep him from protecting Maxima. Colonel Kane had given him a second chance. Every second away was another Braxton was alone with her. Whatever it took—that’s what he would have to do to protect the one’s he loved. There could be no going back.

“Besides,” Colonel Kane continued, “Though my timing was perfect, I didn’t show up to save you. Braxton wants you assisting the battle on the main front, but I know something he couldn’t keep hidden. He’s meeting someone nearby that isn’t from the North American Sector, which means they must be European Sector and Braxton is betraying us...or the ones he’s meeting are something else altogether...the Hyperboreans. Either way, I’m being watched too closely to make a move myself so I’m going to give you a little detour on your way to your next post.”

Eos was temporarily distracted from his despair by Colonel Kane’s news.

During all the action, the two members of Squad Two had been overlooked. Colonel Kane stared with pity on his subordinates who were beaten and tied to chairs. It was time to save the men of Squad Two, their original objective before Eos threw himself head first into danger.

“Help me get my men untied. Let’s get them out of here.” Colonel Kane couldn’t stand to see Major Skye in such a condition.

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Eos helped search the room for a key to the handcuffs. As he did, he couldn't help seeing fresh coat of red splattered on the wall. He would keep moving forward, for Maxima...he had to. He must, but he would never forget.

Colonel Kane shed some of the subdued mood and spoke with a little more enthusiasm than the room had heard in long while, "Eos one more thing...It depends on how things go, but this will most likely be your last mission in this war."

Eos looked out the window at the waste he had lain to the street below.

"I'm going to make sure that it is."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



## FINGERPRINT

**B**lunted light traveled through the semitransparent roof in an air hangar that was miles west of Sherbrooke. It cascaded down through a maze of arched support bars. The hangar door was open, allowing the outside to fully illuminate the newly acquired cargo carrier plane. Its belly was opened and ready to be filled.

Ares and Bellia were motionless in their matching black cloaks with red crests on their left breast. They stood in front of the opened cargo hatch with their hoods down around their neck. Ares measured up the man he was dealing with.

General Braxton did the same. He judged the boy to be transitioning out of his teen years, though still not fully developed into a man in the torso or in height. His face still showed hints of boyish

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charm behind nearly shoulder length black hair. Locks fell in strands over his thin face and curled upwards in a random fray.

Braxton tried to interpret Ares' intent, but the boy's eyes had a maniacal quality that was unreadable. There was something about him that was as wild and uncontrollable as the amethyst that sprayed out from his pupil and threatened to overtake the blue of his iris entirely.

"Before we proceed with the transaction," General Braxton spoke in a thunderous echo that filled the silent hangar, "I have reservations about our trade because of recent reports." He said with poise. Twenty men were gathered at either side of him in lines that led towards the hatch of the cargo carrier. Behind each of them were stacks of slatted crates. Over four hundred crates were gathered in total.

Ares spoke with a quiet smoothness, "Reservations? The Mitad have held up our end. Lord Vistomus has given you the knowledge and resources necessary to harness our power. What can we do to ease your concerns?"

General Braxton felt a dangerous tinge of menace behind the question. Ares made him considerably uneasy. Perhaps it was the skin. The pale gray, ashen tone was unearthly. Or perhaps it was his relaxed stillness. "There have been reports that you or another member of the Mitad have been fighting for the European Sector. If this is true it would negate any deal we had—" Ares interrupted General Braxton by putting out a silencing hand.

"I can assure you, General, I am not the only Hyperborean on your planet at the moment," he twisted the truth to settle Braxton's worry, "The Mitad have no interest in the affairs of Earth. In fact, this shipment of arms will be out of your world in a matter of hours."

Braxton was no fool. "I have a transmission jammer in place throughout the area in case the European Sector is listening in, or you try to make contact with them for any reason. You've chosen a location

## FINGERPRINT

too close to their territory for me to be at ease. I'd like to see the shipment off the planet myself, if you don't mind."

The delicate, blonde girl at Ares side spoke for the first time. She was gentle, yet firm. "Trust is necessary in deals like these, but you may watch as I open the gate if you feel it's necessary."

Given the situation, General Braxton had little room to negotiate more with the Hyperboreans. In fact, he was lucky they were being diplomatic to this extent. He nodded.

"Load the crates!" He ordered his soldiers with a finger pointed towards the open hatch in a grand and powerful gesture.

Through fuzzy edged circles of binocular lenses, surrounded by black, General Braxton stretched out his hand from inside the hangar entrance. Soldiers to either side of him broke away from formation and lifted hundreds of crates.

Major Clark tipped his binoculars down and turned to Eos and Corporal Grant.

"He's definitely trading arms, but with who? Who is that?" he wondered, "Either way this has to be happening behind the other generals' backs. They would never support trading arms near a battle zone like this. It's treason!" He seethed with hushed passion. "There's no doubt about it...Eos are you paying attention?"

"Yeah, it's just that..." Eos said distantly.

Major Clark sighed, "I know. Colonel Kane told me over radio. I remember my first... it was traumatizing," he paused, "but you can't dwell on it right now. Do you remember the conversation we had in Sires? Remember what I told you on the beach when you were lost and frustrated."

Eos remembered words that had given him guidance: *You need to decide what you want. Chart your own path, find some friends to travel it with you,*

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*and when the moment is right... you make your move! You have to be smart about these kinds of things though...*

“Now, the moment is right. This is your move! This is what we talked about! You have to get in there and your head has to be one hundred percent in it.” Major Clark put an arm around Eos. “Everything you’re after is right there in front of you. The past is chasing you. You can run towards your goals or away from the past, but don’t let negative emotions paralyze you, Eos!”

The dismal funk that had haunted Eos’ mind was lifted. Major Clark was right. He shouldn’t need to be reminded that everything he wanted was before him. He had to confront General Braxton! If he was lucky enough—he might just learn what General Braxton was doing in that hangar and who he was with. Every opportunity was on display for him, Eos just needed to reach out and seize them!

“Major Clark, you’re right. This is everything I’ve been waiting for. My sister can’t afford for me to hesitate.” Eos said getting fired up. Still, he couldn’t help but feel a dread as deep as he had at the battle of Sherbrooke. This time it wasn’t mortal danger caused the same feeling, but confronting the man who had dictated his life, manipulated his family, used him for his abilities, and confined him to the desert. Confronting him in front of the Hyperboreans, no less.

“That’s right. Look, if we get through this. I’ll have Maria cook a feast so big, I promise you won’t finish it! That’ll cheer you up,” Major Clark laughed sincerely as he imagined being home with his own family again.

Corporal Grant gave Eos an earpiece. “Take this. We’ll watch from here and let you know if we see any danger as you come around from the side. Keep the volume low, but not off. We won’t make contact unless it’s an emergency.”

## FINGERPRINT

Eos looked to Major Clark, but the Major shook his head. “You’re on your own for this one. I’m only here because Colonel Kane can’t be without blowing your cover. I can’t join you myself and risk losing my job. Being here is enough risk as it is, but we’ll support you the best we can.”

“Right,” Eos understood. He scratched the scar under his eye and rubbed his blackened fingers as he reminded himself why he must do this. Leverage and knowledge were at stake. He started his trip around the massive area surrounding the hangar.

Major Clark watched the still runway warily through his binoculars.

All attention was focused on whatever was occurring inside the hangar, leaving a clear opening for Eos to enter. All he had to do was run past a few soldiers near the entrance and his infiltration was complete.

Through his lens, nothing moved on the ground. He observed nervously as Eos approached the hangar. Something drifted with a flutter at the top of Major Clark’s circular lens of vision. He raised his binoculars higher. What he saw filled him with discouraging suspicion.

“Radio Eos, Corporal. Tell him to hold back for a minute. There’s someone on the roof.”

A black cloaked man crouched on the curved roof with steady footing. He watched from the height as Eos approached the side of the hangar. His red emblem of a two-headed serpent was covered by a steel pole that was thrown over his shoulder. He held the silver pole in place with his forearm and his hand hung over it loosely. The pole was crowned at the end with a black blade. At the base, the spear’s blade curved into two flanges like the wings of a bat.

“What is this, the middle ages? Corporal, the man on the roof is carrying some sort of spear.” Major Clark examined the stranger, dumbfounded. There was something dreadful about the confidence

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the crouched man exuded with only a melee weapon to defend himself. The question of how he had managed to get on the roof was something else altogether.

“Eos, *do not* go any further. You’re being watched! I repeat, do not go further,” Corporal Grant radioed. There was no response from the other side. The Corporal put his hand to his ear and spoke into the microphone of his headset again, “Respond, Eos! Stop!”

“He’s still moving toward the hangar. Why isn’t he responding?” Clark became worried.

“Come in, Eos,” Grant tried again. “The radio isn’t transmitting, Major!”

“Well fix it! Eos is running straight in there while being watched. I’m responsible for that boy’s life! Whoever that is...” he gritted his teeth at the feeling looming over him, “he doesn’t have good intentions and Eos isn’t in the proper state of mind for a fight,” Major Clark raised his voice. He thought of his son, James. He saw the same strength and potential in his son that he saw now in the dark-haired teenager heading into unseen danger.

“It’s not a problem on our side, Major Clark. I checked the equipment before I got here. Something must be jamming the signal near the hangar,” Grant said helplessly. “I don’t know what to do.”

Major Clark’s eyelids fell heavily with the weight of the choice he was about to make. He needed this job for the security of his family. In a few more years a promotion would surely come, and he could move his wife and son closer to his post. He couldn’t afford to be involved in this for Maria’s sake...for James’ future, but he could never face them again if he let a young boy he was in charge of protecting get hurt. He squeezed his forehead and eyelids in a tense conflict of interests and rubbed his temples as he debated.

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“I don’t have time to think about consequences right now.” He made a snap decision, stood, and burst towards the runway. Major Clark was aiming to meet Eos head on.

Eos noticed Major Clark as he approached just fifty meters outside the hangar. He slowed his run. Major Clark bolted ahead with gazelle like speed and watched the roof carefully as he moved.

The man on the roof shifted in his crouched position as another body approached. He sprung from his squat on the roof and stepped from the edge in a suicidal leap.

He fell elegantly from the height, but the trip to the ground was too high to survive. For just an instant, gravity drug him down with a stomach in throat lurch.

Major Clark slowed his running and watched the insane act. The dark boots of the man from the roof plunged horrifically, but only a few inches into the fall, he slowed to hover. Like a leaf falling, he pranced down as if an invisible staircase caught each bound. A small glow underneath his boots lit the placement of each foot as he graced his way to the ground.

The faint, glacial-blue light under his feet was familiar. Major Clark knew exactly why he recognized it. Amidst his astonishment, he associated it with one thing.

The feet touched the ground with a delicate patter and the light dissipated.

*The power was similar to Eos’.*

Fear pounced on Major Clark. The air left him as the figure shrugged the spear from his shoulder and caught it in his hands. The man’s legs split into a wide stance and he tightened his grip on the pole. Eos and Clark were each at a forty-five-degree angle to the man and a long, safe distance away from his spear. They stood just outside the hangar, but Eos’ path was blocked.

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The man pointed the spear tip at Eos.

“I’ll take care of him. Just get inside the hangar!” Major Clark called quickly across the asphalt and pulled his pistol from his waist holster. He held the gun steady despite the bad omen that was filling him.

Eos ignored the order. “What are you doing, Major? You can’t get involved!”

Major Clark shrugged slowly, “I’m too invested now, Eos. I don’t know what this guy thinks he can do against me with a spear, but I’m not going to let him get near you.” He forced determination to mask his fear.

The cloaked man laughed quietly, “Take care of me?” He turned the spear toward Major Clark.

At the motion, Major Clark squeezed his finger around the trigger in reaction.

*Crack!*

A bullet traveled towards the spear carrying man’s torso. Its target was set; there was nothing he could do to move in the milliseconds it took the bullet to close the distance.

Just as the gun fired, Eos noticed a shimmer of blue around the black cloak. It was like a glass layer had formed around his body. It was barely noticeable except for the blue sheen that glossed over him from Eos’ angle.

The bullet met the black cloth!

Major Clark let his gun lower slightly and relaxed his grip.

The chunk of metal hit the man’s chest.

The blue hue gleamed over him.

The bullet stopped at the cloak and flattened into a metal disk.

It splintered backwards in curled shavings around itself.

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The shrapnel stayed suspended there against his chest for a moment before gravity claimed it and brought it to the ground harmlessly.

The bullet was no more than a gnat to the man. He hadn't flinched or even taken a breath during the shot. He let the transparent, blue layer fade from around him.

Then, his hands emitted a light. Just as Eos' hands did when he formed a sphere—the glacial blue energy came from the man's hands in a crackling surge of energy. The glow consumed the five-foot spear in an instant and the metal was illuminated in a blue aura!

Eos watched the sight with wonder. There was another like him. It was mystifying and exciting; like discovering another member of a species thought to be extinct. Most of all—it was terrifying.

The pole of the spear throbbed with a molten radiance. This man was much faster than Eos. Whatever action had just been performed, it took him mere seconds. The spear looked like something a blacksmith pulled out of a forge, glowing white-blue.

There was only time for Eos to take half a breath before the attack came.

The spear extend as fast as Major Clark's bullet had traveled—much faster than eyes could perceive. It extended from five feet and closed the distance in an instant of white and blue blurred ferocity. The bat-like blade raced towards the Major.

Only the bright energy flash was perceived by his brain in a disorienting blindness.

*Splurch.*

The black point pierced Major Clark's abdomen and was pulled back through.

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The spear retracted back to its original length. If Eos would have blinked, he wouldn't have seen the brutal and unreal attack. All of his awe of the man's similar power was gone.

Eos felt the same retching feeling grip his stomach for the second time that day. The nauseating feeling was so strong it swelled in him, flowed out his nose, and squeeze at his brain.

Major Clark looked with a slow curiosity at his stomach. The darkening splotch in his olive uniform perplexed him. The pain was immediate, but his comprehension was not. He touched the spot with two fingers in disbelief. They slipped inside his belly and came back stained red.

He let out sharp exhale and fell to his knees, quivering. His trunk twisted weakly as he collapsed to his back with a hand on his abdomen. He pressed desperately, trying to put pressure on the gaping hole.

"Major!" Eos screamed in nauseous agony that resonated in every inch of the hangar and outside it for a mile. He moved toward his fallen friend.

"Not so fast. No one can be left as a witness here. You're next," the man said matter-of-a-factly.

A pale gray hand clenched around his spear from behind.

"Wait you fool," Ares said lowly, "Don't you know who that is?"

Eos hardly noticed the long haired, young man who appeared in the same black cloak as the attacker. He was busy rushing to the Major's side.

"That's my kid brother!" Ares exclaimed.

Not a word made it to Eos' ears as he kneeled next to his bleeding friend. Major Clark forced his hand into his breast pocket. "Guess I...wasn't much use," he coughed weakly. A drip of blood gathered at the corner of his mouth. He removed a small piece of paper from his

## FINGERPRINT

pocket. It was the picture of his family. He tilted it and held it as high as his failing body would allow.

“No Major! No. Don’t say that!” Eos sobbed. He recalled the words spoken to him in Sires once more, but he realized he had forgotten the last part: *You need to decide what you want. Chart your own path, find some friends to travel it with you, and when the moment is right... you make your move! You have to be smart about these kinds of things though. And with skills like yours, I hope I’m there when you change the world.*

“Your searching...” the crimson droplet rolled down his cheek, “Find...find...bonds not blood.” Major Clark didn’t speak again. He just stared at the tiny piece of captured memory in his hand. He gazed longingly at his own smiling face with child and wife in his embrace.

Tears flooded over Eos’ face. “No. No. No!” His whispers resonated into a scream as the only man, aside from Glenn, who had ever served as a guide in his life, drifted off from the shackles of the living. Apart from Glenn and Maxima, Major Clark was the one person who truly felt like family.

A feeling of hatred, stronger than any emotion he had ever felt before, seized him. He looked at his blackened hand—his curse, his burden. Everything dark in his life was summed there. No more tears fell. Only rage consumed him. He clenched his hand as if strangling the man with the spear. The black tongues of his mark came to life, consuming his arm past the elbow as the tendrils of black twisted around him.

There was a *pop!* A sphere of energy burst into his hand. From within, Eos had summoned it forth in his time of need; in his time of revenge. In only seconds, he wielded a fully developed sphere and stared down the cloaked man.

“So, it *is* him,” Ares’ companion said, “Good thing I didn’t kill him first. Lord Vistomus wouldn’t have liked that much.”

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“There’s no forgiveness for you.” Eos said with eyes red and bloodshot. The dark bangs blew across his forehead and whipped around him like the mark on his arm.

From a ten meter distance, Eos launched his lethal energy at the killer in front of him!

Doom traveled in a pulsing red light.

In a flash of gray, a glowing chain of pale light appeared.

Ares summoned his super natural chain whip and flicked it in front of the man with the spear. *Zwing!* The head of the whip clashed with Eos’ red sphere in a conflict of two living energies. They made a high-pitched humming and clattering. The collision deflected Eos’ attack into the side of the hangar. The sheet metal was obliterated, leaving a singed hole in the wall. Ares’ whip disintegrated into beads of light, and they were sucked back into his sleeve.

Eos would have been in awe at the power before him, but his rage stifled any emotion before it could reach his body. He summoned another sphere.

Ares walked between his companion and Eos.

Eos already had another weapon ready. The strands of black that clawed at his tricep, burned as they took hold of him.

He attacked!

The energy was released just a few feet from Ares. The blue-amethyst eyes stared head on with a wild thrill. He swiped his ash colored hand across his body! There was a momentary pale glow over Ares’ arm and it repelled the attack into the hangar with a large blast. The sphere was deflected once again, but his time by Ares’ own arm.

Ares threw his head back and laughed hysterically.

“To think,” he said, “that after all this time...you delivered yourself right into our hands. I’d say this is too easy if we hadn’t been looking for you and Maxima *all these years!*” He laughed once more.

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Eos watched the man mock him after besting his attack, first with some kind of chain of energy, then with only his bare hand. What was he facing? What kind of monstrous power did these two possess? Eos succumbed to panic in the presence of such warriors.

The cloaked man behind Ares spoke. "I don't understand what Lord Vistomus would want with a weakling like him. Any trained child with the ability to wield could create a Soul Sphere like that on Hyperborea. It's pathetic really."

Ares paused his amusement, "Don't be so sure. Look at his hand." He pointed.

"You're right. It looks like he's been tampered with...a seal of some kind. He may have potential after all."

Ares squinted at Eos. "So, the old man abandoned you two in the end. No wonder we couldn't find you...sly old scoundrel."

After his heightened levels of grief, wonder, and fear, Eos was purged of emotions. In an empty voice he asked, "Who are you people? What's a Soul Sphere...sealed? Why...Why did you stab Major Clark?" His mind raced, forming question faster than he could speak.

The dark laugh resumed, "You wouldn't have forgotten your big brother would you, Eos?" Ares asked. "I certainly haven't forgotten my little siblings." He enunciated each word in a slow, decisive taunt. "You really don't remember anything do you? You honestly know nothing of home... of Hyperborea? You don't even realize you wield the power of your soul? This *is* rich!" He laughed in disbelief.

His brother? It was impossible for this gray skinned man to be related. Home? The place he so longed to find...they held the answer? His soul? He didn't know which topic to tackle first. Eos stumbled over his knowledge deficiency.

As he grasped for the next move, all he could do was watch helplessly as blood trickled from Major Clark's mouth, contributing to

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the greater pool his body laid in. He held the photograph to his chest with a motionless affection.

“Soul Wielders of Hyperborea...that’s who we are, Eos!” Ares finished.

Eos thought of Maxima and himself. He recalled the precious image of his sister. “There’s no way I could be related to someone like—”

General Braxton’s voice overpowered Eos. “What is going on out here—*Eos*...” He realized who had caused the commotion. “You sure have a skill or sticking your nose where it doesn’t concern you, boy! First the meeting...now this,” he growled, “Who led you here? I left Colonel Kane too busy on the battlefield to have tried me again. So, who?”

Eos begged to change the focus. “General Braxton, Major Clark’s dying. Get him to a doctor. Hurry!”

General Braxton only watched coldly. “He’s a lost cause with that wound, and he knows too much now. Which leads me back to my question: who lead you here, him? Certainly, a Major wouldn’t have access to such secretive information.”

Eos’ eyes softened, “You can’t just let him die! Not Major Clark! He’s a North American soldier, you can’t...you have to...”

General Braxton refused to show even a glimpse of emotion.

Major Clark’s hand slid off his chest with a soft splash into the dark pool he lay in. Light faded from the kind eyes that had adopted Eos.

They killed Major Clark and Braxton simply considered him a loose string. The burning moved higher up Eos’ arm, but it didn’t pass mid bicep. He clutched his arm with a groan. The sensation felt like his skin was boiling, but he welcomed it. He channeled it.

## FINGERPRINT

Eos gave a disgusted sigh. “I guess we’re past any lies and excuses. Not that I care. I’m done playing your games Braxton. You just stood by as a great man was killed and watched!”

“If you’re done playing games then let’s go home, Eos. Come with us,” Ares interjected.

Normally the temptation would have been accepted without a second thought. Ares held the answer to his origin and to the mystery of Hyperborea.

“Eos is part of the North American Sector. He’s not going anywhere.” Braxton said.

Ares smirked. “We’re taking him whether you like it or not, Braxton. He doesn’t belong on this planet. We have use for him back home.”

“He wasn’t part of the deal,” Braxton refused to back down.

Ares stepped to Eos and grabbed him by the bicep. “The terms have changed.”

Eos pulled his arm back violently, but the one who claimed to be his brother only tightened his grip. He pulled again, but Ares dug his nails into Eos’ skin.

Confrontation was General Braxton’s strong suit. He got close enough to brush hairs with the Hyperborean brat. Neither was willing to give on the matter.

General Braxton was claiming him as property again. Ares and the killer were demanding him as theirs. He balled up his right hand into a fist of blackened flesh.

Major Clark was lifeless next to him.

None of this was what he wanted. He couldn’t protect the one person in the North he cared about. He couldn’t control anything. Malin’s lessons in combat came to mind and his fist swung at Ares in a maddened fury.

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*Crunch!*

The pale gray face was struck with a force that likely broke the arrogant boy's nose. His grip released, and he stumbled back. He wiped blood from his upper lip and looked at him with disgust.

"I'm not leaving with the people who killed Major Clark. I don't care if you claim to be my brother. I refuse to accept that I'm related to you! And General Braxton, I'm not going to fight any more battles for you. I'm not going to power any generators. I'm going back to Maxima!" Eos yelled in low primal frustration.

Ares shook his hand loosely to try and separate the blood from his hand. "You always were father's favorite. He let you have everything, but not here. No one can protect you here," he said with a crazed tone. "If you weren't so valuable to the Mitad, I wouldn't forget that blow, but I'll give you one last pass. Make no mistake—you don't have a choice. This is more of a join or die kind of deal." Ares laughed conceitedly.

"I'd rather die," Eos spat.

The smirk left Ares and was replaced by a scowl. He reached for Eos again.

General Braxton caught him by the wrist. A rare look of disbelief crossed Ares.

"What're you doing, General Braxton? He'll kill you." Eos said, not sure why the concern slipped from his lips.

"No, I don't think he will." Braxton said confidently. "Ares, I have withheld any ammunition from this trade in the event that you deviated from our deal. Those rifles are useless without bullets."

Ares' eyes bulged. "You think that is really enough to secure Eos with you? You're a dead man!" A ghostly glow emitted from his hand. Ares started to manifest his soul into the chained weapon, but Braxton was ready for the violent response.

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“No, I knew that wouldn’t be enough to appease your greed, but I do have the one thing you value more than him. I can get it to you in one month.”

The light faded.

“You have it?” Ares asked carefully.

“I do.”

Ares looked to his cloaked companion as if seeking an opinion on the new twist. The hood bobbed up and down once in acceptance. Ares looked back to General Braxton, “Alright, that’ll be acceptable. *Both of them that is.*”

Braxton released Ares’ wrist. Bruises in the shape of fingers were already forming on the skin. He looked at Eos. “I’ll have you wait in a truck with some of my men for protection. They’ll put this soldier’s body on another truck as well,” he gestured to Major Clark. “Eos, Come with me.”

Eos followed in a daze through the spacious hangar. Troop transport trucks were parked to the side. As he was led into one, he attempted to solve the mystery that was haunting him. In his morose stupor he asked, “What could you possibly have over people as powerful as,” he tried to remember what they had called themselves, “the Mitad? Please tell me you didn’t trade her for me. Don’t tell me you sacrificed Maxima!” He could think of nothing else more valuable.

General Braxton looked down at Eos with sternness, “I’m prepared to sacrifice whatever it takes for this nation. I did what was necessary, but make no mistake—I haven’t any intention of letting them have you or your sister.”

Eos accepted the answer, certain it was the best he would get for now. He sat in the back of the canopied truck, weary.

Two soldiers stood at the bed of the truck between him and the rest of the hangar. He watched as Ares and the hooded man joined

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

another woman near an enormous aircraft. Clark's killer walked around to the open hatch on the other side and entered the belly of the plane, full of crates. Ares and Bellia faced the hangar doorway.

"You have to hold it open. Remember what I taught you." Ares reassured Bellia.

"I know...I can do it this time," she said.

She spread her hands out and pushed her palms away from her body.

The plane rolled out of the hanger and the engine roared to life just as a thunder of static noise rippled through the air. It tore at the boundaries of the universe. The noise grew louder, and Eos watched from the truck as a purple light grew into a mirror like portal to another world. From his angle, he couldn't make out what was through the bizarre border, but its raw energy rattled the walls of the hangar and threatened to bring them down. The plane rolled toward the growing portal.

Violet tendrils lapped at the wall from the edges of the synthetic doorway to Hyperborea.

Bellia's arms shook.

"Hold it! You can do this." Ares urged.

Her arms dipped an inch. The rectangular portal shrunk smaller than the wings of the plane as it approached. "No, Bellia. You have to keep it open!" Ares yelled over the noise, "Just for the a few more seconds."

The plane penetrated through the fabric of Earth and entered the portal. The nose disappeared through it; then the body of the plane followed.

Bellia contorted her face as she struggled to hold the gate together and let out a grunt of resolve. She forced her arms to rise. The portal expanded just as the wings passed through.

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The plane disappeared within. The tail left Earth just as it was surrounded by the shrinking portal. The aircraft was gone. It had vanished in a miraculous teleportation act orchestrated by Bellia.

General Braxton spoke quietly to the two Hyperboreans in private. As they discussed, two soldiers carried a black plastic body bag into the hangar. Each one carried an end. The bag slumped in the middle from the weight of its contents. Though he was hurting, Eos took solace in knowing that Major Clark's body would be taken back.

After a few minutes, the remaining two Hyperboreans exited the hangar by foot and General Braxton ordered the body put in the next truck over from Eos.

Eos tried to leave the truck he was in and run to the Major, but the unsympathetic, mustached general blocked his way. Eos wheezed, devastated. His chest rose and fell violently with his struggling breath.

The two glared quietly. Finally, General Braxton cleared his throat, "Weakness is something I can't afford to show in front of the Hyperboreans. It is... unfortunate, that a soldier died today. If I could have prevented it, I would have, but you two acted without order. I'm sorry for the loss." He spoke with as little feeling as ever.

Eos was skeptical of the sincerity. He barely opened his mouth and snarled through clenched teeth. "You could have saved him. An honest man died because you let him...because you're helping these...murderers!"

"There are things that are even out of *my control*, boy, and there are things you can't understand. I don't deal with the Mitad by choice." General Braxton decided it wasn't something that he needed to justify, "That's enough of this. It's time to leave."

"Are we going back to see Maxima and Glenn?"

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Not quite,” General Braxton began spinning another web of manipulative rhetoric, “I have one more stop for you to make—” Eos had heard enough.

“I told you I’m not playing your games anymore. I’ve done more...sacrificed more than was ever expected. I’m going home.”

“Think what you want, but you have two choices. Work with me or work with them. Seeing as they just skewered an officer from my army... your friend and have disappeared to Hyperborea...I think your options are limited,” Braxton said pompously, “Now I’ve promised some things to Ares to secure your safety, but the chances of him double crossing us are more than certain.”

“You don’t care about my safety. You care about using me!”

Braxton sighed, exhausted of the constant struggle, “I don’t care why you think I am protecting you; the end result is the same. You’re not in your brother’s control yet and you need me to stop him from claiming you. You need me... to get back to Maxima.”

Eos knew he was right. “He’s...he’s not really my brother...is he?” he asked hesitantly.

“I don’t know the answer to that, but I know who might. When dealing in the affairs of your people, Eos, there is only one man to see. After we meet with him, I will personally escort you to Maxima.” Braxton knew he had won the argument. He walked off sure that he had piqued Eos’ interest enough to make him conform for a bit longer.

Eos sat alone in the truck as it drove off, out of the hangar and into the vast and savage world. The truck rolled slowly behind a line of others. He stared at the expanse of asphalt. It was uniform... the same; a continuous monotony except for a dark splotch where a pool of blood had soaked into the ground. The truck passed the stain at a crawl as it kept pace with the others.

A small white paper fluttered on the runway.

## FINGERPRINT

Eos jumped out of the bed of the truck while it was moving. The whole line halted in a pile up just moments after.

He swallowed with a throat dry from loss. A tear streamed down the scar under his eye and joined the dark splotch on the ground. Eos picked up the picture, freeing the happy memory from its connection to the morbid spot.

A dark brown thumb print was left imprinted on the photograph where Major Clark had held his family in his last moments. Above the unique maze of blood crusted ridges on the picture, Major Clark smiled up at Eos, son and wife in hand.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



### THE PRISONER

**T**hrough the greenish brown rust of jail bars bathed in a mahogany light, a middle-aged man smiled up at the guard who had entered with a bowl of food in hand. The guard set it down and kicked it through a small one way flap near the stone floor.

The man behind the bars snatched the bowl of gruel greedily as it reached him with a clatter, but not with his hands. They were bound inside metal cylinders in a debilitating handcuff apparatus that detained him below the elbows.

He lunged at the bowl with his face to the floor as he devoured the food. His eyes were glazed over and hollow from his years alone in the small space. His hair color was fading and indiscernible in the unlit room, but it sprouted only from the sides of his head and shot out in every direction as he fed. From his hands and knees, he pulled the bowl close under his body and watched the guard suspiciously.

## THE PRISONER

The guard leaned into the bars; his low hanging jowls wobbled as he spoke.

“You’re pathetic. You could be living as a free man and help our Sector at the same time, but instead you choose to resist and live in your filth.” He spat into the cell. “You disgust me.”

The man’s nose scrunched, and he bared his teeth. He put his face to the bowl, took a large mouthful, and spat it at the guard.

*Splat.* The cold oatmeal-like substance hit the man with jowls in the neck.

“Agghh, you animal!” He clawed the muck off his neck. “That’ll cost you your next meal.” He shrugged to clean himself with his uniform as he closed the heavy metal door. The space of light was squeezed away by the door until only a small sliver was left for the prisoner to see by.

The guard spoke through the door opening, repulsed by the man inside, “I almost forgot to tell you...General Braxton is coming to visit. I know you two always get along so well,” he teased with a tortuous laugh. The last of the tinted light was gone from the room and the prisoner was left sitting on the hard stone in his captivity—contemplating.

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Eos turned over an energy sphere that faintly lit his dark confinement with a red, spinning glimmer. He sat on a hard bench in the back of yet another military truck and stared into the layers of light. What had Ares called it, a Soul Sphere? They had said he wielded the power of his soul. Could it be true? A twisted reflection looked back at him in the Soul Sphere’s constant churning. For a second, the light refracted in just a way so that it looked like another face was there right

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next to his. The unrecognizable face looked over his shoulder before disappearing back into his reflection.

It didn't matter what the power was if he couldn't use it to protect anyone. He couldn't save one man's life. He couldn't even cause the two members of the Mitad to flinch. Ares had deflected his attack with just his hand! At least he had landed a solid blow with his fist; though he wished it could have been the man with the spear who he'd punched.

He tried not to dwell on it; he would have to grow stronger. If he didn't, Major Clark's death and his belief in Eos had been in vain.

The mission hadn't been a failure in every respect. He still managed to learn details about the source of his power, but it had left him with far more question than answers and nothing was worth the price that was paid.

The truck slowed to a stop and Eos waited on one of the uncomfortable seats that were welded to the walls in the trailer of the truck. The door opened, and General Braxton looked in with an expression that Eos knew well. The General was going to dictate exactly what was going to be said and done.

Eos decided to challenge that.

"Why am I being locked in the back like a prisoner, General?"

"We have no time for your fuss. There is only room for two in the front: a driver and a General. Of which, you are neither. Get out. Time is of the essence." General Braxton said.

"You love to pretend you have everything under control, but if you're in such a hurry, then perhaps you don't have a handle on these Hyperboreans. Admit it, you need me! So, stop treating me like a kid and start telling me what's going on!" Eos prodded General Braxton.

"Need is an overstatement. At this point Ares is bound to break our deal and try to take everything for himself. I can't let that happen.

## THE PRISONER

For now, appeasement and delay are our only options, but if we can learn a weakness in that monstrous boy...then we might—”

“*Our options?* There is no we! I told you, I’m done fighting in your wars and playing for *Team Braxton*.” Eos swiped his hands across his body as he repelled the idea.

“Either you throw your lot in with them or with me. Your future is more secure with me, but you are free to choose.” He walked away, sure of his tactics. “Just remember whose care your sister is under.”

Eos clenched his fist so hard his knuckles cracked and turned a blood drained white; well one hand did.

A brown metal gate closed with a grinding hiccup as he got out of the truck. The gate was part of a perimeter wall of brick. Grime and drainage stained the wall in nasty streaks. It was crowned with a spiral of barbed wire that flashed its jagged teeth, rusted from age.

“Where are we?” Eos spun around the truck and followed Braxton. Brick buildings similar to the perimeter wall filled the area.

“South of the war...West of the civilized parts of the Sector. Listen carefully. I am going to introduce you to a man named Aizo. He knows more than anyone else about the Hyperboreans. After I brief him on the Ares dilemma, I will allow you to talk with each other. We need to learn something about either your or Ares’ powers that can help us defeat him. But I warn you...he’s nearly lost his mind. Consider everything he says carefully as it is likely mindless babbling. It’s difficult to discern between knowledge and incoherence.”

Eos looked at the dreary buildings suspiciously. They were windowless forms that were losing their battle against time. Decaying leaves littered the premises. They passed one brick structure with its wall blown out.

Eos knelt down and picked up a piece of loose brick that had fallen from a collapsed section above. There was something about the

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missing piece of wall that only increased the cryptic quality that hung on every stone. It wasn't a quality of the location, rather something...or someone it held.

"What is this place?" Eos asked.

"Laboratory One. It was once a prison...and for a some it still is." Braxton gruffly answered.

"One...Are there other places like this?" Eos asked hesitantly, not wanting to further irritate Braxton.

"There are three in total. No more questions, boy. This is our building." Eos followed inside and was met immediately with the muggy oxidized smell of rust. It clung to his nostrils in a pervasive yet mild stench.

Inside the plaster walls were crumbling to show their brick and dirt innards. Pipes hung over doorways and on the ceiling, dripping throughout the damp place.

A guard waited for them with a key in front of a caged staircase. He unlocked it and let them through.

At the top of the damp stairs was a prison cell that was centered in the room. It sat in open space with bars from floor to ceiling and little else between.

There was man at a table inside.

Between rusted steel Eos could see that he had a guard on each side. Both dangled stun batons at the man's neck from arms stretched out like someone afraid to crush a bug. The guard who led them up the staircase stuck an ancient key in the door to the central cage. He turned it and there was a tumbling of old pins inside the locking mechanism.

Braxton left Eos outside the visiting space while he bent down and whispered into the man at the table's ear. Between the narrow spaces,

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Eos couldn't make out much, but he heard the man rumble in a low hysteria.

"Come in Eos," General Braxton beckoned a few minutes later.

Eos did so with a curious uneasiness.

"Aizo, this is Eos. Eos, meet Aizo." General Braxton introduced the two.

Aizo was in plain handcuffs which looped through the table, limiting his hand motion to inches. He wore a shirt of ragged long sleeve burlap material that hadn't been washed in years.

Aizo was older, perhaps in his fifties, but forties were just as likely. He was bald on top with wisps of dulling hair sprouting from the sides and sideburns that bushed out in a ridiculous manner—nearly hiding his ears. All this was complimented by a small, triangular beard that pointed like a compass due south of his chin.

Eos would have chuckled at the man...before he saw Aizo's solemn eyes which contradicted his outlandish appearance. He stared past Eos as if no one was there. He nodded again and again, his mind lost in another world.

He cocked his head and squinted one eye at Eos. "I know you," he said and turned to Braxton. He pointed a finger, "I knew him." Then he was silent and went back to staring through the bars that confined him.

After it was clear he had no more to say on the subject, Braxton moved him to the next topic. "We were wondering if you know of a fellow warrior from your planet. He goes by the name—"

"Mmhmm. I sure do." Aizo began again, picking up where he left off. "I havn't seen you since you were six years old. Probably don't remember me though..."

Eos interjected, "How do you know me?"

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“I was a member of the Anite Royal Court, and the United Council of Races, and dear friend to your father. You and Maxima ran around the palace—” Braxton put his arm around Aizo’s shoulder in a less than friendly gesture.

“As I was saying, there is a Hyperborean here named Ares. Do you know of him?”

Aizo shrunk into himself. His eyes darted around the room. He spoke grimly, “Well, Eos, if your brother is really here on Earth...it can mean only one thing.” He crossed his arms and retreated into himself.

The words, though spoken from a man haunted by isolation, only reinforced the notion that Eos had another sibling. “So, you’re trying to convince me Ares is my brother as well?” Eos thought about the possibility. It looked to be the truth. Everyone from this... Hyperborea place agreed on that much.

“He’s your brother... but only half,” Aizo’s hollowed voice cracked like a man’s twice his age, “Your father tried to unite the two races on Hyperborea, but he was unsuccessful. There was always someone in the shadows thwarting his efforts. When the Krogs gained momentum over the people of the Cor Land,” he rambled to himself while moving his eyes constantly, “war broke out. Your father led the United Council heroically, but your mother was captured by the Krogs. When she was finally rescued...Ares was the outcome.” He muttered the last part bitterly.

Eos’ head swirled with new information. It was too much to comprehend. Only one thing stuck with him. “My father...he led you? Who was he?” He asked in a hurry to get answers.

Aizo laughed wildly in a high pitch, but stopped short as a cough took over. “King my boy. Your father was our king.”

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A spark of excitement warmed Eos. “Then that makes me...” he mumbled in disbelief.

Aizo shook his head sadly. “If your brother is here with his group of wielders, then they have undoubtedly brought Hyperborean civilization to its knees or—”

Braxton squeezed tightly on Aizo and he fell silent.

“This tale of Eos’ father is amusing to be sure, but I fail to see how this helps us find a weakness in Ares. Now, do you know anything useful?”

Aizo’s conscious drifted away again.

“I want to hear more,” Eos demanded. “Let him continue.”

“We’re not here to feed your personal delusions of grandeur. This man is bordering insanity. Look at him. We need to find out what he knows about Ares, if anything, and get back to the complex. That is, if you still want to see your sister.”

It was clear where Braxton was going. Eos could only have one thing and Braxton knew which he would choose. The fascinating tale would end for now.

“Ares...that arrogant child. I’m...I’m back home,” Aizo hummed.

Braxton squeezed Aizo into consciousness once more. “Now do you know anything useful or are you wasting my time?”

Aizo looked at Braxton puzzled. “About what?” He asked with genuine curiosity.

Braxton nodded to the two men with stun batons. One jabbed his baton into the insane prisoner’s back. With a jolting zap, Aizo was thrown forward onto the table!

“Stop!” Eos cried out.

“Now tell us about Ares,” Braxton demanded.

Eos felt sorry for the poor man. His mind was loosely hanging by a thread and Braxton was demanding more than he could possibly

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deliver. Eos watched the hollow eyes squint in pain, but as he examined the face closer he saw something more. Aizo gave a small grin. It wasn't his insanity. The look was mischievous.

"Ares, I know him! I know him," his voice bounced with childish excitement.

*Zap!* He was tasered again.

"Enough of this waste of time. We're done here. Take him back to his cell," Braxton declared.

"Wait! I haven't told you the prophecy." Aizo grinned.

Braxton paused. "What prophecy? I'll have no nonsense."

"The legendary prophecy of Hyperborea, of course! It tells of how the planet would be overthrown by one boy. That boy was Ares, and," his voice rose to a high pitch, "it tells of another who will defeat him!" Aizo fed Braxton exactly what he wanted to hear.

Aizo flicked his arms like a magician performing sleight of hand. A twice folded scrap of dirt caked paper appeared from his sleeve along with a small pebble of charcoal.

Braxton placed his large hand on the table and eyed Aizo. "Why've you been hiding this prophecy from us all this time and *where did you get that paper?*"

The wild haired man teased Braxton, "You act like this is the first time you haven't been in control of something," he laughed and it again turned into a cough. He scribbled on the dirty paper with his pebble but stopped. "First I have a demand. In return for this...I want..." He stretched his hands in the air as far as the hand cuffs allowed, as if to make a grand announcement.

"I want..." His eyes darted.

"What do you want?" Braxton asked annoyed.

"What I want isssss..." Aizo continued to tease, dragging the last syllable for many seconds.

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“Spit it out!”

Aizo grinned widely, “...A glass of water!” he said triumphantly.

General Braxton nodded to one of the guards. “Bring him a glass of water then!”

All eyes in the room went to the startled guard, except for Aizo’s. He quickly jotted something down on the paper with a flick of his wrist and flipped it over in the second everyone’s attention was diverted. He returned to his spacious staring.

The soldier jittered anxiously, but obeyed Braxton.

“He is bringing your water. Now tell us this prophecy.”

Aizo once again snapped back to reality. Eos was less convinced of the man’s slips of mental clarity with each passing moment. “Yes, the prophecy!” Aizo exclaimed. In steady slow lines, he wrote on the paper. He paused to dawdle and bent his head down to the table to scratch it.

“Well let’s hear it,” Braxton’s annoyance grew once more.

Aizo handed it to Eos who read aloud:

*The Lord of Wings. The King of Hyperborean throne  
He shall raise two sons. One will shatter royal home  
He will plunge his world into the dark  
While the other son will dutifully bear the mark  
One will take to the other a great fight  
Only after fierce battle will victory be in sight  
All will rejoice upon the prince’s return  
But soon after, the noble walls will turn to pyres and burn  
On the final day of reckoning the true successor will*

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Eos scanned the lines again, searching for more, but there was nothing to find. “That’s it. It ends there. That can’t be all of it. Do you know the rest?”

“Can’t say that I do,” Aizo’s voice drifted and he was once again gone.

Just then the guard returned with a glass of water. Aizo reached for it with a satisfied hum.

“What a waste of time,” Braxton swiped the back of his hand across the table and sent the glass crashing into the prison bars before Aizo could get a finger on it.

He whimpered sadly.

“We’re done here. Guards take him back to his cell.” The guards reached below the table and forced Aizo into a strange mechanism that looked like his hands had been put in tubes of drying concrete. Aizo struggled against his restraints but had little room to move. He shook his head fearfully as they opened and closed the cylinders around his hands. They unchained him from the table and led him towards the door.

There was a small scuffle to keep the surprisingly spritely prisoner under control. Aizo lunged away into the bars with enough force to bruise his shoulder as he failed to evade one guard’s stun baton. He put his back to the bars and faced down two batons pointed directly at his nose. He gulped pathetically.

“Make this easy, Aizo.” One of them said.

Aizo shook his head slowly to say no. The batons jabbed forward!

The prisoner ducked to the ground in a crouch. His restraints clunked against the floor. The batons swung down at him. He leaped back with a spring of liveliness and precise footwork that he shouldn’t have had.

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In an instant he stood between Eos and the guards. Aizo squinted at Eos with the same mischievous look from before. “The answer you seek lies behind that prophecy.” He laughed hysterically.

Aizo leaned in to Eos and whispered for only them to hear, “Braxton is hiding what belongs to us. You must take it back.” He was tackled to the ground and shocked multiple times but he only laughed with a giddy echo that rung in Eos’ ears well after he left.

Outside of Laboratory One, Eos pulled himself into the back of the transport truck. Braxton closed the door on him. He sat down, feeling more like a prisoner than ever. He repeated the so called prophecy in his head over and over. It was meaningless; just garbled meandering of a crazy prisoner. Eos laughed to himself as the truck bumped along the road. He bounced on the cold, hard bench and observed the box he was confined in. Maybe he was the crazy prisoner.

*The answer you seek lies behind that prophecy.*

Eos rapped his knuckles against the metal with muted *clunk* as he went through all of the crazy man’s words. Two races on Hyperborea: the Krogs and the people of Cor Land, his father was the king of a place called Anite, his inheritance was no more...was it all the ramblings of a lunatic?

He struck his knuckles on the bench in frustrated cadence.

*Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.*

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*Clunk. Clatter. Clatter.*

*Clunk. Clatter. Clatter.*

Repetitive bashing of his hand constraints had broken a small chunk loose from the prison floor. The things were meant to contain

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his wielding abilities. If he tried to blow them off, he would lose his hands in the process.

Aizo wound back his powerful leg and flicked a small pebble from between his toes. It struck the metal wall and ricocheted just outside of the cell bars and rolled back within reach. He reached through the bars with his foot and found it once more.

A creak accompanied the door opening. Light crept into the room.

The pebble was thrown once more; it struck the guard in the chest harmlessly. He bent over and picked up the small rock. “What’s this you crazy fool?” The jowls vibrated. “You’re not digging again are you? You remember what happened last time.” He pulled out a flashlight and shined it on the floor inside the cell.

Aizo fell and covered his eyes from the bright light, but the small chunk of broken stone in the floor was visible. The guard stuck his flashlight through the bars and put his head against them to get a closer look at the scene.

In a blurred movement, Aizo launched himself from his crossed leg position into a low squat and leapt straight into the bars. A shimmer of orange energy glowed at his feet and he flew forward. He placed one foot on the rods of metal and brought the other up in a vicious front kick that met the guard’s chin in circular path. His leg continued its path until he was carried over by his own momentum into backflip and landed on the floor!

The guard lay unconscious on the ground with his loose facial skin drooping on the stones. After a few minutes he came to, spitting blood from his fracture jaw. He tried to say something, but all that came was an entanglement of syllables that sprayed from his mouth along with spittle and blood. The flashlight lay on the ground, illuminating one corner of the cell.

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He rose with rage and fumbled for his keys and baton. The ring of keys was thrust into the cell door and he rushed through the entrance. Aizo was waiting.

The guard thrust forward with his stun baton. *Zap.*

Aizo slid left of the jab, narrowly missing the attack. His arms dangled uselessly in the shackles. He fainted right when another jab came and slid back into the spotlight of the flashlight. The guard swung his weapon in a sweeping motion.

Aizo ducked beneath the slow swipe.

The guard wheezed through his misaligned jaw.

Aizo stepped back, but his heel hit the corner of the cell. He was trapped.

Orange light gathered around his feet and the guard glanced down at the unnatural distraction. Aizo hopped with both feet and, mid-air, placed them on the wall at the guard's waist level. He propelled himself out of the corner, driving his feet back with an orange burst of energy and a knee leading the way. It struck the guard in the face and he fell unconscious once more—this time he did not get back up.

Aizo fished the key ring out of the door with his teeth. Once loose, he sat and sifted through keys with his toes, and passed it back to his teeth. He tightened his lips around the specific key and pushed it into the key hole of his shackles.

They split in half and his hands were free. Aizo flexed his stiff fingers and massaged the indentions the shackles had left on his wrists. It was time to find Eos. He just hoped Eos understood his message.

In the hallway, he was immediately spotted by two guards. They didn't pull out their batons; they drew pistols on the escaped prisoner.

Aizo laughed with a crazed delight at his new freedom and bolted the other way.

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The guards' demands to stop were ignored as he turned the corner and found a new corridor of cells. He sprinted away with a hop as he looked over his shoulder—*slam!*

He knocked over a guard with his large body. By the time the trampled guard stood up, he was joined by the other two and Aizo was turning down the next hallway in a bounding spree. This hall had no cells on the right side. It was likely a barrier to the outside world.

Shots fired just milliseconds after he ran down the new hall. He pressed all five fingers against the wall and drug them across it as he ran. An impressive array of orange sparks shot from his fingertips as he summoned the power of his soul and embedded it in the walls.

The energy made a vibrational squeal as he raked his fingers against the plaster wall. After running ten meters, he removed his hands from the wall and continued running—right to the end of the hallway. It was a dead end.

The three guards all stared him down through the sights of their guns.

“Don’t move, Aizo,” one insisted. “We *will* shoot you this time. We’re watching your hands. No powers.”

Aizo laughed and cocked his head. “It’s stuffy in here isn’t it? I could use some fresh air,” he said madly as he rubbed at the scars around his wrists from years of his hands being bound.

The guards all frowned to each other while keeping an eye on the dangerous prisoner.

A sharp orange glow emitted from the wall in a blinding sunrise of energy. It shone in five jagged lines along where Aizo had traced his fingertips.

*Bwoom!*

The wall exploded inward in a powdering of plaster and bricks. The guards were covered in a pile of the rubble. Aizo walked casually to

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the hill of stones and stood atop it. He flared his nostrils and took a deep breath of fresh air, untainted by the stale prison. He smiled insanely as he peered down from the hole he had created in the third floor of the building. With a brilliant flare of electric, tangerine colored light from beneath his feet—he stepped out of the prison.

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Eos turned his head as a faint rumbling came from the direction of Laboratory One almost like an explosion. Strange, he hadn't noticed any rain clouds, but it sounded like a storm was following them.

He sat in a trance, obsessed with the words written in his hand. He and Ares were the two sons, no doubt. The answer was on this paper somewhere, but Eos had no idea where that answer was. A sneaking suspicion told him that Aizo wasn't exactly what he appeared to be. So he searched the paper for the truth behind the words. The crazy man had said it was there, though he sure couldn't see it anywhere in the prophecy. He rotated the paper as if looking for some code or hidden message in the words under the low light his Soul Sphere provided.

The truck jumped and bounced on a pot hole that jerked Eos from his seat. The paper fluttered to the floor. He picked up the filthy thing with the reverse side facing up.

In the nearly black, smudged margins on the back of the paper were three scrawled words. He remembered how Aizo had skittishly flipped the paper over as the guard was ordered to get him a glass of water.

The words held no meaning to Eos, but he shook his head in disbelief. Aizo's riddled words were much simpler than Eos had interpreted them to be. This was the answer, literally, behind the prophecy: *Find Lab 4.*

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



### JAWS OF THE SNAKE

“**Y**ou have to find a way. Run if you have to.” Glenn urged quietly with a blue bottle in hand as he sipped the whiskey. His eyes were sunken, his face was covered in dirt from days working without a shower, and his skin glistened with perspiration.

Maxima sat next to Glenn in the generator room. She stared at the new machine that had been built over the last month and mumbled with a nervous vacancy. “I can’t. Not when Eos is coming back today. Braxton has us under control as long as he has Eos and I separated. It’s better if we’re together...even if I’m inside...that.”

“It’s time to call his bluff. He wouldn’t dare harm Eos!” Glenn dried his mouth with the back of his hand.

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Maxima raised her bottom lip and shook her head. Glenn could see inside her sapphire stare that she was going through with it—she was going to power the generator and it was tearing her apart.

Across the large, open concrete domain, a newly arrived olive and navy uniform towered. He was supervising the fine tuning of the metal container that was growing around its predecessor's remains. The overhead lights striped his dark, bald head in warped rectangles.

General Guren made his way to Maxima and Glenn. He cast his looming gaze down at them with a robotic stare. "Remember, Eos must believe you're doing this of your own free will."

Maxima met the towering man's gaze with her own resilient nod.

Glenn had more to say than she did. He set his bottle down on the table and stood in a wobbling stance. "You," he paused and realized standing made him dizzy than he had been prepared for. He ground his teeth and pointed angrily. "You can't do this. I'm not going to let you use her. She just a kid you—"

*Thunk.* General Guren struck Glenn with an open hand in the chest and knocked the drunken strawberry blond back into his seat. "Sit down."

Maxima stepped firmly between them, "Don't touch Glenn," she hissed, "I'm going to do what you want so keep your hands off him." Her fists were clenched close side by side. The fingertips extended to meet each other for a fleeting second. Her sensible nature recalled the action and she put her hands down for Eos and Glenn's sake. Instead she receded behind her desert shawl and slid her chin under it.

Guren didn't like the feistiness in the girl, but he let it slide. "Now as I said, make this believable. Tell yourself you're doing it for the people. I don't really care, but when they arrive, Eos better accept that this is your choice." He left them to their own thoughts and returned to the generator.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Maxima tried to shake off the feeling that her life was ending, but an overwhelming fear of entering the machine seized her. Her optimism was faltering with each passing moment. Was she helping the citizens of North American Sector? Yes, but that was hardly a factor in her choice. It all came down to protecting her brother...even against the most unlikely of threats. Glenn was probably right. Braxton wouldn't hurt Eos, but with a threat like that—no amount of risk was worth gambling on. Maxima's thin eyebrows scrunched as a heavy weight fell on her. It was a responsibility that would test the limits of her abilities: become a human battery for the North American Sector. She would sacrifice her freedom for Eos. She just needed the courage to take the final steps.

Glenn had walked her through the process, explained the safety measures he made sure they put in place, and he even calmed her at times over the past month. Now he sat useless, gulping down his vices to dull the guilt he felt. He had helped construct it. While he may have been under the same threat as Maxima, it didn't lessen his accountability for what was going to happen.

Maxima sauntered in a surreal daze of hypervivid moments—each one separated by somber anxiety. She was walking to the generator. The mechanical thing loomed over her. *Anxiety*. She brushed her fingers around the edges as if trying to feel out her future. *More anxiety*. *Reconciling what was to come*. Her gentle touch pulled away. She stopped her hypnotic circling of the machine that was hungry to devour her.

Like a discolored scale on the skin of a serpent, she noticed something off about the machine. There was a tiny, bulging patch of adhesive just beneath a protrusion of conduit. She picked at the corner of it until the bulge was revealed. A slender shard of blue stone had been stuck to the metal sheet of the new generator, no bigger than the nail of her pinky. The stone was not all that remarkable. It had a pale

## JAWS OF THE SNAKE

blue tint like iced glass, but the feeling it gave off was something different altogether.

There was life in the stone. Maxima could feel the vibrating frequencies in the shard. There was an energy coming from it—like her own Soul Energy. It was not hers. Familiar, but not hers.

Something urged her. She let a blue fog glow from her palm and willed it with a subconscious drift. It flowed into the stone, and the thing *glowed*. It was brilliant and warming and instant.

The moment her energy mixed into the stone her mind was transported from the room. There was no physicality to her. There was a dull steel smell and an echo of silence. She was floating through a stream of energy and emotion. Hers was not the only energy. The stone was occupied by something else. Curls of smoky blue thoughts wafted on until they reached a gray version of Maxima's energy.

They clashed. It was a violent meeting of energies, but not a hostile one. It was like two animals had found each other's scent. Then familiarity. Maxima transmitted her anxiety, her fear of what was to come without meaning to.

Then the gray smoke curled into a sheet of fog. Maxima blinked. She stepped back from the stone shard.

She was left with words in her head but did not know where they came from. She only knew they were not her own: *I'm coming*. The words belonged to whoever had wanted the shard placed there.

At the other end of the generator room, the large slatted metal of an industrial loading dock rolled open. Maxima's heart leapt!

The joy that filled her was almost enough to overcome her anxiety...almost. She didn't wait to see who was behind the rising door. She ran to the other side as fast as she could. The heavy weight of her responsibility was temporarily shed with each step that struck the concrete floor; with each step that brought her closer to Eos.

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Eos stood outside the generator complex, waiting for the door to rise as he stood next to General Braxton. The General was at attention with his hands behind his back in a rigid pose.

The moment the door opened, he was attacked by an aerial hug. Maxima's embrace wrapped him in familiar arms. Eos was almost knocked off the loading dock from Maxima's momentum, but he supported both of them from tipping. A satisfying fulfillment radiated from the brother and sister.

"Eos..." Maxima whispered through tears, "You're back. You're safe and ... and..." Eos unwrapped his little sister from around him.

"That's right," he smiled at her and cupped her cheek with one hand. He wiped the tears from her face with his thumb, "It's finally over. We'll all be together. Now, where's Glenn?" Eos laughed joyously.

Maxima's smile lessened. She gestured over her back. "He's been drinking again. He can barely stand."

Eos burst out laughing. "Well then by all means, let's go get him and stand him up!"

General Braxton watched as the two jogged to the other end of the room. He followed behind them in no hurry. They ran by walls lined with soldiers without taking much notice. There were nearly fifty who were at statue-like attention; so much so that they appeared more part of the complex than noticeable figures.

"Glenn!" Eos exclaimed happily at the sight of the grease covered man. "How much have you had to drink?"

In a stupor, Glenn looked around in search of the answer, "You know, I honestly can't remember." He squinted as if trying to recall hurt his head. "A better question would be when I started. The answer to that is this morning...or was it last night?"

## JAWS OF THE SNAKE

“Well you look awful,” Eos greeted his friend warmly with the taunt.

A cheeky smile was returned. “Can’t say you look any better in that uniform, Eos. What are you doing in that? I set your clothes in the back room.” He stood carefully in a white-ish button-down shirt that was unbuttoned enough to showed his bare chest, smeared with stains and sweat. He walked them to the back room with an arm on the wall for support. Eos got out of his heavy uniform made to block the winds of the north.

They returned down the hallway, back to the generator room. They came out to see General Braxton standing beside Guren. Their expressions were stone.

“What’s General Guren doing here?” Eos wondered aloud. Behind them, he saw the new generator that sat beside the one he had destroyed, “and what is that?” The cold realization set in that something was wrong. The sense of being home faded with the weight of the fifty soldiers that Eos realized surrounded them all.

The new machine wasn’t as prominent in the shadow of the spiraling monster that Eos and Maxima had ruined, but it was an unwelcomed presence all the same. The single chamber was ten feet tall and about the same in diameter. The front was plated with a glass window and two unlit circle lights that waited to be turned on like a dormant creature. Coils thicker than a man’s leg were intertwined with rubber pipes that twisted into on thick cylindrical, snake-like body. The body wound across the floor to a slightly larger container behind, and finally down into the pit that the original generator sank into.

“I’ve kept my word. You have been reunited with your sister, but now the North American Sector has run out of time.” General Braxton bellowed with arms behind his back.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Eos was beginning to put the pieces together, but still wasn't sure of the new machine's purpose. "What are you saying General Braxton? We were supposed to have another month...we—"

"Our estimate was over generous. We had less time than we thought. The North American Sector has been running for three months off power from the reserves, but the reserves are depleted, and oil is scarce. It's time to begin production again."

The face of the empty machine sat across from Eos with clear desire to be filled. The dark eyes wanted to be lit. "How do we begin production?" He gulped in apprehension of the answer. "I have no idea how to use the new machine."

"It's not for you to use," General Braxton said. "Your sister has volunteered to power it alone. I still need you to prepare for Ares."

Eos looked to Maxima for confirmation. She darted her eyes from his. She couldn't let Eos look into hers, for he would see the truth. Guren's heavy watch was on her. She was surrounded by armed soldiers who stood silently like suits of armor along the wall. Those suits could come to life at any minute if Braxton gave the word. Then Eos and Glenn would be the ones under threat. So, she nodded and gave a false assurance.

"Maxima you're going to do this by yourself? Can you handle that? It took both of us before." He searched for an explanation.

"My power has grown since you left. This machine...it doesn't work like the last one. It can only hold one person." A solemn hush fell over the room.

The snake-like generator now conveyed its purpose to Eos.

Glenn was despondently sipping at the table. Streaks of liquid cleansed his face of the grime that was layered on it. It wasn't sweat or alcohol that glistened on Glenn's cheeks. He tried to keep his pain inside with each gulp, but only forced it out faster.

## JAWS OF THE SNAKE

General Guren came up behind Maxima and put his large hands on her shoulders.

“It’s time, Maxima.” He said.

Maxima reached forward to hold her big brother one more time and bit down harder than ever on the fabric between her lips. She hung her arms around his neck and whispered softly into his ear, “I’m sorry, Eos.” She pulled the shawl from her mouth and off her neck. Her hands draped the fabric over Eos’ shoulder.

She was pulled away and led toward the generator.

“No,” Eos muttered in a whisper of disbelief. He repeated the word over and over in a palpable and revolting denial.

“Don’t do anything rash. Your sister’s health is our top priority. We’ll remove her from the machine and take her vitals every day. I want her alive just as much as you do.” Braxton said.

“Don’t you dare compare your concern for Maxima with mine!” Eos snarled and pointed at the machine, “And that...spending every day in that is *not* living!” Eos sleeveless arms tightened, and his veins bulged. Maxima looked over her shoulder at him with desperate eyes. How could Eos ever forgive himself for letting this happen to her? The black mark on his right arm pulsated with his fury. The tips of the ink-like strands crawled up his arm. A red glow took hold of his palm.

General Braxton sighed, “I warned you. Stop your antics, boy.”

Eos breathed long breaths that fumed from him as the red light in his hand formed a Soul Sphere. *Krackle. Snap!* The sphere shot small bursts of radical energy from the core of its churning mass. The light bathed Braxton in Eos’ refusal, but the General did not flinch.

*Shk! Shk! Shk!* The walls of soldiers all raised their rifles in response to the threat of Eos’ Soul Sphere. He didn’t care about his own endangerment, knowing there was no way out. Someone would have to power that generator in the end. He lowered his head.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“I want to take her place.”

For a moment, only a buzz of Eos’ manifested soul was heard.

“I’m afraid I can’t let that happen. I need you in case we have to confront Ares in the near future.” The apathetic General responded. With each rise of his pointed mustache, Eos wanted to burn it off with his right hand and leave him with a scar on his other cheek.

“I wasn’t asking Braxton. I was—”

*Schik. Click.* The sound of a pistol slide being racked interrupted Eos.

He turned to the sound.

General Guren held a silver pistol, pointed down at the raven-haired girl who was going to power the machine. “Settle down, Eos. Don’t forget that your life isn’t the only one in play here.”

Eos tightened his fingers and wound back his hand. “Get that away from my sister!” He screamed.

General Guren nodded and lowered the gun to the other side, only to raise it again in the opposite direction. Glenn dropped his whisky bottle and scooted his chair back as he realized the gun was pointed at him.

“Now get in Maxima.” Guren ordered.

Before walking toward the machine, Maxima looked at Eos and gave a slight shake of her head in grave denial of what Eos was thinking about doing. With a hissing of air through a body of pipes and coils, the door panel swung ajar from the machine, the two plastic covers overhead turned to green lights, and Maxima entered the open jaws of the metal snake.

While still pointing the gun at Glenn, General Guren pushed the door closed.

Eos’ head swam with tension. A dizzying frustration stabbed at his brain. The coffee brown spikes of Major Clark’s hair hovered in Eos’

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mind. Suddenly he was back on the coast after his family had been torn apart the first time. The reassuring hand was on his shoulder as the sun set. He knew Major Clark would have told him this wasn't the time yet. He hoped the Major was watching, because his skills were growing, and he wouldn't let Braxton have control for much longer. Soon, very soon...he just needed a plan. He needed some leverage over Braxton.

He let his crimson soul disperse into a vapor.

He walked up to the generator. No one stopped him. Maxima looked through the glass at him from her elevated position.

A mask descended before her face and she covered her nose and mouth with it. Then there was the sound of valves unlocking and pressure building. Yellow-green liquid puddled around Maxima's feet. It rapidly rose to her ankle level.

She raised her hand and pressed her palm on the glass as she became consumed in the suspension fluid. Eos fought back tears as he placed his black hand on the outside of the generator. Their hands squeezed tightly from opposite sides of the machine until the bath of yellow and deep green passed her shoulder level.

*Khoow...Khoow;* Came the low wheezing of her facemask as her eye lids fell centimeter by centimeter. Her hand was no longer pressed against the glass; she simply dangled in a floating state. Maxima's preserved body was overlaid in the sickly color of the machine's venom. It had consumed her.

Eos held his hand against the cool container for a moment longer before letting it fall.

He watched as the sapphire light of Maxima's Soul Energy formed beads around her skin like perspiration. The droplets gathered around her and dripped off, sapped from her body. They rose to the ceiling of the generator like jellyfish swimming through water.

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“Glenn?” Eos looked to the engineer for an explanation or an answer to his concerns or even just something to calm his jittering mind. Glenn stood before him, a pitiful sight. Two long strands of his light hair fell over his contrite, dismal face.

His thin lips moved, but no words would come out at first. After a few attempts he managed to say, “I’m...sorry Eos...They made us.” He bawled in drunken state. “I built it because they said they’d kill...they’d kill you otherwise. I didn’t want to, but I—”

General Braxton stopped him, “That’s enough Glenn.”

Eos felt a tear roll down his cheek like a strangely warm snowflake melting on his numb face. He was sick of not being in control. He was sick of Braxton’s manipulative lies. He just wanted to be free with his sister.

General Braxton shifted uncomfortably as Eos leveled with him. The boy burned through him with his stare. It was a look that bore through Braxton’s indifferent heart and filled the void with a tiny inkling of fear.

“I will get her out of there and then you *will* pay.” He declared and left the room through the loading dock.

A few soldiers attempted to go after him, but Braxton shooed them off. “That won’t be necessary. There’s nowhere for him to go. Everyone will stay here, except for you,” he said to Glenn. “You opened your intoxicated mouth, now you get to fix the situation.”

The gloomy, hopeless stupor was gone from Glenn. He forced himself into composure and carefully placed each foot in front of the other as he strutted out of the room. He threw a spiteful glance at the man who had been playing with everyone’s lives like pawns he didn’t mind sacrificing.

“I intend to.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



### ESCAPE THE CLUTCH

Glenn stood outside the complex with one hand in his pocket and the other pointing toward Eos with his palm up casually displaying what had come into his possession. At the end of his gangly finger hung a key ring. They stood between two military Humvees that were parked amongst multiple rows of identical vehicles.

Eos halted his furious march and acknowledged Glenn, “What is that?” he asked.

Glenn’s words were slowed by alcohol just enough to be noticeable. “Your ticket out of here. We can’t come up with a plan to get Maxima out if we’re under Braxton’s watch all the time.”

Glenn was in rare form today. He was drunk, as usual, but also pulling through in a big way...not quite as usual. Eos snatched the ring off Glenn’s finger.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Let’s go quickly.” Glenn chuckled proudly to himself, “They just leave those things lying around. Didn’t expect me to be bold enough to take it!”

After finding the correct vehicle, Eos opened the truck door hesitantly. He sank into the foam seat and turned the key over in his hand, unsure. Should he leave? He had just gotten back to his sister and already he had to regroup. There was nothing he could do as long as Braxton and his horde of soldiers were there. Still, he couldn’t feel right about it with Maxima being left behind. He grimaced as he pictured the way he last saw her, floating like a spirit trapped in a bottle of toxic liquid. Bathed in the neon poison. Surrounded by cold metal. Face constricted by the breathing mask. Blood drained paleness and floating stillness in a carbonated hell.

*Braxton is hiding what belongs to us. You must take it back.*

Aizo’s words shook him from his hesitations.

Glenn looked through the open door on the other side. “Are you gonna to be okay with this?”

Eos thought carefully and conceded, “What other choice do I have? I can’t do anything in the current situation. I only have one lead to follow which might help us get her out of there.” He prayed the lead would end with something to leverage against Braxton.

With a spinning head Glenn shakily grasped the overhead handle to help himself fall into his seat.

He placed the key into the ignition as he had seen others do and turned it. The engine sputtered into action. Eos looked around nervously. There were trucks parked in front and on both sides of him. Once more he tried to recall what he had seen others do when they drove a car. He had always wanted to try.

“Let’s go before Braxton decides to come out and check on us.” Glenn urged.

## ESCAPE THE CLUTCH

Eos pulled the gear shift by his right arm down hurriedly. He felt for the pedals with his feet.

*Vroom!* He pushed the gas pedal down all the way.

A jerk of acceleration seized Eos. A tingle of shock surged from his stomach to his toes as the truck lurched forward.

*Smash!* They collided with the truck in front of him. The fronts of the vehicles met head on. The hood wrinkled like a crumpled wrapper, but the damage was only superficial.

“What are you doing? Put it in reverse. Reverse! They’ll be coming out here for sure now.”

Eos scanned wildly for something that resembled reverse. There was an R two notches above the D by the stick he had pulled. That must be it.

He pushed the stick up and slammed the gas pedal again.

The truck flew backward with neck snapping acceleration!

Glenn let out a maddened, quivering scream and held his hands out as if to stop something. The truck continued its reversed path with Eos’ foot to the floor. Glenn’s scream accelerated with the truck’s motion.

*Smash! Shatter. Bwoosh!* The truck plowed into a light pole that had been twenty yards behind them. The window was splintered in rear of the truck and the air bags deployed. Glenn’s face was surrounded by the air bag, but his muffled noise continued even after the crash. Finally, his horrified scream settled.

More hair than usual fell over Glenn’s infuriated face. His nostrils flared, and his mouth was turned in a frown of angry disbelief. “Switch seats *now.*” He demanded with a huff as he brushed the hair from over his eyes.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Glenn walked around the front of the truck. Eos could see obscenities form on his lips through the cracked windshield. He climbed over into the passenger side.

“Last time I saw you, you ruined my generator. Now you come back after all these months and you crash a military truck...” His head shook, and his face had turned a shade of red beyond his hair color. “Twice! Have you never driven before? You idiot!” Glenn’s temper flared as he yelled.

“No, have you ever seen me drive before? It’s not like you ever taught me.” Eos snapped before sitting back with an aching neck, astonished at the damage he caused.

Glenn cooled down with the realization that Braxton would be able to instantly locate them if he indeed was looking. “Well...I guess I overlooked that.” That was the closest Glenn would come to admitting his drunken mistake to let Eos drive.

They drove off with soldiers peering out open door to investigate the commotion. Eos urged Glenn, “Go! Go! I think they saw us.”

“I can’t believe we just did that.” Glenn sighed minutes later. He turned to Eos as they drove over the dried land at seventy miles per hour and squinted. “You’re destructive you know that?”

Eos folded his hands in his lap. “It wasn’t bad for my first time though was it? Maybe later you can show me—”

“No.” Glenn denied him immediately.

Eos watched the world roll by his window as he thought of Maxima. How was he going to get her out of that machine? General Braxton had her on lock down. Worse, the building was full of soldiers and Eos couldn’t afford to stick around and see if General Braxton and Guren were going to keep watch over their power source. There wasn’t much opportunity. He truly and desperately hoped Aizo wasn’t really the insane prisoner he portrayed.

## ESCAPE THE CLUTCH

The path Glenn took became wiped from existence as the wind churned sand over their tracks where they drove.

“Where are you going?” Eos asked.

“West. I know a little ghost town full of people who live off the grid. They aren’t part of the rebels, mind you, but they’re good people. I have a friend there, named Shaun Dunn. I drink with him every now and then. Braxton might expect us to head east toward the cities. He’d expect us to go where it would be easier to survive, and if he searches for us there, we’ll have disappeared already.”

Eos could tell Glenn had thought this out ahead of time.

“Where will we disappear to?”

“You’re the one with the lead that could help rescue Maxima. You tell me. I’m just taking us somewhere we can lay low and get food and supplies.”

Eos pulled Aizo’s prophecy out of his pocket and scanned it. The words revealed no more meaning to him now than any other instance when he had read them. They couldn’t waste any time. Every second his sister was being used as a power source, her life and health were in more jeopardy.

“We’ll go to Lab Four,” Eos said, sure that it was his only hope of finding something that would give him the edge on General Braxton. The taste of bile greeted the back of his throat as he watched himself get further and further away from Maxima. He wanted to open a window to throw up but swallowed the feeling.

Glenn rubbed his temples to ease the fog from his head. The truck veered off to the left, but it didn’t matter. There was no road. “Never heard of it,” he moaned as he forced his brain to sober up.

Eos rubbed the powdered layer of dirt off of the paper, careful not to take off any of the words. The coarse fibers of the paper met his fingertips as he recalled everything that could be of use in the search.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Braxton mentioned that there were only three laboratories under the North American Military. There must be one more and I’m sure he’s hiding something huge there. I don’t know where that is, but I know someone who might. I just need a phone.”

“Well, they’ll have one. I hope you’re sure about this.”

The drowning buildings surfaced from the desert sand just as Eos had remembered them from his trip to meet General Braxton over three months ago. Glenn slowed the truck. “It gets hard to know where to stop when the wind rearranges the landscape every day. This is the area for sure, but we’ll have to go out and look through some windows to find Shaun’s place.” The windows Glenn referred to were previously the second story of suburban homes, but no longer. Now they were hatches into an underground world of buried mazes.

Sweltering air kissed Eos’ skin with a humid drip as he stepped onto the sand. Sweat beaded up on his arms and face; a mist washing over him. He tilted his head at a series of mole hill houses that poked from the ground. He understood why Glenn could have trouble finding landmarks.

*Chk Chk.*

The universally recognizable sound caused Eos and Glenn to stop. They realized that there was a shotgun barrel pointed at them from the nearest house.

“What do ya think you’re doin back here? There’s no one left for you to take, you military rats!” A cantankerous voice called from within the window. His tone was cracked in a way only years in the desert could age you. Glenn and Eos put their hands up immediately. It took a minute for their eyes to adjust focus from the blaring light and into the dark hole in the dune. The question came from behind the barrel of a pump action shotgun.

Eos looked to Glenn, who had claimed to know these people.

## ESCAPE THE CLUTCH

“I’m here to see a friend. I’ve never been greeted around here with a gun before, but I can assure you we are not military.” He looked back at the banged-up Humvee with a new understanding.

“Ya come back without the uniform to take the last of us? We won’t go! You can drag our dead bodies out of here!” A long peppered beard poked through the open window now. A balding hairline was tucked tightly near the stock of the shotgun, aiming right at the newcomers.

“We’re not here to take—hold on. What do you mean take the last of you? I’m just here to meet an old drinking buddy of mine: Shaun Dunn. If it’s the truck that has you worried, we stole it. We’re in a spot of trouble and on the run from General Braxton himself.”

“We’re unarmed,” Eos added. He was going to give Glenn time to try and work out his plan before resorting to Soul Wielding. They would be in a desperate situation for food and water soon.

The weary face showed a flash of recognition at the name. “Shaun...he’s been...never mind. My sons’re already behind ya. They’ll check the truck for weapons. We’ll see if you’re lying or if you’re really stupid enough to be on the run unarmed,” he coughed dryly.

Two boys in their late thirties opened the doors on the other side of the truck with pistols in hand. They rummaged through the truck. “They’re clean dad.” One hollered after a thorough search.

A cylindrical shape dug into Eos’ back in a less than friendly manner. When he attempted to look over his shoulder; it only dug deeper. He saw that the second son had his gun to Glenn’s back.

They waited for the desert dwellers to make the next move.

“Walk slowly inside the house.” One said in a voice aged well beyond his years.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Eos obeyed as the sun dipped behind the dune ridge that encased the neighborhood of swallowed houses.

∞ ∞ ∞

Ares blended with the night in his Mitad cloak as he stood outside the generator complex. Zolo's tracker idea had worked perfectly. He followed the signal of his own Soul Energy which led him to this building. It was an inventive idea inspired by Zolo: placing a small amount of Soul Energy into a particular item that could retain it and tracking down his own soul. The boy knew that Ares possessed powers, and without understanding those powers, he had asked if there was a way to use them for tracking. He was nearly Ares' age and he already showed great promise for the Mitad. Perhaps he would have been a prodigy like Ares himself if he were a Soul Wielder.

Ares boldly strutted up to the loading dock and knocked on the garage door. When the knock was not answered, he patiently knocked again. This time the door rose. A North American soldier investigated the disturbance with his rifle raised, but he could see nothing at first.

Ares slipped down the side of the rifle. All the soldier saw was a blur; a ripple of black in the night. Suddenly, his throat closed, and he inhaled desperately for breath. None came. He dropped his rifle and plucked at his neck to be released from the grip around wind pipe.

He was lifted so that the toes of his boots just scraped the ground. The canvas of night swallowed him. His head spun, and his vision narrowed into tunnels. Through the slits of conscious vision, he saw the pale hand and thin wrist that was lifting him. He hadn't even been able to scream out to warn the other soldiers.

## ESCAPE THE CLUTCH

Ares made sure the soldier was unconscious, dragged him to the edge of the loading platform, and dropped the limp olive uniform over the edge.

*Thud.*

The room inside was dimly lit, but something facing the other side gave the room a diffused green and yellow glow. Ares stepped into the complex as three more soldiers neared to investigate the open door. They surrounded him in an instant.

“Who are you? Identify yourself,” one of them ordered.

Ares breathed slowly and took in the situation. Three soldiers around him. As far as he could tell, there were ten on the left side of the room and six more on the right. The poison colored glow was coming from the center of the room and as he sensed a familiar tingling that only his Soul Energy could give him—that was his target. He felt the resonant energy of his soul pulsing dimly from the tracker Zolo had placed. The signal was fading.

A rifle burrowed itself in his chest. Ares gave the soldier a patronizing look and then a sly smile. This would be fun...maybe even the tiniest bit of a challenge. He dropped to the floor.

Ares tightened his core and spun in a crouched position as he fell to the ground. His leg lashed out and swept the first soldier's feet out from under him. He fell back, head first. The clatter of his gun on the concrete muted out the back of his skull hitting at the same time.

The other two pointed their guns down, but Ares had seen it coming. They would aim down, and he would roll off to the side. He did just as he'd planned while manifesting his ghostly Soul Energy from his sleeve.

*Crack! Crack!* They both fired at a target who had already moved.

A glowing chain whip wrapped around the second soldier's ankle before he even realized the blur of his target had moved. Ares yanked

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the chain back and the soldier was laid out next to his partner. The third swung his gun around. Ares flicked his chain whip forward once more.

Links of pale light zoomed by the soldier's face and bleached his vision. He pulled the trigger blindly and sprayed shots that ricocheted a safe distance from Ares. The links were suddenly around his throat. The pointed end of the chain spun, wrapping itself twice around. Ares stood explosively and gripped his soul chain with both hands. The soldier clawed blindly at the glowing chains constricting his throat. The energy seeping from them burned his skin.

Ares took two running steps forward, pulling the chain behind him. On the third step, the chain was taut. He tensed every fiber of muscle in his arms and chest and flung the chain forward—out the loading platform.

A scream was heard throughout the building.

Ares called back his weapon and it wound around his arm in a coil which he draped like a tapestry over his forearm. The other sixteen soldiers were quick to move. Already three were coming towards him in a near perfect line. He weaved his chain through their chests, impaling all of them in one go with a series of squelching penetrations.

That left three on the right side of the room. He spun and danced around them like a ghostly spirit that floated through the air. With elegant speed he ran them through with his chain.

The mob of ten on the other side were caught off guard by the Soul Wielding. Ares rushed at them head on. He focused his Soul Energy away from his chain whip momentarily and a glow came from beneath his feet. He charged forward in a sprint towards death. The soldiers' guns were raised.

## ESCAPE THE CLUTCH

Ares was just feet away. His footsteps became softer and suddenly his next step landed in midair! A glimmering platform of his Soul Energy was matched perfectly beneath his foot.

The leaders of the pack pulled their triggers.

Ares launched himself from the platform with added propulsion of the Soul Energy at his feet. The bullets were fired underneath him and across the other side of the room. They embedded in the wall with a shower of concrete spitting back. Ares soared above them. His feet nearly grazed the soldier at the back of the mob as he landed on a sheet of his Soul Energy.

As he turned to face the mob, he also swung his chain around.

*Fwum. Fwum. Fwum.* It cut through the air with ferocious speed! The whip wrapped around one side of the mass of bodies before they could comprehend that a human being had just leapt over them in one amazing bound.

The chain continued its curved path. Momentum, along with a little manipulation from Ares, brought it around the head of the mass. He summoned it back and completed the loop while the soldiers were still reeling.

As it returned to his open fingers, it formed a knot around the original strand that still flowed from his sleeve. He gave the chain a heave and squeezed the ten soldiers together in a painfully tight mess of limbs.

Ares secured the knot and left them facing the other direction in a panicky struggle. The end of the chain dissipated into bubbles of his Soul Energy and broke off from within his sleeve.

The door at the other end of the room opened and General Guren passed through it with a pistol raised. The scene shocked him. Eight of his soldiers were strewn about the room, splayed about with a stillness only someone unconscious...or dead would have. The rest

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were gathered into a giant pack and tied together by an unnatural radiant chain—a group of helpless, captured men. They groaned, shouted swears, and struggled to no avail.

Ares stood at the foot of the generator, looking through the glass. In the reflection he saw the towering General.

“Such a vile bunch you are, treating a Hyperborean like this. It’s unforgivable.” Ares said. General Guren aimed his gun. “Don’t.” Ares halted him, “Look what I’ve done to your men. You seem to be more reliable for delivering a message to Braxton, so I’d prefer not to kill you...though it would be just for treating one of us this way.”

General Guren pointed his gun to the floor. “What do you want? General Braxton said you would betray our trust, but we never expected this. How’d you find this place?”

Ares stared callously. “Just insurance. We trust you in equal measure.” He turned back to the glass, to the beautiful young girl—his little sister. She was suspended like a preserved monument to elegance; peacefully asleep...calm amidst her abuse. Droplets of energy dripped from her skin. She looked so much like her mother. He nearly mistook her.

Rage swelled in Ares.

A Soul Sphere like a small bead formed at his index finger. It was a microcosm of energy that swirled violently. He looked at the sphere thoughtfully and then past it, at the green tinted girl. He touched the glass with his index finger.

*Shrk. Crick.* The glass door of the machine began cracking. Like a web being spun, the cracks multiplied throughout the door until Maxima was barely recognizable through the fractured glass.

Guren grunted as he restrained himself from trying to stop Ares.

Ares looked behind his shoulder at the bald man, “Tell Braxton to bring the Mellizo Glyphs to our meeting at the Thelon River if he

## ESCAPE THE CLUTCH

wants Maxima back...and bring Eos.” He punched the glass with his fist. It shattered, and the toxic colored liquid flooded out with a frothy crash around his feet.

“Bring the what?” General Guren asked. “Eos isn’t here. He’s run away. Braxton went after him.” A vein bulged in his forehead as he spit out the words. It took everything to contain himself from taking a shot at Ares.

Though he was younger, Ares looked at Guren like he was explaining something to a small child. “The Hyperborean artifacts. Bring the artifacts that you stole from us.”

Ares detached the face mask from Maxima and picked her up in a cradle carry; the girl weighed even less than he had anticipated. She had grown a lot since he had set out on his own. She was only four then. Now she looked so much like Anite’s Queen Terrava—their own mother.

*So, Eos was no longer with Braxton...this changed things.*

He summoned the Soul Energy from the chain back to him and manipulated it to his feet. The soldiers were free, but he dashed from the building at super human speed before they could pick themselves up. General Guren was left feeling like a fool with two broken generators. Braxton was going to be furious.

Ares didn’t stop running. He went nearly an hour before taking his first rest. Then he was on the move again. Small pulses of his energy lit the way as if paving a path for each step. He entered through the window of the buried city hours later and traveled down three floors.

Lanterns lit the empty sleeping quarters. Zolo decorated his room with a large two headed snake, the symbol of the Mitad, painted on his wall in a deep red paint. It filled the room like an occult symbol. There was little else except medical tools, text books, and sketches.

Ares laid Maxima down on a cot.

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“How did the tracker work? I was thinking that I could—” Zolo walked into the room excitedly but stopped short when he saw the girl on his cot. Her skin glistened and her hair was still damp.

“It worked perfectly,” Ares said.

Zolo looked at Maxima suspiciously, “When you said you needed to get back something they had stolen from us...I didn’t know you meant a person. Forgive me, but I didn’t plan to help you kidnap, master Ares.” Zolo said with less conviction than intended as he recognized Maxima.

Ares ignored Zolo’s hesitancy. “She’s more or less my sister... unfortunately. I need you to take care of her until she wakes.”

Zolo grabbed his medical kit: a collection of precious tools and supplies he had procured over the course of years. He explored abandoned houses daily in search of better equipment and books.

He was vigilantly at Maxima’s side. “What’s wrong with her? Is she sick or wounded?”

Ares laughed at Zolo’s concern. “She was being used in a human experiment by the North American military. I can’t say for sure when she’ll wake with what they have done to her, but she’ll recover eventually. I’m sure you’ll be able to speed that process.”

Zolo put two fingers to her neck. “Her pulse is slowed but steady.”

“I trust you can handle the situation. Call for me when she wakes up.” Ares said. Though he had finished speaking, Ares lingered in the room.

Zolo nodded to him. He swallowed nervously. He would never have thought the girl from the trailer would be in his room. He fumbled awkwardly for a cloth and dried her face. There had been a question he had wanted to ask the strangely familiar girl. Now he would get his chance.

## ESCAPE THE CLUTCH

“Zolo,” Ares asked for his attention. He stood obediently and looked into the blue and amethyst eyes of his mentor.

“We are considering offering you much more than just a position as officer in the rebel group. There is a deeper cause which we fight for...a much stranger reality than you currently understand. This position will come with a great deal of power, not just over members of the rebels, but far beyond that. Lord Vistomus thinks you are ready. How would you feel about such a promotion?”

Zolo tried to control his enthusiasm. “I could wish for no greater honor, sir.” He bowed his head respectfully to Ares.

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“You two have a lot of guts doing what you did and for that I’ll putcha up for the night,” the salt and pepper bearded man commended Eos and Glenn. “I can’t imagine how that truck made it this far with the shape it’s in. What in the world did ya do to it?”

Eos looked down, embarrassed. “It was a...err... close get away. We were being pursued.”

Glenn scowled, but there was grin underneath it. “Oh yes...it was *veeery* dangerous. There was much screaming. We barely survived thanks to some *skilled driving*.”

Eos’ cheeks went red.

“Well I’m glad to help how I can, but food and supplies ain’t free. Things’re stretched thin ‘round here.” They sat around a table in the cool, sand insulated house. The room was lit by a few fogged oil lamps.

Glenn reached into his pocket and produced a thick wad of cash. He threw it on the table.

The old weathered man shook his head and made a disappointed sound. “Money’s pretty worthless to us...”

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They needed supplies to make it anywhere going through the desert. Glenn implored, “We need food, water, gasoline, and weapons if you have them. We won’t make it out of here without supplies.” Glenn attempted his best desperate pleading eyes.

The host folded his arms and tapped his fingers against his bicep as he thought. Glenn could see the man was slowly giving in. It must have been the eyes of desperation; his begging was working.

“Well...” Their host fought with himself, but Glenn was already celebrating the victory in his head. “Maybe I’ll be able to use it if I make a trip into town. We don’t have gasoline though.” He grabbed the entire wad of paper and pocketed it before Glenn could protest. “Boys get them some food and water,” he ordered his two sons. “And bring me that old revolver.”

“Yes, dad.” The boys echoed each other.

Eos sat quietly and let Glenn do the talking. Glenn moved on to his original purpose.

“So how far are we from Shaun’s house? I can never keep my bearings out here.”

The old man rubbed his face gravely, pulling his loose skin in distress. He spoke slowly and stuttered his words. “Well ya were close, I’ll give ya...give ya that. He lived about a mile around the dune.”

“What do you mean lived? I drank with him about four months ago. Shaun isn’t the type to just get up and move; especially without telling me!” Glenn demanded answers.

“About a month ago...a whole platoon of soldiers came ‘round,” he coughed into his hand, “Claimed they were roustin’ out the rebels. ‘Course, it’s hard to convince the soldiers you aren’t a rebel when you live out here like we do.”

“What are you saying? They...they didn’t just...” Glenn became saddened.

## ESCAPE THE CLUTCH

The man shook his head. “I don’t know what fate they were dealt, but I watched as nearly every man and family I knew were taken from here and packed into a truck as prisoners. They left to the west. What’s out there...I have no idea. They must have some new prison. I’ve considered taking a trip to look for them, but at my age...”

Eos and Glenn looked at each other. They both knew of only one place that was further west than the desert.

“I need to make a phone call,” Eos added, “Do you have any way to communicate with the outside world from down here?”

“Sure, the land lines may be buried under sand, but we repaired the mains. Still work all the same. Where’re you two headed again?”

Eos looked down at his dark hand, which he had kept hidden under the table. He held the prophecy in it. *Lab Four* stared back at him. “We aren’t entirely sure yet. We’re hoping the phone call will clear that up.”

Just then the two brothers returned with pouches of water, cans of food, and a revolver in their hands. They set the loot on the table in a pile. The father picked up the revolver.

“Weapons are too valuable for me to give away now that the military has raided the area and taken most of our guns. Don’t even get me started on ammo.” Glenn waited for the catch. Did he want more money?

“This is a revolver I’ve had for over forty years and it’s given out on me. Doesn’t fire, but maybe it’ll be of some use to ya for intimidation purposes and the like. You two don’t look like you would know how to use a gun anyhow.”

Glenn accepted the gun with a sigh of relief that he hadn’t been asked for more money.

Eos nearly rebutted that he had the rank of army captain but realized that such words would undo the thin relation they had just

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built. Not to mention he could barely hit a stationary target during his training.

“If you follow me into the kitchen I’ll show you to the phone.” He stood with an oil lamp that lit the way in a dim, hazy light. They followed him into a small homely kitchen that smelled of mustiness and onions. A black plastic phone sat on the counter with a hardline running through the wall. “Yup, still use it from time to time to call in orders of supplies. Go ahead and get things figured out and after that I’ll show ya to your rooms.” He grunted and walked out of the room with bones as creaky as the floor boards.

Eos pulled out the contact card given to him by Major Clark.

“Who are you calling?” Glenn asked.

“My commanding officer. His name’s Colonel Axel Kane.”

Plastic buttons clunked with each fall of his finger as he dialed Colonel Kane’s number. The phone rang as Eos prayed that a confident and prideful voice would answer. A voice answered, but it was neither of those things.

“Hello? This is Colonel Kane,” came a voice that was low and sounded exhausted.

Eos addressed his commanding officer eagerly, “Sir, this is Eos. I’m in a bit of a situation and I need your help.”

There was a long silence.

“It’s good to hear a familiar voice. You were taken away before...never mind...Things are getting crazy around here. I already owe you plenty. Whatever you need, I’m here to help.” Colonel Kane tried to sound as if there was a smile on his end of the phone, but Eos could tell there wasn’t.

“I’m looking for something in my search for Hyperborea. The only clue I have right now is a place called Laboratory Four. Have you ever heard of it?”

## ESCAPE THE CLUTCH

For a long time, there was just the Colonel's breathing. "Oh, the cousins? They're doing fine. I've continued to research where that fourth one could be. If you're looking for him, I guess we're trying to find the same person."

"Colonel, what are you talking about?" Eos was lost in the conversation.

Axel Kane carried on, "Sure, you remember what they all do! The first is a guard for war prisoners. The other does weapons research, and the third researches communication on the east coast. That fourth one is a mystery though. It's like Uncle B. is trying to keep him away from me. I have a pretty decent idea why, but still no clues as to where he actually is."

It began to click in Eos' head.

"Colonel Kane...are you being...?" Eos caught himself. Being listened to was the only explanation possible for the Colonel's bizarre behavior.

"Oh, I am; I am. Don't worry about it. Uncle B. still keeps tabs on me. He has the other uncles checking up on me at all times."

Eos paused to recount the conversations. Uncle B must be Braxton and the other uncles were his generals.

Eos' heart sunk. If Kane was still searching for his *fourth cousin* as well, then he was of no help. His one chance at whatever Aizo had wanted him to find was dashed. Failure was all Eos felt. He was going to have to charge in and fight his way to Maxima in a mad suicide mission. That was the only option left to him.

Kane dropped a less subtle hint hoping the family talk had distracted anyone potentially listening to his bugged room, "I've learned that Uncle B. is trying to somehow reproduce what you can do. He wants some red lights of his own. I've also learned prisoners of

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war are being sent somewhere, but not to my first cousin the guard anymore.” He risked a slip of his coded dialogue.

Glenn listened to the conversation.

He chimed in as he pieced together something. “Eos, when you were gone... Maxima and I were taken to this place now that I think about it. It must have been Lab Four. The whole place was dedicated to researching your powers and designing that generator from what I could tell. I know that’s hardly any help since we were blinded when we were taken there...but...” He fell silent, knowing the answer was buried there. He just couldn’t quite bring it to the surface.

“Wait Colonel,” Eos asked with hope rising. “You mentioned what your three cousins do, but you forgot the environmental research being done.”

“Environmental Research?”

The puzzle was finally putting itself together in Eos’ mind. Shaun and the others were taken west. There was a secret lab that Braxton didn’t have on the books and Glenn and Maxima were taken there blindfolded. General Braxton must have feared they could easily find the place because they had been there once before.

“You must know of Sires. There is a whole base researching the sustainability of living on the west coast? General Braxton met us there once before!”

“I’ve never heard of it and Uncle B is doing no such thing. I can assure you he has little interest.” Colonel Kane said with a chilling realization. “If you were really at such a place...I think you may have already met my lost cousin.”

Eos realized that General Braxton hadn’t just happened to be in Sires after the generator was destroyed. He had been planning to build another generator all along. General Braxton must have flown to Sires to speed up the schedule.

## ESCAPE THE CLUTCH

Eos was overwhelmed with a new-found hope and a slight tinge of foolishness for not realizing the answers before. “Thank you, Colonel! How could we have not pieced this together before?”

Colonel Kane gave a weak laugh. “I feel all the more foolish. Once again, I’m learning from you. Go find what you’re looking for...It was good to hear from you.” Something was pulling at his voice. There was an awkward pause and Eos thought the conversation was winding down to an end, but Colonel Kane wasn’t finished. He was struggling to continue.

“Did you...” The voice broke up in a painful grumble as Colonel Kane recalled something he wished he didn’t have to, “Did you see his face? Did you see who killed ...my best friend?” Colonel Kane’s tone became dark. It reminded Eos of the beast he had seen when he had looked into Colonel Kane’s eyes in Sherbrooke. It was doing more than looking out now; it was reaching through its prison cell and escaping.

The craving for revenge filled Kane’s mouth with a metallic taste.

Eos recalled the events at the hanger achingly. Kane brought the memory forth like stabbing a hot poker into an open wound. “I was there, but I...I couldn’t protect him. Colonel I tried. I used all my power, but it wasn’t enough. They were too strong.” He tried to explain, but the guilt could not be alleviated. He had failed to protect Major Clark when he had needed Eos the most.

“Did you see the murderer’s face?” Colonel Kane asked through clenched teeth.

“He was hidden under a hood. I didn’t see him very well, but he was a Soul Wielder like me. I would know him if I ever fought with him again.”

“I see.” It sounded like Colonel Kane was fighting tears. “I just got back from his memorial service. It was the strangest feeling being

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there. I felt like he should have been attending it with me...they say they buried him near where Maria and James live.”

Eos choked out a response. “Good...he would have wanted to be close to them.”

“It’s a terrible day for a war.” Kane said with a sad bluntness.

“A war, sir? Is there going to be a war?” Eos asked confused.

A single tear rolled down Colonel Kane’s cheek. It splashed like the first rain drop as the skies darken for a storm. It splattered on a young image of Major Clark and Colonel Kane. They were arm and arm during the Fracture War. Back then they were best friends with the world at their feet... in the height of their youthful optimism.

“The war’s already started.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY



### THE SUPPLEMENT

**I**t was said that a rumble spread through the entirety of North American Sector like a heart palpitation when the west coast had fallen into the sea during the Fracture War. Colonel Kane had memorized every second of the occurrence. A phantom feeling possessed his nervous system, forcing him to relive the pivotal event on a near daily basis. The scarring of the continent and nation had traumatized him as much as any of the other gruesome moments of his career. The ground was shaking now. Not for anyone else, but for him—the fracture was happening again.

He did his best to recognize it as the false syndrome it was and commanded his motor patterns to carry on as they normally would.

Colonel Kane was in officer's service uniform when he entered the barracks. He marched with a long, dark trench coat fluttering behind him as he made his grand entrance. His boots pounded the barracks floor. Each footstep stamped with the certainty that change was coming.

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A gold eagle, clutching arrows in its talons, shone from the center of his peaked officer's cap. When his men saw the gold oak leaves on the cap's peak peer over them, they stopped what they were doing and gave him their absolute and devout attention.

A silent buzz of anticipation resonated in all five members of Squad Three.

Colonel Kane flashed his smile that could motivate any unit, but it was darker than usual...sadder. "Squad Three, I have a new mission for you. As you have noticed...I felt this one was too important to hand down the chain of command to Captain Draven. In fact, this may be the last time I lead you as a Colonel in the North American Military." Colonel Kane had never been one to let others get a word in and he didn't plan to start now. "This mission is so important that I'm leading you in it myself. I couldn't imagine better soldiers to fight alongside or a more important cause to undertake. There is no cause more important than keeping authority in check and defending our way of life. If you head over to the meeting room in Squad One's barracks while I gather Squad Two, I'll brief you there."

He turned and whipped the tail of his coat with a grand swoosh as he left. Captain Draven was just as stunned as the rest of his squad at the sudden and severe announcement. He laughed nervously from his cot, "The Colonel is probably just over enthusiastic to be back in the field. You heard him, let's wait in Squad One's barracks."

In the meeting room, Captain Draven sat next to the captain of Squad One: Dagon McLane. He was a fire haired man with gray-blue eyes and a pencil thin neck. The rest of Draven's men filled in the rows behind them. Not long after, Major Skye of Third Squad joined them with his men.

Colonel Kane stood before them, the image of leadership and confidence.

## THE SUPPLEMENT

“All of you know of Eos who recently left our company. He was a boy of high character, responsible for the rescue of Major Seth Skye. I’m sure most of you have also witnessed his unique abilities.” He scanned the cramped room to judge his audience before he laid the rest of the information on them. “Our intel suggests there are more with abilities similar to his in the Sector...many more. While Eos fought for the North American Sector, we cannot say the same for the rest of these super humans called Hyperboreans. Their allegiance is unknown, if they have any at all. We don’t know why they’re here or what they want. However, they have recently given us a hint. General Braxton and the other generals have had in their possession for many years now, artifacts from these Hyperboreans’ home land. Now that they know this—the Hyperboreans want them back. At the end of the month, General Braxton is going to do just that.” The squads all stirred uncomfortably in their hard chairs at the idea. The plain white walls gave them nothing else to shift their attention to.

Colonel Kane paced the room with his hands behind his back. He had decided to go into this with reckless abandon so there was no use holding information back.

“Major Clark was killed recently investigating these people and their relationship with the North American Sector.” He winced as he said it. There was a delay before Colonel Kane could speak through the lump in his throat. “What he found...what he died for...was discovering that General Braxton was giving weapons to this group. We don’t know why, but we must accept the possibility that General Braxton may not have the intentions of our Sector in mind. I am telling you this as a North American citizen and not as your Colonel because after this mission I will most likely be stripped of my rank.”

Captain McLane was the first to speak. Against his commanding officer he would never speak out, but to Axel Kane the North

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American citizen he had to try. “You know we’d follow you anywhere, Sir, but is this, whatever this is, worth sacrificing all the work you put in to gain your rank? You’ll never be able to make it to the top if you play your cards now. You’ll lose everything you worked for.”

Colonel Kane beamed down, “This *is* everything I’ve worked for. All of you have been assigned to a special task force. You will be an escort and protection detail for General Braxton during his next encounter with the Hyperboreans. I have no intention of letting him compromise North American security. That is why I have set up precautionary plans if, when I join you in this protection detail, I deem his actions detrimental to our Sector. On the board I have laid out the...” he searched for the word without saying anything too condemning, “the supplemental material I’ve added to your mission. Call them extracurricular orders.”

Colonel Kane turned to a corkboard he had prepared with maps and tactics. He removed his cap. Before setting it down he caught his reflection in the golden eagle emblem. It showed him in a melancholy distortion as he rubbed the hat tenderly and recalled the pouring of dedication, the lost comrades, and lost years that he had traded for it. Everything he had given for his career had prepared him for the task at hand.

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The heat of the desert had only spread the crack in the windshield from Eos’ first driving experience. Eos and Glenn sat in new clothes given to them by the old man and his two sons. Now they were in more desert appropriate attire: short sleeved robes of light fibers that were cinched to their body by a leather belt. They had left the sand

## THE SUPPLEMENT

colony with food and water, but gasoline was something that they couldn't manage to bargain for.

The fuel meter pointed dangerously close to empty, and it was of little surprise to Glenn when pressing the pedal had no effect. The futile pumping of his foot signaled the end of their truck ride and the wheels coasted to a stop on desert floor. The fuel had run out.

Fuzzy lines distorted Eos' vision. It was as if a warped glass lens was before his face, melting everything into a heat puddle as the mid-day set in. Eos couldn't recall when he had left the truck. The long walk on the sand was boiling time into a suffocating mix that left the day indiscernible.

Eos tipped the water canteen up to his mouth. The thin, dripping stream of the dwindling supply did little to quench him. He was guided by a strange feeling among the dehydration that was setting in. His Soul Energy was almost moving without him willing it. It jittered excitedly within him and prickled at his skin like the relief that comes from scratching an itch. Eos was almost being pulled through the desert as if some force was summoning him.

"I know I'm going crazy, but..." Glenn licked his dry lips, "Do you see something out there? Look; it's just a dot."

Eos looked.

"You're crazy, Glenn. Guess the sun got to you first."

They continued their westward march and Glenn snatched the canteen from Eos. He was disappointed when only a few drops came out. "You drank it all!" Glenn complained.

"You drank it all over a mile ago! You whined about it then too." Eos said shortly.

"Sure I did...you greedy little..." Glenn shoved the canteen back into Eos' chest.

Eos threw it back at Glenn. "You're a real jerk."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

“Me?” Glenn looked around bewildered. “We are only out here because of you! We’re wandering around out in the desert searching for your clue. There is no guarantee that it will help us, by the way. For all we know, you’re just wasting time while Maxima suffers with Braxton. That’s if *we* don’t just drop dead.”

The circumstances escalated their argument further than it would have normally ever gone. Eos was too furious to hold back. “She wouldn’t even be in there if it wasn’t for you, Glenn. You put her there. You helped build it!”

“I only did it because Braxton threatened to kill...he was going to...” Glenn stopped yelling. Trickle of sweat were coming down his face.

Glenn sank to his knees in the sand. He hid his face shamefully in his hands. “I didn’t want to. You think I did? They were going to kill you, Eos. What was I supposed to do?”

Eos tried to cool his temper, but it was as difficult as cooling his climbing body temperature.

A wavering distraction, a fleeting glimpse of a shape, drew his attention just enough to forget the squabble. It was the dot Glenn had seen. Far to the west, he saw it—Sires.

No that was the lie he was told to cover up its secret.

“I see it too,” Eos whispered, “Lab Four.”

The tingling resumed in his skin, the rising of his energy into an excited surge; whatever was causing it...it was in there. Eos could feel it.

Glenn picked himself up and they trudged along in silent embarrassment for their words. The ground became more of the cracked earth that formed a mosaic of dried mud. Every step reminded Eos of where this whole ordeal had started.

## THE SUPPLEMENT

“Do you remember the workers in Sires? They told us they were refugees.” Eos asked. Glenn signaled that he did with a nod. “What were they wearing?”

Glenn rubbed his scruff as he recalled, “Just dirty desert rags.”

Eos attempted a smile with his cracked lips. “A lot like what we’re wearing, right?”

For the first time, Glenn saw that the clothes given to them were sweat stained and dust covered. The light blue color was pitted with grime and splotted with the salty liquids lost on their trip through the wasteland. Glenn realized Eos’ plan.

They followed the cracks in the dried-clay desert floor until the stretch of stations that encircled Lab Four in barbed wire was upon them. When they saw it, they kept going. The buildings grew from tiny blots to full sized guard stations.

Soldiers were quick to leave their station and close in on Glenn and Eos. Glenn collapsed to the hard ground from exhaustion. Eos spoke like the parched, desert stranded, boy he was. However, he made sure he was loud enough to be understood, “Please...take us back. My friend, he’s dying. We should’ve never left. There’s nowhere to go out there.” He wheezed.

The soldier in charge was only a Sergeant Major from what Eos remembered of Major Clark’s quick lesson on ranks. “Who are you two and how’d you find this place?” he asked.

“We escaped, but there was nowhere for us to go. It was a mistake—” Eos replied on his knees as he pretended to check on Glenn; trying to shake him awake.

The Sergeant Major cut him off, “Impossible. No one has ever successfully made it through the fence.” He said it with authority, but looking at the dirty robes the two wore, he was less sure. How else would anyone make it this far into the desert on foot? The escape event

## CHAPTER TWENTY

that occurred one month ago weighed on his mind. *Could two more have breached the perimeter?*

Eos thought quickly. “We didn’t go through the fences. We swam.”

The Sergeant Major looked surprised, “No one can get close to the waters without being seen.” Despite his words, he waved four of his soldiers towards them.

No more ideas came to Eos, but he didn’t need them. “We did.” he said. There was no need to try and explain their escape any further. The lie was good enough.

“Pick him up.” The Sergeant Major gestured to Glenn, “And move.” Glenn put his arms around Eos as he feigned a dying hobble. He didn’t have to work hard to appear dehydrated and sun sick.

“Should have known better than to run. Nothing but sand out there,” one of the guards said as he marched them towards the gate, led by the Sergeant Major who eyed them carefully. The two were suspect to him beyond their current circumstances, but he couldn’t place why.

“What block were you from?” He asked as one final test before he threw them back into the prisoner camp.

Eos’ mind raced. What had Lieutenant Jacobs said back when they came the first time? He hadn’t said anything about blocks, had he? “Uh,” he fumbled for an answer and then he remembered something, “D-Block.” That was it. He was almost sure of it.

The reply was heard by suspicious ears, but there could be no harm throwing them back into the prisoner population. It was never bad to have more bodies. “Very well, men take them back to D-Block’s manager.”

A private lingered near the Sergeant Major.

“Do you think they were from the escape last month, Sir?”

## THE SUPPLEMENT

The Sergeant Major clenched his jaw and responded without taking his eyes off the two prisoners being taken away.

“No. It would appear this was a separate incident. We’ll have to keep tabs on them.”

“Yes, sir.” The private saluted and scampered back to his post.

His superior stopped him. “Oh and Private,” he gave a steely glare. “Let’s keep this incident off the books. Write it down as...prisoners who got too close to the fence. After our first escape ...I can’t afford to have General Braxton breathing down my neck.”

The private saluted again, “Yes, sir!”

Eos and Glenn marched through the barbed gate. The walk to D-Block was nothing compared to their journey through the desert, and soon enough they were at a large tin shack made of flimsy corrugated sheets. It was small, no bigger than the kitchen of the Generator Complex, but compared to the tents that lay on top of each other, it was good living space. The heavy smell of sweat in the manger’s room was probably better than the stench in the tents, Eos imagined.

Sitting at a small wooden desk was a plain looking man. He was short and sat on a tall stool to reach the desk. He was writing with fixed attention on the papers under his nose.

“We’ve got a few runaways for you, Marcus.” One of the guards went to the back of the room and returned to Eos and Glenn with slender metal bracelets. They had a red rubber coating around them. Before Eos could help Glenn pretend to stand on his own feet, the bracelets were clamped over each of their wrist. Then the soldiers were gone.

Marcus looked at them from the corner of his eyes as he wrote. “Well, what are you waiting for? Let’s have your identification papers.”

Eos and Glenn looked at each other in a heart sinking moment.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Glenn cleared his throat. “The...ahem...the guards confiscated them, sir.”

Marcus rolled his eyes and threw his pen down.

“They’re always making my job harder! Now I’ll have to spend time getting you new numbers and re-registering you,” he grumbled.

“That’s what I told them, Marcus. I said, you’re just making it harder on the manager, but the guards thought they were being funny—” Glenn stopped as Eos punched him in the back and gave him a warning glance.

“Well you know the punishment,” He hopped down from his stool and landed on the ground after a second of free fall. “No rations today or tomorrow. They’ll be cut in half for the next month. You made a bad choice boys.” He flipped through stacks of paper on the floor. He mumbled to himself, “Where did I put those....And of course, get seen anywhere near the boundary with those bracelets and you’ll be shot dead.”

“Come on, sir. A whole month?” Glenn whined, “Can’t you help us out here.”

Eos shot him another glance and Marcus did as well with no hint of amusement.

“Well I can’t find the papers and I’m busy. Come back at ration time and I’ll be freed up to do your paper work. Those guards think they’re real jokers messing with poor Marcus.”

“Thank you, Marcus.” Eos said with a quick bow of the head as he backed up towards the door.

“One more thing, Marcus.” Glenn said as Eos prepared to drag the loose lipped red head from the shack by his messy hair. “I had a friend who I heard arrived here a month or so ago. Have you heard of a man named Shaun Dunn?”

“I don’t memorize every prisoner that comes in here.” Marcus said.

## THE SUPPLEMENT

“Please sir, we’ll die without any rations for that long. He might be able to help us out.”

Marcus tapped his pen irritably. “You’re dead men anyway.”

Glenn looked desperately at him.

After a moment of thinking it over he gave in and decided to help the poor runaway, “But, I suppose I can help you postpone your death a few extra days. I’ll look through the archives for you.” He walked to the largest stack of wire bound papers and flipped through it muttering, “Dunn...Dunn.”

“Ah here we go. Shaun Dunn. Arrived nearly a month ago. Says he was scheduled for the lab about a week later. The healthy ones always are,” Marcus shook his head sadly.

“So he’s here! Where can I find him now?”

Marcus squinted crankily. “Find him now? Your friend was taken *there* and you make sick jokes like that? Get out of my sight!”

Eos tugged on Glenn’s robe. “Come on, Glenn. Let’s go.”

“What did he mean by *there*?” Glenn asked worriedly as they walked through the tent slums. It was hard to break it to Glenn, but they didn’t have time to lose focus. He shared what he had learned.

“Glenn, I’m sorry, but during my time up North...I overheard a man talking who worked here. He was requesting more bodies and suggested using prisoners of war. Whatever they’re doing here...it’s killing off people faster than General Braxton can supply them. There’s something horrible happening and no one is making it out alive.”

Eos had a horrible hunch what it was. Colonel Kane’s coded words were in his head. *He wants some red lights of his own.* No that was impossible...wasn’t it?

Glenn’s demeanor changed, but he made no comment about his friend. Eos thought it better to drop the subject. They walked amongst a flow of Block-D’s prisoners; carried by the pushing of bodies in a

## CHAPTER TWENTY

zombie-like march. The sun was falling to the west and just beneath it stood the two watchers of the desert camp: beige buildings that stood six stories tall. Side by side their windows peered over each and every soul that the area contained.

Eos looked at them on the horizon of camp while holding his black hand to his brow. “The one on the right was the building we met Braxton in last time...”

Glenn finished his thought, “So we need to find out what’s inside the left one.”

The strange pulling of Eos’ energy occurred again, and his arm throbbed as if magnetized. He clenched his right arm tightly to try and soothe the skin rippling sensation. They pushed against bodies toward Lab Four. With every row of tents they passed, with every side alley child and gaunt face, the population density thinned out. It was clear that none of them wanted to be near the buildings.

They waited until the last light of the day was gone. They walked until the camp disappeared behind their backs. No one stopped Eos and Glenn from proceeding toward the buildings. Eos could only assume they weren’t stopped because there was little chance of anyone actually approaching of their own will. The place was a bad omen and that fact could be seen in every terrified heart they had passed. Somewhere within that omen was a secret that Braxton didn’t want found...and Aizo did. A secret that he hoped would be enough to bargain for Maxima.

The buildings had a familiar perimeter of fences and outposts around them, but through the windows of the little station it was clear there was no guard in it. Glenn and Eos easily stepped on one strand of barbed wire and lifted another to slip through.

## THE SUPPLEMENT

“Let’s go around the side. We don’t want to draw too much attention when we break in.” Glenn suggested. They found a side door on the south side. Glenn looked to Eos.

Eos tried the door handle with unsteady hands.

“You really think they would leave it unlocked for you,” Glenn chided Eos. “Go ahead. Blow it open.”

Eos began forming a Soul Sphere, but was immediately Glenn cut him off, “Not like that! I know destruction is in your nature but try stealth for once.”

Eos looked at the sphere. It was already the size of a fist. Glenn was right. With that he would have blown the door clean off. He should have been more careful. Foggy wisps drained off his hand until the sphere was only an inch in diameter.

Glenn took a step back, knowing Eos’ power.

Eos held his palm up and squeezed his fingers around his manifested soul. The energy was extremely hard to maintain. For months he had practiced only maximizing his power. Now he had to control it.

He moved his hand toward the door knob and flicked his fingers out, releasing the Soul Energy.

There was a small crackle of the energetic explosion and a flash. The force of the blast cracked the door open. The door knob and dead bolt were gone in the instant the light faded. A glowing metal hole was left in its place.

Glenn pulled the door and stepped inside. Eos followed. Once the threshold was passed he was overwhelmed by the disobedience of his own Soul Energy. It pinged around his body anxiously. He was unsure the source, but it felt ancient and cryptic in its loyalty.

They were in a dark hallway with linoleum floors stained in splashes of dried brown. The ugly mint green tiling that covered the

## CHAPTER TWENTY

lower half of the walls had similar splotches. They were the source of the iron filled smell that hung in the air.

A smear of the brown, crusted stain started behind the first door on Eos' left. It was clear that the source of the stain had been drug out of the room. Eos put a hand on the knob only to feel a cold chill.

The slightest crack of the door let a rotten smell waft through. Eos recoiled, but held his breath and pushed through the doorway. The sickening odor stopped Eos from entering any further. It was the smell of decay, old blood, and an attempt to mask it with antiseptics. They mixed poorly and reached him like a dead fish floating to the top of water. Before closing the door, he saw an empty operating table with scalpels, blades, needles, and various instruments that Eos didn't recognize nearby a shelf of glass bottles. He shut the door as Glenn came out of the room across from him.

"What is this place?" Eos asked.

Glenn was strangely quiet. "Some kind of gruesome hospital from the looks of it."

They made their way through the hallway, repulsed by each blood-stained room they discovered. Door after door of similar scenes greeted them with a repulsing and contradicting smell of death and sterile hospital supplies.

"This place is empty," Glenn said as he tried the last door on his side.

Eos went to the door at the end of the hall. Muted light came through the frosted glass window.

"No, I can feel...something. What we're looking for is here. I know it is."

Glenn called from behind another door, "There're stairs in here. I'm going to check out the next floor."

## THE SUPPLEMENT

Eos never heard him. All before him was the place Maxima and Glenn had been blindly taken to: the heart of Lab Four. Coils, pipes, wires, and every shape of material Eos could imagine were collected in the room in between large metal structures. Their shape was familiar. Each of them was a previous model of the generator Maxima was now trapped in. Storage tanks and generators stood like a forest of metal prisons whose roots of wires and tubes took hold of the entire floor of the large two-story room.

Across the room was a balcony that overlooked the entire floor space. It was a lab dedicated entirely to Eos and Maxima...or at least their ability to soul wield.

Eos noticed movement on the balcony. A hand clasped onto the railing like a vice. The figure stepped into the light. The luring feeling that beckoned Eos to Lab Four was coming from the man, but not his person; rather something he had on him.

Eos hid instinctually behind the large cylindrical machine nearest him.

“No need to be shy. Come back out little one.” A raspy voice invited from above.

Eos peered from his cover, “Who are you?” He asked the man with high protruding cheekbones on the balcony.

The man ran his left hand through his loosely parted blonde hair. “I could ask you the same thing.” He stared with small beady eyes, through the lenses of his glasses, at the machine Eos hid behind. The man on the balcony wore a pristinely white suit that covered his thin, sleazy frame like snow. It was accented by a maroon tie that fell from under his jacket like blood from the operating tables. “What are you doing in my lab?”

“Looking for answers.” Eos called from behind his barrier.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

“Aren’t we all though? Now, how did you manage to sneak your way in ... Ah, I know you,” the man called excitedly, “You’re Braxton’s little pet. I see you don’t remember our encounter up North, but believe me when I say I’ve heard so much about you. Is it true what they say? Do you now have the power to kill dozens of men in an instant?” He asked with a crooked smile that was too large for his tapered face.

Eos remembered seeing the man at the meeting he had spied on. He remembered the man in a white suit tearing down the documents from the presentation at Braxton’s order. Eos didn’t take the insult of being called a pet lightly, “Who’re you calling a pet? Looks like you’re the one Braxton keeps locked up here doing all his dirty work.” Eos fired back. He noticed the man was holding something in his pocket.

“Such a temper,” the man shook his head and chided. “I was the first person to ever analyze your powers, but you were, what, five years old?”

Terrifying, fragmented memories of his first weeks under Braxton flooded back from their repressed storage. Strapped to a table. A strange man hissing words at him as he struggled against restraints. Forced to perform experiments under threat. Needles taking his blood every morning. Poking into him. Shocking him to get a response. Calling out for his sister. Searching for his other half, but unable to move. Bathed in a red tinted light as he cried. And then Glenn...the man who pulled him out. Who saved him from the terrible fate.

“You’ve always interested me, and it appears I interest you. Perhaps two of Braxton’s pets can play a little game together. I do enjoy games. It’s a simple one; we ask each other questions and exchange answers.”

## THE SUPPLEMENT

Eos didn't trust the man on the balcony. His hair was too greasy and his eyes too shifty, but Eos wanted answers. "Fine, I'll play along. What do you do here?"

"You broke into my lab, so I'll go first. Have your powers developed as Braxton tells me? Do you really have the power to kill dozens of men instantly?" He asked with maniacal interest and a crooked smile that was too large for his tapered face.

The energy in Eos swirled violently, frothing at the surface of his arms. He would have to play the game. "I don't choose use it like that." He answered reluctantly.

The man snickered a bit. "But you do have the ability? I'd prefer more detail, but an answer for an answer I suppose. As for what I do here...my name is Doctor Kurt Fleischer. I am the lead researcher and I research your powers. I try to harness them, convert them to usable energy and even...replicate them." He hissed enthusiastically.

Eos felt a heavy weight sink in his chest as he heard the words. Braxton was replicating his power? The potential was frightening. He leaned back against his concealment and contemplated the implications of Dr. Fleischer's research.

"Have you succeeded?" He dreaded the answer.

"It's my turn I believe. These powers...how destructive can they theoretically be? What's your limit, so to say?"

Eos thought. He wasn't sure himself, "Limitless as far as I know, but I've hit a plateau recently." He found Kurt Fleischer's fascination strange. Then he repeated his question, "Have you succeeded?"

"Interesting...limitless. I like the sound of that! To your question...no...sadly all the subjects have rejected the serums and surgeries like sickly children. They've all died mostly." Dr. Fleischer hid no remorse behind his smile; in fact, it displayed his enjoyment.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Bile rose to Eos' tongue with a sour taste at the thought. People were killed trying to replicate *his* power.

"That's just...you're... sickening," Eos spat out.

The man laughed dully and with a hiss, "I'm down right wicked!"

Eos cringed, "So why is this place empty?"

"For someone looking for answers, you sure ask the wrong questions. Again though, you're forgetting my turn. I wonder," he pondered from up on his stage. "How did you get your powers?"

"I've always had them. I was born with them." Eos said irritably. He was growing tired of Fleischer's game. "Why are you so fixated on my powers anyway?"

Fleischer sighed egotistically, "So many questions; you really are bad at this game. My fascination is derived from the simple human obsession of transcending that which is within a human's grasp. We always want more. I'm no different, nor are you. Not to mention, my life's work has been to replicate your powers. Now that I have the living specimen before me, you can't blame me for having a few questions." He laughed with his right hand still hidden in his pocket. He continued, "I'll double down and answer your other question in return for two of my own. The lab is empty because we're taking a bit of a recess. We use the people of this camp for experimentation, but also for keeping the place running."

The idea of using Maxima as a human battery was not so surprising now that he knew Braxton had a camp of people he kept for slaughter.

"The well is running a little dry out here in the desert if you excuse my pun. Due to an exceeding amount of failures, we are running low on test subjects. We're replenishing the numbers so I can pursue a new lead. Now for my next question: What can you tell me about Hyperborea?"

## THE SUPPLEMENT

“I was hoping you could tell me the same thing.” Eos said. It was kind of amusing in a sad way. They were seeking a truth that neither had an answer to. The strange pulling sensation became stronger. Something on that balcony was causing his soul to flutter like butterfly wings brushing the edge of his skin.

Fleischer was disappointed. “It’s me who’s asking the wrong questions now. Braxton hasn’t let either of us in on that mystery. Well then, have you ever possessed a...supplement for your power?”

“I’ve never heard of anything like that.” Eos said. There was only one question that remained for him. He was done with Fleischer’s sadistic responses.

“You disappoint me. Why don’t you at least show yourself, Eos?” Fleischer echoed down.

Eos took a breath to calm his jittering body and walked into the open, between two generators. He spoke firmly, “This is my last question: what’s in your pocket?” He stared up at Fleischer with fierce eyes and a dagger-like scar right beside them. He prepared his right hand for a fight. There could be no forgiving a man like this and there was no chance Eos was going to let the sins of Lab Four continue in his name.

“It seems our game is over then.” Dr. Fleischer said with a shrug.

Eos projected his disgust at the balcony.

The white sleeve rose from within his pocket to reveal a small rectangular trinket on a chain. It hummed with a life of its own that only Eos could sense.

“This is an ancient artifact called the Mellizo Glyph. It was given to us by a man named Aizo.”

Eos knew that couldn’t be true, “There’s no way Aizo’d give anything to you.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

“I don’t like being accused.” Fleischer said darkly and lifted his left hand over the balcony. “Aizo has served as my primary resource material for study. You see I may not have told the whole truth in our game. I was sick of weak test subjects dying. Don’t get me wrong,” he threw his head back and raised his eyebrows, “It was fun at first, but the failure ...quickly... erased the fun. I needed to try something different, and by mistake, I discovered a new procedure for gaining your ability.”

A ball of citrus colored Soul Energy burst into his empty hand with a flickering of green-yellow light!

“You see, by myself I was barely able to manifest this power for even one second. Luckily this artifact supplements my ability. I don’t understand how it works yet, so don’t tell Braxton. It’s a secret.” He said and put his slender index finger to his lips and let out a shushing sound without blinking once. “It’s a shame you couldn’t be of more use. Since you know no more than I do, I’ll have to learn more by taking you apart. Shall we find out who is stronger?”

He wound back his arm as Eos watched in suspended awe.

It was only as Fleischer released his attack, that Eos realized what was happening. He dove behind the first in a row of machines. *Bwoom!* The concrete floor of the open room was left with a small crater as the yellow light burst into a spectacular explosion just feet from where Eos had leaped.

Eos had a small Soul Sphere in his hand, no larger than what he had opened the entrance door with. He thought of the machine he took cover behind. The atrocious machine was created for such an evil purpose using even more twisted methods of research. He couldn’t let lives continue to be sacrificed in the name of his power and he could never forgive the man who created the generator that held his sister.

## THE SUPPLEMENT

He touched the scar near his temple. Maxima was relying on him. If he could get the artifact from Fleischer, Braxton would be desperate to have it back. Perhaps he would be desperate enough to release Maxima. If not, he would at least have a supplement to his abilities.

Eos recalled the bubbling of greenish liquid that suspended his sister. He remembered the way she floated in the container so innocently...and it made him furious! He fed his red sphere, and it moved like a hungry, wild dog.

However, he wasn't fast enough to compete with the artifact. Before Eos could finish summoning his soul into his hand, Fleischer's yellow glow radiated through the room with a flickering that danced off the walls and sent Eos flashing images of his sister submerged in a similar color.

Eos had no time. He dove to the next machine. Not a second later, a mighty burst left his previous cover a contorted, glowing piece of shrapnel.

Eos landed on his shoulder and tumbled behind the next machine. His concentration broke along the way and he started again on constructing another sphere.

Once more, he couldn't compete with Fleischer's supplemented speed.

"Come out I said!" Fleischer screamed psychotically and thrust his hand towards the shelter Eos was behind. His eyes bulged with satisfaction at the coming kill. His pinhole pupils stared excitedly.

Eos didn't have time to move. He couldn't react fast enough and so he pressed himself flat to the ground. *Bwoom! Crunch!* The large cylinder was hit with a crumpling force. The entire structure was lifted from the ground.

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Eos could only watch as the vessel flipped over him. Death glided across his face and reached out its hand with a breeze that brushed his nose. The generator spun violently over his wide eyes.

*Grind. Screech.* It landed and slid across the ground in a flurry of sparks before slamming into the wall. Eos held up his right hand. Crimson light poured from it. He kicked his legs out and rolled to his feet. He moved into the proper stance with his arm already wound back, but so was Fleischer's! Crimson and yellow weapons of equal size were raised.

Eos threw his and the man in the white suit mirrored him from up high.

Neither of them flinched as their souls tore through the air at each other on a path of inevitable and awesome collision.

*Crackle-Boom!*

The two projectiles clashed in an electric explosion. Red and yellow scattered out from the eruption causing an aura of magnificent energy. The concussion rippled through the air as the energies dissipated. The prototype generators were lifted and slid back from the collision with a heavy dragging. Tubes and coils were torn from the machines and whipped about, but Eos stood firm...never taking his eyes off the balcony.

Eos was exposed, and Fleischer was faster at creating his weapon.

Fleischer had won. His grin would have spread wider if it was at all possible.

Now would come the kill.

In seconds, another perfectly formed energy sphere formed in Fleischer's hand.

Eos felt the artifact calling to him. He felt the Soul Energy throughout his body being pulled toward the balcony.

## THE SUPPLEMENT

“Well, I was hoping to learn more from you. You disappointed—”

A dull *thud* interrupted the triumphant speech. Glenn struck Kurt Fleischer over the head, causing him to collapse like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

“I was getting tired of hearing that freak talk.” Glenn strutted up to the balcony holding the broken revolver by the barrel. “It may not fire, but it was at least good for something.” He bent down and picked up the Mellizo Glyph from Fleischer’s hand.

Glenn tossed it over the railing to Eos.

“That’s what we came for isn’t it?”

Eos caught it. Suddenly his body was calm; his Soul Energy was peaceful. The artifact had returned to Hyperborean hands.

He inspected the small trinket. The rectangular shape fit nicely in his hand. It was a vial made of a creamy ivory-like stone. A perfect cube of the material was attached by a hinge to the rectangle body. The tiny sliver of a cylindrical neck separated the body from the cube cap. A metal ring had been punctured into the top cube to attach it to the chain it now hung on.

Arcane writing was etched in tiny scratches with black dye on all four sides. Each face of the Mellizo Glyph hid the secrets of another world in an undecipherable language of scrawls. On the front and back face, large symbols broke up the glyphs. On the front was a triangle of sorts. The top of the shape was not connected; instead the triangle was made of two pieces that swooped down and nested atop one another at the bottom of the triangle. At the center of it lay a sphere with wavy points that combed up towards the top of the symbol like a ball of flame.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

It was mysterious indeed. Eos turned the Mellizo Glyph over. It was like a miniature tablet that recorded a lost culture—Eos' lost culture.

The other side had a different rune carved in it. This one was of two circles that sat side by side. Each circle had a curved line coming from it like a spine that made a larger circle around both of them. Spikey ridges brushed gently out from the greater circle.

Two big runes and tiny lines of other symbols on a bizarre vial; Eos had no idea what any of it was, but Braxton wanted it and therefore it was valuable. If he could bargain with it, he would. If Braxton wasn't willing...Eos was prepared to do anything and he was armed with a supplement called the Mellizo Glyph.

"That's not all I found up here," Glenn said while leaning over the balcony with his forearms on the rail. He held his finger out, above the overhang. It was a gesture similar to the one he had made outside the generator complex. "I should be a professional car thief once this is all over." He smiled cheekily.

From his finger dangled a key ring. Eos couldn't help but smile at Glenn's criminal skill.

"While that guy couldn't stop talking about himself, I went through his office," Glenn beamed proudly at his find before spinning the key around his finger and putting it in his pocket, "Let's go find our ride."

Eos slid the chain of the Mellizo Glyph over his neck. A piece of Hyperborea was with him. It was something from home, and he wouldn't part with it easily. He tucked the artifact under his shirt. The smooth surface rested tenderly on the skin of his chest and the coolness of the chain hung from his neck like a thread of ice that kept him constantly aware of his mission...of his purpose.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



### WAKENING

**A** foreboding shadow followed behind an angry man; a man who had nearly everything stripped from his control over the past twenty-four hours. He was about to learn that he had lost even more than he knew.

It appeared Dr. Fleischer had lost control in some new experiment and trashed the laboratory work space. Prototype generators and parts were strewn about haphazardly and deformed like mutilated play things. Whatever Dr. Fleischer had done, he hadn't stuck around to be reprimanded. He was not on the first floor or in his office...and the safe in the office was left wide open.

It was empty.

General Braxton's veins surged in a rush of his fury. How could it be empty? What had Dr. Fleischer done? He picked up the corded telephone set of the desk, ripped the cord from the wall, and hurled it toward the safe.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A blood vessel pulsed on his forehead and he breathed a heavy, rage filled breath. That was the phone that Dr. Fleischer hadn't answered as he tracked Eos and Glenn in the direction of Laboratory Four. After no signs of them from his search towards the cities; the only place they could have gone was to the desert. He dreaded that they might have pieced together this location.

He left the room, only to notice a collapsed form on the balcony. Braxton's clenched fist and burly forearm shook as he looked at the crumpled man. He quickly prowled over to Dr. Fleischer.

*Thump!* He dug his boot into Fleischer's ribs with a vicious kick.

A lung-full of breath left the body and he awoke immediately. Fleischer clutched his side and gasped for air. It was a struggle to focus on who had delivered the blow. His head was still throbbing from the lashing Glenn had delivered with the pistol.

His aggressor pounced, grabbing him by the knot of his maroon tie, and lifting him over the railing. Fleischer's upper body dangled over the mess he had created on the floor below. His attacker was a blur through eyes that watered from pain, but he recognized the voice.

"Where is the Mellizo Glyph, you scum?" Braxton's warm breath was inches from his face. Fleischer tried to reach for the railing, but Braxton only slid him further over it.

"I had it...but," he flailed desperately for something to grip onto, but found only the arm that held him. Dark strands of hair fell over the wrinkles of General Braxton's forehead. His eyes were void of consideration. This was a man who wouldn't hesitate to drop him over the edge.

"But? Please continue Dr. Fleischer." The deep voice boomed.

"The boy! The boy came and took it." He said quickly. "Eos and his friend."

## WAKENING

“How did he know to come here? You fool! I told you that artifact was never to leave the safe unless you were using it for research.” He yanked the tie, pulled it back over the railing, and threw Fleischer to the ground. He had lost both of his power sources the previous night and now one of his two bargaining pieces was missing.

“Get some men together and find them!”

“Yes, General Braxton.” Fleischer wheezed as he bent over on his hands and knees and clutched his ribs.

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Zolo sat next to Ward on the floor across from his bed. In it lay the unconscious girl that Ares had stolen away from General Braxton. He had tended to her as best as he could. All he could do now was wait for her to wake. They leaned back underneath the painting of the Mitad symbol. The red paint had dripped and ran, but the two headed snake was recognizable enough.

“She’s the one Ward. This is the girl I found in the back of that truck we stopped.”

Ward gave his friend a teasing punch. “I can see why you couldn’t take your mind off her. She sure is pretty. What did Ares have you doing in there anyway?”

Zolo shook his head. “You know I can’t tell you that,” he stopped and thought, “It led to her being here though. I don’t like it... I have a strange feeling about this, but I just have to trust Ares for now.”

“Oh come on, man. The job is over! No harm in telling me now. You’re always too much of a rule follower.”

“You know it’s not that,” Zolo said softly, “Lord Vistomus rescued us. We would have been experiments in Sires, if it wasn’t for him. So, if he wants what I’m doing to stay a secret then I’ll keep it that way.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ward knew they owed everything to Lord Vistomus. That's why they followed him unconditionally. "Feels like so long ago..." he reminisced, "Something's been on my mind lately, Zolo...I don't know what made me think about it, too much free time I guess. Do you still remember your first name? I mean the name you had before Lord Vistomus gave you one. I've been trying to remember mine, but no matter what I do... I can't. Must have been too young."

Zolo looked up at the ceiling with a fleeting desire to go back to before. He had spent so many years in the dark underbelly of the desert. "Jace...that was my name. It can be tough to remember on some days, but I've never forgotten."

Ward envied him. "I wish I remembered more from the good times when we had our families."

Zolo looked at him incredulously, "You have a family here now. These are the good times compared to the death sentence we had."

Ward chuckled, "I know; we were the lucky ones who were saved. I'm grateful. I am. Sometimes I just daydream too much."

It was evident that Zolo didn't want to talk about the topic anymore. He was concealing something, and the essence of it was drawing his mind away from the conversation.

Ward changed the subject, "Reeve's doing better. You're a real miracle worker, Zolo. How long does *the doctor* estimate before he's able to work again?"

"At least another two months until he's walking," Zolo mumbled. Usually he would have been flattered by the compliment. He prided himself on his self-taught medical prowess. His knowledge derived from the books he had scoured from underneath the desert. He had found streets maps of the previous world. With those maps he had dug his way to libraries or found paths through timeworn underground systems. Then he consumed everything of scientific importance.

## WAKENING

Ward could see that Zolo wasn't in the mood to talk. He stood and brushed off his pants. "I guess I should get back to doing something." He stepped over books and sketches that cluttered the floor.

Just before he left, Zolo said, "Wait, Ward."

Ward turned. The voice was torn, tormented by what was on his mind.

"I'm getting a promotion. Ares says I probably won't be stationed out here anymore. I may not see you guys for a long time, and I need you to take care of everyone while I'm gone. You're the only one I'd trust."

A pit formed in Ward's stomach. The leader of the rescued children, the rising star of the rebels, was getting a promotion and leaving them all behind. Ward spoke with thinly masked disappointment. "That's great, Zolo. You deserve it more than anyone. I'll...I'll take care of everyone, you can be sure of that." He walked out, shaken by the announcement.

Zolo was left alone with the sleeping, raven haired girl in his bed.

She turned over and looked at him with eyes partially concealed under heavy eyelids. She spoke with a sweet voice that was lined with the delicate murmur of sleep, "I heard you say your name was Jace. Mine is Maxima. Where am I?" Her words were slowed and dampened by the fog of her two day nap.

Zolo was caught off guard. He spoke shyly and couldn't bring himself to look into her eyes for more than a second. "It was my name, a long time ago. They call me Zolo now and you're in the base of the rebels against Braxton's regime. Maxima..." He turned over her name in his head like tasting a fine wine. It had a familiar ring to it. He realized instantly why he had felt a connection to her in first instant he had seen her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Maxima's strange blue attack flashed through his mind. He had seen it once before. The intimate blue that brought him back to his childhood...and to his life being disrupted forever. He had known it many years ago, but only for a short time. It was obvious. It had always been obvious to him since the raid on the transport vehicles, but the incredible chance of it allowed his mind to hold disbelief.

Maxima sat upright and jumped a few inches off the bed. She landed with her hands out in a cautionary manner. The cloud of slumber had lifted, and she recognized the boy from the trailer. He was the rebel who had stopped the convoy and broken into their truck; the boy with the green eyes.

Now she was in their base? How had that happened? The last thing she remembered was placing her hand against Eos' from the other side of the glass.

"You!" she shouted and pointed at Zolo, "You were the one who attacked us...and jumped out of the truck," she reminded herself of how he had stylishly given her a salute, fell backwards fearlessly, and closed the door on her at the same time.

Zolo stood. "That was me, but there's no need to worry. You're in a safe place. Much better than whatever General Braxton was doing to you," he noticed her lower her guard and continued, "I must admit, I didn't make the connection until just now, but don't you remember me?"

She looked over the golden-brown haired boy.

With a light-hearted sigh, Zolo gave her a hint, "You were a year or two younger than me and we weren't together for long." He let out a slow, awkward whistle, "Boy, did you change my life."

Maxima squinted at him. Suddenly, she was taken back to the days in their foster mom's house. She was looking at the hole in the wall her brother had created and the other she added alongside it.

## WAKENING

“Jace?” This time she said the name with much more recognition.  
“Now you remember me.”

They both smiled, and Maxima gave Zolo a hug. She had found her lost foster brother.

He had been buried in the sand.

Zolo was surprised by the embrace. Maxima’s skin was warm and her hold on him was a kindness—one he had not experienced since joining the rebels. The gesture felt strange and of a time when such emotions could be afforded. He separated from her.

There were so many questions to ask. Maxima could hardly pick one to open with. “How did you end up here with the rebels?”

Zolo looked away and distracted his gaze with the Mitad symbol. “That’s kind of a long story. I’ll make it simple. Once you two were taken away...Braxton saw us and everyone nearby as loose strings. He didn’t want to risk word getting out about you and Eos, so we were all rounded up and taken prisoner the next day. I barely remember it anymore.” He lied and waved it off to avoid upsetting the girl.

Maxima’s jaw fell in compassion as she searched for the proper response for being responsible for something like that. There wasn’t one. “Then Miss Lori...your mom...is she...?”

This time Zolo didn’t look away. He fixed his eyes on Maxima. “She’s gone,” he said in a low restricted voice, “I should really find Ares now. He told me to bring him as soon as you woke up.”

“So, you saved me?” Maxima asked.

“You could say I helped, but Ares is the one who really saved you.”

“Who’s Ares?”

He looked at her oddly. “I figured you would know him. He called you his sister...more or less. Stay right here. I’ll be back.”

Maxima was left looking at the prominent piece of the room: the two headed snake painted onto the wall. It gave her an unsettling

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

feeling: the dripped paint and hissing tongues. She turned away from the wall and wondered why someone other than Eos claimed to be her brother and if she was responsible for Miss Lori's fate. She couldn't stand the thought. Her mistake as an infant hadn't just affected her. That much was becoming undeniable. Even as a child, others' lives were in danger just by intersecting their path with hers.

Her thoughts transitioned to how she had arrived here. Why hadn't Eos come with her? His absence was the most unsettling piece of it all.

Zolo returned with Ares.

The young man's hair resembled hers, if only a little shorter a more wavy. His eyes showed hints of Maxima's blue hue, but a violet color spread out within it.

"Good Maxima, you're awake. We have a journey ahead of us. I guess I would say something like: I hope you're rested. However, I think you've had a long enough nap wouldn't you agree?" Ares smiled at her with a devilish grin, "Follow me." He waved her through the door as he turned away.

Maxima did as he said with questions flowing out as fast as her stride, "What journey? Where are we going?" She asked. "Last I remember, I was put in that generator and now I'm here. What happened?"

Ares paused on a step and answered. "My name is Ares, and I'm your half-brother. I destroyed the generator and pulled you out. You were resting here, but we must go to our meeting location. That is where Eos will join us." He said knowing exactly how to fixate Maxima's attention and pinpoint her rapidly overflowing thoughts.

"He's coming to meet us! He knows I'm here then? This is great. We'll finally get away from Braxton. Where is he now?" Maxima cried out. For the first time in years, she and her brother would have freedom outside of General Braxton's reach.

## WAKENING

Ares laughed. “I don’t know where he is exactly, but you could say I’m sending him a message...when he gets back to where I rescued you, I’ve made sure he knows where to meet us.”

They continued up the stairs with Zolo trailing them.

Ares had given Maxima enough of a gap in time to gather herself and consider everything that had been said. “Wait...you said my brother. I didn’t know I had another brother.”

“I wouldn’t expect you too. You see I’m the black sheep of the family. Daddy didn’t really want me,” he said with an unexpectedly pleased inflection. It had a somewhat mad ring to it. “Then again I can’t say he wanted you much more considering he left you here on Earth all this time. Enough of that though. We’ll have time for idle chatter before the meeting in nine days.”

The stairs came to an end and the ascension reached the ceiling of the underground building. Ares undid a latch and evening light peeked through the trap door. He stopped his ash colored hand before opening it fully.

“Zolo, I want you to stay here. You’ll keep the base running for me, won’t you? You’re in charge.” He gave the boy the task to bolster his confidence. It was working already.

“You mean it? I won’t let you down, sir!” Zolo lingered despite his excitement.

“I’m taking Maxima to Bellia and Tessio up North. I’ll be back in a day or two. What are you still doing here? You have troops to be managing.” Ares tilted his head at the boy.

Zolo nodded vigorously, but still didn’t leave. He thought of Ward’s conversation. Ward couldn’t even bring back his original name anymore. That part of Ward was lost. Zolo still held on to his. The girl on the step above him was the tie to his past and, possibly, his future.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Maybe we can talk about the old times when I see you again. You know reminisce... and catch up.”

“Sure, I’d like that.” Maxima smiled down with warmth that was absorbed in Zolo’s green eyes.

Ares shook his head as the conversation’s meaning was lost on him. “Zolo, if you’re not in the proper mindset for this job, I can leave Niall in charge. We need to coordinate with the other bases. We’ll be taking action soon and can’t afford a distracted mind.” Zolo was making his way down the stairs before Ares finished announcing Niall’s name.

“My mind is fully on the job, Master Ares!”

Ares pushed the trap door open and Maxima found herself standing on the shingles of a roof that scarcely peeked out of the desert belly. The hatch was like a mouth taking one final breath before going under.

“Do you know how to perform Soul Step, Maxima?” From the look on her face, Ares could tell she didn’t. “You’re just as ignorant as your brother, aren’t you? Why did I expect anything more?” He said exasperated.

A worried look crossed her. “What’s Soul Step?”

“Don’t worry it’ll be fun. It’s a much more efficient means of travel than any kind of technology Earth has to offer. Effortless soul propelled speed. That is Soul Step. Watch me.”

Ares’ pale light was summoned to his feet. “This power you wield is your Soul Energy. It’s not so important you understand it. All you really need to know is how to use it to travel fast.” He said and stepped with one foot onto an imaginary platform.

Just as Maxima expected him to put his foot back on the ground, he shifted his weight onto the levitating foot and stepped up! His other

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foot met a similarly nonexistent plane and came to rest there. Maxima shuttered in awe.

How had he done it? Was it a trick? No, he had said that it was using the Soul Energy. She put her head down to examine the feet like it was some magician's illusion. Sure enough, he was not touching the ground. As she looked closer she saw a pale shimmer.

"I created a thin platform of Soul Energy beneath my feet. You try." Ares invited her.

With a leap of faith Maxima summoned her energy into two small sheets at her feet and fixed them in space. She closed her eyes and let her weight fall on them. The transparent blue platform supported her. She hovered above the ground, amazed.

"I did it!" She exclaimed.

Ares was growing tired of explaining, "Yes, now try taking a few steps off the ground."

Maxima obeyed. The blue sheets faded into dust that sifted to the ground as she formed the next platform. Slowly and steadily...she took another step. With the first she nearly tipped off the platform, but she threw her arms out for balance.

"Now try to form your next step before you take it. This is the basic principle of Soul Step! If you can manage to create planes at a running pace...then you're really getting somewhere. True experts can use many planes at once by moving them in perfect timing and knowing where their next footstep will land. If they happen to change course...their Soul Energy will move underfoot instantly. *That* is absolute mastery. I only know a handful on Hyperborea who are that skilled. For now, we can work at whatever pace you need."

Within minutes, Maxima was taking slow steps across the desert.

"You're picking it up fast, but that was only the first half," Ares continued the lesson, "Now focus on packing that platform as densely

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

as possible and creating a small burst beneath your feet to propel you forward.”

Maxima was taken aback.

“Are you sure I should try that? This is my first time and I—”

Ares didn’t let Maxima voice her worry.

“Yes,” he reassured her, “We have to be miles north of here by tomorrow morning. The sooner we get moving the better. Normally I’d have a woman named Bellia transport us, but she isn’t always the most accurate. We wouldn’t want to end up twenty miles away from our destination with no orientation of where we’re headed. Let’s go then; we don’t have all day.” Ares put on a cold front about his teaching, but he was impressed. The raw talent Maxima displayed was unparalleled.

Maxima shakily gathered her Soul Energy into a more compact set of platforms and took her next step with conviction that she could perform Soul Step. She moved forward with confidence and a timid trust of her Hyperborean brother.

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Maxima put her foot down inside a building that sat on a remote plain of snow. She was thankful that she hadn’t traveled all that distance with her feet plunging into the cold white powder. Soul Step was truly an amazing way to travel. She also understood why Ares hadn’t wanted to chance ending up miles off course when being transported by the woman he called Bellia. The snowy tundra was not a place she’d want to wander.

Ares marveled at his sister’s talent silently. He had fully expected to carry her the whole way upon learning she had never so much as heard of Soul Stepping. It was a rare skill on Hyperborea and even a

## WAKENING

slight talent at it could earn you a comfortable living. Maxima picked up the technique so easily that he barely had to slow his pace for her. He did eventually carry her for a large portion of the trip, but still...she was clearly more apt than her brother.

A thick door closed behind them as if they were entering a walk-in freezer. However, the arctic temperatures were sealed *outside* the shelter.

Two Mitad members sat at a table. One had her hood pulled back, a high cheek boned blonde. Ares led Maxima to her, passing tables of lesser ranking Mitad members.

“Maxima, allow me to introduce Bellia and Tessio.” He gestured with pale fingers.

“Have a seat,” Bellia offered.

“Tessio, a word please.” Ares went to another table with the hooded man. He picked up his bat winged spear that had been leaning against the wall before getting up.

“Welcome to our little way station. So, where’d Ares manage to find you?” Bellia asked.

Maxima immediately took a liking to Bellia. “Thanks. I think rescued is perhaps a better word. I was... General Braxton’s prisoner.”

Bellia raised an eyebrow, “It doesn’t get much worse than that, but now you’re with the Mitad. You’re with your own people.”

“What do you mean my own people?”

“Hyperboreans and wielders!” Bellia held out her hand. A violet glow of Soul Energy appeared and floated in between the two women.

Maxima’s lips hung slightly apart, “There are more here?”

“Of course, we’re headed back to Hyperborea soon though.”

“Hyperborea?”

“Home.” Bellia clarified with lips curled in innocent amusement.

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Maxima sat back and stared off with the fulfilling thought that nearly brought tears to her eyes. It existed. What they had been searching for...hoping for. "I need to tell Eos."

"He should be here in nine days."

Maxima nodded still mesmerized by the thought.

Bellia asked mildly, "So what was it like to be Braxton's prisoner?"

"Well, I wasn't a prisoner in the typical sense. More like a hostage. Braxton pushed my powers to the limit, threatening to harm my brother if I didn't obey."

Bellia focused on the table and brushed her hair behind her ear, "I know a bit myself about being pushed to my limit at someone else's will."

Maxima let her open up as she felt ready.

"Our leader has asked me to do what I thought was impossible. I've done some terrible things to accomplish what he needs. I'm stretched so thin around here. Every member relies on me for travel."

Maxima didn't understand what that meant exactly, but shared her own pain, "Braxton wanted me to fuel his generator as a human power source. I did it to protect Eos, but I don't think I could have gone through with it otherwise."

"That sounds horrible. I doubt I'd have the courage like you did." Bellia said.

Maxima put her fingertips together as she thought about it. "How will you know until the moment comes? It wasn't courage, it was love. I loved my brother enough to go through with it. What'd you have to do for your leader?"

Bellia shook her head, "I can't speak of it yet. Now that you're here though...it'll be easier."

Maxima frowned and scrunched her dark eyebrows together. "Me? How will I be able to help?"

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“If we have the Mellizo Glyph, it will take the burden off me. Eos will bring it to us now that you’re here.” She smiled.

“What do you mean *now that I’m here?* Wasn’t he planning to meet you?”

Bellia realized she had misspoken, but her attempt to backpedal only let more slip out “No, it’s not that. He’s just more likely to work with us now. Once he finds out that you’re with us, he’ll come—”

“Ares said that Eos was coming to meet me here.” She stood from the table, “He said that Eos already knew...”

“Calm down, Maxima. Once we have the glyph everything will be alright. We’ll all return home.”

“What’s this glyph you keep talking about?” She eyed Bellia warily.

“Just an artifact that belongs to Hyperboreans; to the Mitad. It’ll allow me to fulfill my duty without hurting anyone else.” Bellia said.

“Why wouldn’t he work with you before?” Maxima’s voice rose.

Bellia was talking herself into a corner, “Just a brotherly quarrel. Nothing to get so worked up over.”

“Oh, but it is. I’m not being told everything. I won’t burden Eos again. If he doesn’t trust you then I don’t either...especially now that I know why I’m really here.”

“Maxima don’t—” Bellia shook her head wishing they could have just continued talking and becoming friends. That chance was long gone.

Maxima marched to the table that seated Tessio and Ares.

“Eos doesn’t know I’m here does he? You just want me so you can get this glyph thing from him. Isn’t that right?” She asked edgily with her fists feistily raised.

Ares looked at her with a calm irritation, “Sit back down. Can’t you see I’m talking with Tessio?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“No, you lied to me. I don’t even know if you’re really my brother.” She groaned in frustration and turned, “I’m leaving to find Eos myself.”

There was a hook nose man behind her. His pointed chin moved crookedly as he talked, “Ares asked you to sit back down. So, *sit back down*,” he said slowly.

Maxima tried to walk past him, but he blocked her way.

“I’m not asking.” He said and produced a green Soul Sphere.

Maxima couldn’t believe what she had walked into. She wouldn’t be their bait. She wouldn’t let this man stand in her way. “Neither was I,” she gritted her teeth and separated a blue orb into two Soul Spheres like a dividing cell. “Get out of my way.”

Ares got between the two facing off.

“Interesting technique, Maxima,” he noted, “That’s enough from both of you. Stand down,” Ares said to his underling. “Sometimes the lower ranks are over eager to demonstrate their ability. You really must have a seat. Eos will be here in nine days. Until then, you wait here.”

“I won’t be your bait to draw my brother here!” Maxima raised her weapons threateningly.

Ares sighed, “Go ahead then, Tessio.”

Maxima looked back. Tessio was behind her with a metal bar in his hands.

She threw her spheres urgently. The first at Ares, who side stepped it expertly. The hook-nosed wielder behind him took the blow squarely in the chest and was sent flying through the flimsy wall of the shelter. A cutout of his sprawled body was all that was seen of the man as he sunk beneath the snow.

Maxima raised an arm at Tessio as she shifted to face him, but he snatched her wrist and ripped her arm behind her back.

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He slipped his arms around hers and pulled her hands together in restraint. Maxima let her sphere dissipate at the surprising jolt. She grunted as she grappled for control of her own arms.

The metal bar in Tessio's hand glowed a white-blue and grew! The rigid metal became like water and wove around her wrists in a figure eight.

In a blink, Maxima's hands were tied behind her back.

She was so furious that her calm nature vanished, and she growled as she fought for control.

A Soul Sphere appeared in one of her bound hands. She spun her whole body to gain enough rotational momentum to throw it.

Tessio ducked the sapphire light.

A gaping hole was left in the small shelter. More frigid air rushed into the room.

"Let me go," she cried out and prepared another Soul Sphere. Whistling wind lashed at her face.

"She's going to destroy this place," Ares exclaimed, "Sedate her. She's left us no choice."

Tessio planted a needle in Maxima's trapezius.

Maxima faced Tessio, ready to fight back, but the effects were immediate.

"I won't burden him again," she murmured and fell to her knees. "I won't let...Eos..."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



### THE GATHERING I: SHIFT THE BALANCE

**A** gunshot pinged through the dunes with an echo that was faintly heard from inside the truck Glenn had stolen. The escape vehicle jerked with a neck jarring motion as the front driver's side tire was shot.

The truck spun through the sand as another tire was pierced. The insane speed Glenn drove at was redirected as they glided over the fine grains of the desert. The truck twisted and rotated in an imminently dangerous path. The vehicle eventually came to rest as it slammed into a building that the desert hadn't fully swallowed.

*Dum!* A hollow pounding struck the window next to Glenn. He and Eos unbuckled and braced for whatever would happen next. *Dum!* The sound came again, bending the window in momentarily, and

## THE GATHERING I: SHIFT THE BALANCE

treating their eardrums to the fear inducing sound of someone trying to break into the car.

“Who’s out there, Glenn?” Eos asked nervously.

The sound came a third time, but this strike brought the butt of a rifle through the window, leaving shards in Glenn’s lap. Through the jagged hole in the window, a raspy, heavy voice interrogated them, “Eh, doesn’t Braxton know better than to send his men through here?” Niall pulled his rifle back out of the car.

Glenn saw numerous men in the same attire as the rebels who had stopped him and Maxima once before. Again, Eos and Glenn were caught driving a military truck. The last time it had been forgivable, but convincing the rebels would be a much different task than convincing the reclusive desert citizens.

Glenn glanced back and forth between his aggressors and Eos.

“Not these guys again. I just can’t catch a break, Eos. I mean...ridiculous!” Glenn said exasperated.

The tall, asymmetrical faced man pulled them out of the truck and marched them toward the rebel base with burlap bags over their heads. The last sight he saw was neon orange ripples in the infinite sandstorm that made the plumes and rolling walls of the storm look like a far-off map of tiny firing neurons.

“They sure aren’t dressed in military uniforms.” Someone said.

“Wur not takin’ any risks,” Niall bellowed. Eos felt a large, sweaty palm on his shoulder that halted him on his prisoner march. There were too many men around to try and fight his way out. Four months ago, that might have been his first instinct, but not now. He knew better. He had more control over his impulses.

Eos stopped as the hollow-eyed man had wanted. The hand remained on his shoulder.

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“What’s that on yur neck?” Niall rasped. He pulled the chain that was around Eos and lifted the Mellizo Glyph from under his robe. “That’s an interesting necklace you’ve got ‘ere.” He slipped the chains from around Eos’ neck and took the Mellizo Glyph.

The coolness of the chain left him and so did the smooth soothing feel of the Hyperborean artifact. While he was blinded, Eos’ edge over Braxton was snatched away. He had learned from Major Clark and from experience. He had become patient and waited for the proper moment to act...but could he afford to let the key to getting Maxima back be taken?

“No! Give it back,” Eos rumbled with a sharp aggression. He prepared his hand, the one with the red metal bracelet from Sires, for an attack. Glenn could feel the anxiety building in Eos.

Glenn spoke plainly and in a relaxed manner, “Not here Eos. Not now.”

Eos’ hand shook. He reigned in his anger. Just as his soul was about to manifest itself, he called it back. He had to trust Glenn, who had dealt with the rebels once before.

Niall ignored the boy’s excitement. He laughed and held the strange necklace closer to his face. He had no idea what it was, but he knew who would. “Lord Vistomus would want to see this. It’s like the one he’s always looking for. What do ya think Maya?”

A female voice responded as Eos and Glenn continued walking, “He does have an obsession for artifacts. Show it to him and see what he says.”

“Watch yur heads,” Niall shoved Glenn’s head down and through the window entrance to the underground world of the rebels. He gave a swift, shoving kick in the rear to push the prisoner in. He did the same for Eos.

## THE GATHERING I: SHIFT THE BALANCE

They tumbled into the base, surrounded by the burlap of their bags.

Eos knew it was getting bad. He sat up and tried to talk with the rebels, “We aren’t part of the military. We just escaped Lab Four.”

The room fell hushed.

Niall broke the silence with a hearty chuckle. “Escaped did ya? No one escapes from there. You’ll have to do better than that.”

“It’s true,” said Glenn. “We stole the car and that necklace from there. See for yourself.” He held up his wrist, hoping it was in the same direction as his captors. He showed them the sign of a Sires prisoner: the red cuff on his wrist.

Maya spoke again, “They do have the bracelets.”

Zolo joined the room.

“What’s going on here?”

“We captured these soldiers driving south of here.” Niall answered “They don’t look like soldiers...did you find any weapons on them?” Zolo asked.

“That’s because we *aren’t* soldiers!” Glenn said, aggravated.

Maya pushed the real issue, “We can figure out who they are and why they were driving through our territory later. They have Sires bracelets on them, which means the trackers in them could be leading someone here! We need to get them off and get them away from here.”

Zolo remembered he had been left in charge. He needed to act like it. “Right, Ward, get the bolt cutters and see if we can get them off. Then Maya will take them far away from here. We need to get them out of range. After that, we’ll figure out what to do with these two.”

Everyone hustled about as ordered.

Niall gave his input, “It’d be faster to just cut off their arm.”

Glenn whimpered, but the rebels and their leader ignored the suggestion.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Zolo looked down with pity on the two captured men. One was around his age. The red bracelets reminded him of the fate he had nearly met as a child. Braxton ran a twisted camp in the name of progress. Zolo had been saved and now it appeared that these two had as well, but he had to be absolutely sure of their innocence.

“Take the bags off their head, Ward.” He ordered his friend who was working on removing the metal bracelets.

“No,” Niall said and put a hand on Ward’s chest to stop him. “You’re too soft hearted, Zolo. If they wur actually working for Braxton, he’d be able to find us. He’d have our faces!”

Zolo disagreed, but he needed to avoid internal conflict while Ares was away.

“Besides, Lord Vistomus would be interested in what they have.” Niall held the Mellizo Glyph up to Zolo. He dangled it over him from his towering figure.

“What is it?” Zolo asked.

Niall only shrugged.

“That does look like what he described...but why would they have it? Niall, request an audience with Lord Vistomus. He’ll decide their fate since Ares still hasn’t returned.”

Niall breathed heavily and cleared his throat like he was sifting gravel but did as he was told.

Eos couldn’t be sure, but he thought he had just heard the name Ares. Could it be? There was little chance of it being another Ares. What was he doing with the rebels?

Ward removed the bracelets and gave them to Maya, who sprinted from the room as if she had a live grenade.

Ward was left with Zolo and the prisoners. He finished tying their hands together.

## THE GATHERING I: SHIFT THE BALANCE

Zolo bent down so that he was on the prisoner's level. "Where'd you two come from?" he asked.

Eos threw his head back and struggled to breathe the steamy air that had been recirculating through the bag. His hands were tied together now. He couldn't use a Soul Sphere like this.

"Sires," Eos said exasperated at the repetition, "I broke into Lab Four and stole that necklace *which you have now stolen from me.*"

Zolo didn't like the way Eos had said that. It was true. They had just taken it from the neck of a Sires prisoner...If they were really from Sires.

"I need it. It's the only way I can save my sister." Eos said with excruciating anguish in his words.

Zolo stood back up. "Don't lie to me. No one escapes from there."

Eos sighed a defeated breath. "It's true." He insisted, "Braxton is holding my sister. I had to. I had no other choice." His head fell.

Rubbing his temples with his middle fingers, Zolo sighed, "You must understand that I can't risk having Braxton's spies see our base."

The prisoner became like an entirely different person. His defeated demeanor changed to defiance as he uttered the words, "I'm no spy for *that man.*"

He considering the severity with which the prisoner said the words. "I want to believe you two because I almost ended up in Sires myself, but Lord Vistomus will make the final decision. I can do nothing until then."

"Who is this *great* Lord Vistomus you all keep going on about?" Glenn asked.

Zolo snapped to the other burlap bag, "You will speak with more respect when you use his name. He is the one who saved me from Sires. You'll never meet anyone else like him for as long as you live. He's the leader of the cause."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Neither Eos or Glenn provoked him further.

Eos finally asked, “I heard you say the name: Ares. How do you know him? Who is he to you rebels?”

Bewilderment struck Zolo. The prisoner knew of Ares. “He’s one of our leaders and a member of the Mitad. How do *you* know him?”

“He’s...” Eos cringed at the words, “my half-brother.”

The prisoner’s identity dawned on Zolo and snapped, “What’s your name?” Ares had told him that the girl was his half-sister then she was excited at the mention of her own brother’s name.

The lack of oxygen made Eos’ words labored, “Eos Bellator, and yours?”

That was it! That was name Ares had said: Eos. The name he knew from his childhood. This was an innocent man.

“The name’s Zolo. I think you would know me better by my childhood name. I was called Jace Lee once upon a time.”

Eos struggled with a foggy familiarity of the name.

Zolo debated how friendly he should be and decide to at least give some peace of mind to Eos. “I’ve seen Maxima recently. She is no longer with Braxton.”

How was that possible? She had been put in the generator just two days before. Now she was free? The thought relieved Eos, though he wasn’t sure he could trust its authenticity. Before Eos could speak again, someone entered.

“Wur in luck,” Niall’s voice traveled into the room. “Lord Vistomus is willing to see them!”

Zolo bent down once more and whispered into Eos’ ear, “We’ll discuss this later and I’ll see what I can do about getting your necklace back...*if* Lord Vistomus judges you to be friends.”

## THE GATHERING I: SHIFT THE BALANCE

As they were marched down stairs, Glenn and Eos clung cautiously to the railings and descended deeper into the heart of the rebel base. They were going to meet Lord Vistomus.

Niall spoke ominous words with dramatic embellishment, “You’re going before Lord Vistomus Fulmen, the bullet proof man, the wielder of lightning...some even say he’s immortal. Do ya’ believe all that? I’m not sure I do myself,” he enjoyed toying with the prisoners. They didn’t squirm at his words though. “Hmph...either way, best of luck to ya. For your sake, I ‘ope yur not fighting for the wrong side.” He slapped them both heartily on the back.

“Stop feeding myths, Niall. You’re talking more than usual. I don’t like it.” Zolo said.

“Mmgh,” Niall grunted and ignored the young boy’s annoying newfound superiority.

Zolo stopped them. “We’re about to enter Lord Vistomus’ room. You must show him absolute respect... or he’ll kill you.” He said with no hint of exaggeration.

They were pushed through a doorway and then forced onto their knees.

Another voice spoke. Eos could only assume it was Lord Vistomus.

Never before had he heard a voice more dangerously calming or unintentionally imposing. “These are the two you found? Untie them and let me see their faces.”

Fresh air wooshed into Eos’ face as the bag was removed from his head for the first time in hours. He was in a dim room. It was lit only by torches on the walls, but they held no flame. Instead they held clear stones with jagged ripples of faded blue refracting within them. They shone strongly with another source of energy and Eos was almost

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

certain what it was. He could feel the life in the blue-white, stones. It was like the torches were filled with Soul Energy.

The only other object in the room was a small wooden table that sat inches off the ground. Behind it sat a man in a black robe. The cloth bore the symbol of the Mitad, but the snake was centered on his chest and larger than the one Ares wore. The heads of each side flicked their tongues at the caps of his shoulders. A pale and well-defined chin protruded from the hood.

Lord Vistomus stayed quiet and stirred the tea bag around a small cup with no handle. He methodically swirled it in a circle by a string with the tips of his long, pointed nails. He dipped the point of his index nail into the tea. With his head tilted back slightly, though his face was not visible in the dim lighting, he let the drop of tea roll off his nail and onto his tongue. Satisfied, he removed the tea bag, brought the tea cup to his nose, and took a large whiff of the aroma before sipping it.

Zolo knew Lord Vistomus would continue on like this for a while longer if he wasn't urged along. He was a man who was in perfect control. Everything was done on his time and in his own way.

"They claimed to have escaped from Lab Four and say that they stole something from General Braxton there." Zolo said and successfully obtained Lord Vistomus' attention. He set his tea down.

"Yes, the prisoners." He stood up and approached Eos. He tilted the dark-haired boy's head by the chin and put a pointed finger nail up to the corner of Eos' eye, where the dagger shaped scar was. He traced it gently with his finger and a far-off look in his eyes as if recalling some time, they had met in the past.

"Show me your arm, Eos." He requested.

Eos didn't hesitate. The man had the aura of a guru like figure and somehow knew his name. He held up his black arm to Lord Vistomus and displayed the twisting pattern for all to see. There was an intense

## THE GATHERING I: SHIFT THE BALANCE

feeling of energy emanating from him. Eos could feel the strong ambiance of soul... of a wielder. This man was definitely like Ares... and perhaps more than Ares.

Lord Vistomus shook his head and chided with a clicking of his mouth. "What have they done to you, Eos...even I can't help you with this." He inspected the design on Eos' arm. Eos felt his Soul Energy being attracted, almost magnetically, to wherever Lord Vistomus' fingers touched. "The seal can only be broken by you or undone by the one who created it."

Eos had finally found someone who knew what the mark on his arm was...what his curse was. "What's been sealed? I need to know. I was told that by someone else, but he didn't explain it fully. What is this on my arm?"

Perplexed, Lord Vistomus gave an assuming glance, "Who was it that told you about the seal?"

Eos liked the old prisoner he had met and hesitated to disclose his name without understanding the circumstances. "His name... was Aizo."

Lord Vistomus diverted his attention from Eos and retreated back into the shadows of the room in a slow pace. "Niall let me see this necklace you found on them." He stretched out an open hand and received the Mellizo Glyph.

"Ahhh." When it touched the flesh of his palm, he sighed pleasantly as if he had received a dose of pain killer. Lord Vistomus ignored the others in his room and held the Mellizo Glyph cherishingly.

Zolo broke in hesitantly, "What would you, ah, like us to do with them?"

No response was given. Lord Vistomus was consumed by the object in his hand.

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“Lord Vistomus,” Zolo prompted.

He looked over distractedly, “Take them away for now and put the bags back on. I’ll decide before morning.”

“Yes, sir.”

Glenn and Eos found themselves back in the stifling, confined air of burlap sacks—captives once more.

“Wait! I need that necklace,” Eos screamed as the bag fell over him. “It’s mine! Give it back, Lord Vistomus...please. I need it for my sister.”

There was a pause. Then came a laugh.

“Don’t be silly,” Lord Vistomus answered, “Despite why you might think that you need it...the Mellizo Glyphs have always belonged to the Mitad since the beginning.” His voiced changed as if a new person was speaking entirely. It was deeper and gruffer, “This has always belonged to me.” He sat back down at his tea table and picked up the black tea again. The chain of the Mellizo Glyph was intertwined with his fingers as he resumed his drinking.

The light of the stone torches wavered faintly through the fabric of the bags. Eos and Glenn’s hands were retied in the flickering light of Lord Vistomus’ Soul Energy.

A body came charging through the door.

Zolo and Niall watched as a panting Maya intruded. Her momentum brought her tumbling through the door and ending on the ground next to Glenn. “I’ve destroyed the bracelets and hid them far from here, but,” she searched for enough breathe to speak, “We have new trouble. There are soldiers near where we found these two and ...there’s something else. Lord Vistomus I think you’ll want to see this yourself.”

Lord Vistomus moved the tea cup into the shadows of his hood for one final gulp. He placed it meticulously in the center of the table.

## THE GATHERING I: SHIFT THE BALANCE

Then he let the chains sift through his hand and gather next to his tea. “Thank you, Maya. Show me where...I can sense one of them from here.” He moved his lips and tongue as if the new presence was palpable. “Niall come with me. Zolo take them to another room and watch them. I don’t think you’ll be needed, but if you are I’ll send someone back for you.”

They were gone. Lord Vistomus left immediately with Maya and Niall to gather others for this new, urgent threat. Zolo marched his tied and blinded prisoners out of the room. What could be so important that it merited Lord Vistomus’ presence? It was likely that the troops could take care of a few nosey soldiers...so there must be something more. Something else was bugging Zolo. Lord Vistomus had kept the thing called a Mellizo Glyph. It was the prisoner’s possession and Lord Vistomus had never looted from anyone before. He never prevented his men from it, but he never partook himself. Then again, he had said it was his from the beginning, but how was that possible? If he coupled that with Ares’ suspicious actions concerning Maxima, the members of the Mitad were acting very unusual.

Eos hesitated to ask, but Zolo was the most likely to answer. “So, are we being let go?”

Zolo almost ignored the question from his foster brother. Apparently, Eos hadn’t quite connected the name Jace Lee in his memory. “Lord Vistomus said he would make his decision in the morning. That is what he’ll do. No more talking.”

Eos tried anyway, “Zolo, please, when did you see my sister?”

“I shouldn’t have said anything. We’ll talk again tomorrow after Lord Vistomus decides.”

There was something strange about Eos. An aura of energy surrounded the prisoner with the tattooed arm. It was just like the one

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that could be felt around Lord Vistomus. It wasn't nearly as evident, but it was there all the same. Two people with the same aura of spiritual power and they were after the same necklace. Eos wanted it for Maxima...but she was with Ares. Zolo just couldn't put everything together and shook his head angrily.

As Zolo wondered through the possibilities, Eos drifted off. During the span of two days, he had witnessed his sister turned into a human power source, escaped General Braxton, battled Fleischer, and been captured by the rebels. He could only produce one thought as his pulse slowed and his conscious evaporated into the state between awake and sleep. He needed to get back to Maxima. Now he would have to find a way without the Mellizo Glyph. He was back to having no leverage and in no position to help Maxima. Then again, Zolo said Maxima was no longer with Braxton. The confusion was too much for his tired mind.

The room was overflowing with uncertainty from all parties.

Eos' defeated thoughts faded to more pleasant dream like imaginings. Aizo's story stirred him. He was the prince of Hyperborea; even if Aizo had said his inheritance was no more. Did that make Maxima...Eos couldn't afford the luxury of sleep. It was an inconvenience. Still, sleep claimed him. The only thing that kept him from falling deeply into it was the sporadic lightning that struck outside.

Zolo twitched worriedly with each tumultuous rumble of lightning. No rain accompanied the sounds he heard, for no storm had been brewing that night and the infinite desert storm was far away. Things must have gotten out of control. Lord Vistomus rarely demonstrated his powers in front of others. Zolo had only witnessed it once. That was as a child. The sound he heard could only mean one thing: Lord Vistomus had taken part in the fighting himself.

## THE GATHERING I: SHIFT THE BALANCE

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A red blip pulsed on the GPS in Fleischer's hand.

General Braxton wouldn't be ordering him around anymore. The moment he got the Mellizo Glyph back, his power would be supplemented again. The artifact would provide him a reservoir of energy to draw from; *then* he would kill the pompous old man. The ordering around, the bureaucracy that held back his research, and the belittling would come to an end.

Kurt Fleischer was in a vengeful mood. The first on his list that was due for retribution: Eos and his sucker punching friend.

He settled into his seat in a backup military truck. It wasn't his truck—because his had been stolen. That was just another reason why Eos needed to pay.

An even twenty soldiers were with him in this chase, including Sergeant Major Murphy.

"Keep heading east," Fleischer hissed, "We're close now. They're moving, but we'll be on them soon."

Sergeant Major Murphy nodded and continued driving with the gas pedal pressed to the floor. Fleischer thought of all the experiments he had toyed with. None of them had been survivors. He liked survivors. Soon he would find out if Eos was. There was so much he hoped to learn from him. His limbs jittered with excitement that shook the white suit he wore.

He adjusted his maroon tie neurotically.

The blips of the trackers' locations were so close now.

"I love hunting," he wheezed with nasally elation.

Sergeant Major Murphy just ignored the doctor's quirks.

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Fleischer's blood rushed. He craved this predator like chase. The GPS showed them within a few miles of the fugitives. The dots stopped moving on the grid screen.

Then the dots disappeared entirely. "What..." Fleischer said confused. He smacked the device in his palm a few times. Not good. He had lost the prey. Sergeant Major Murphy noticed too.

"Just keep driving east. They couldn't have gone far!" Fleischer demanded irritably.

The truck slowed as it wound around the ruins of a civilization past: roofs and rubble, divots and dunes; relics of the old world.

"Why are you slowing down?" Fleischer demanded as he searched through the dusk for a reason to stop, "We can't lose them!"

"Look ahead sir, it's the car they stole."

Fleischer squinted at what the headlights illuminated. There it was. So, they had left by foot? Or was it something else? "Everyone out. Spread out through the area and find them!" Fleischer landed on the desert floor with his men. The prey was close...but so was something else.

Soldiers were at the ready all around him. They didn't take more than a few paces before a bullet was fired. It blasted through the desert on a path without obstacles and penetrated Sergeant Major Murphy. He let out a horrid, gurgling scream.

His hunch was right. There were other players in this game; rebels no doubt.

Gun fire lit the night with fiery bursts from rifle barrels. Soldiers took cover behind the tops of buildings that stood above the sand. They hid on their bellies behind small dunes or even chunks of brick walls that had surfaced as they returned fire on their unknown foes.

## THE GATHERING I: SHIFT THE BALANCE

Fleischer stood behind the truck and carefully removed his jacket. He folded it over his arm and set it on the truck seat. Bullets flew overhead. Next, he loosened his tie and took it off.

Cries rang out through the desert. A bullet split a window next to Fleischer. He didn't flinch. He was a survivor. Nothing would harm him. With meticulous attention to detail, he rolled the sleeves of his white dress shirt up to his elbows.

Another soldier let out an animal like howl. They were being quickly picked off. Fleischer doubted if they had even managed to locate and shoot a single rebel. He cracked his neck and inhaled sharply through his nose. The screams and gun fire were a symphony to his ears and a drug to his body.

If it was just a few rebels, this would be fun. He would have to make it fast though or Eos would get away with the Mellizo Glyph.

Another dissonant scream. One more soldier down.

The sense of battle was too much for Fleischer. The idea of inflicting damage overwhelmed him like flood waters rising past their barriers. The desire for battle spilled over the edge.

“Over there. They're behind the building to the North,” one of Fleischer's men spotted the rebels. Soon he heard another cry; this one belonged to a rebel. A tingle went down Fleischer's spine and his ear drums danced. That one wasn't a survivor.

Fleischer held his right arm out and pumped his energy into it. A bright lime color built up. He could tell that no more could be fed into his hand. It was as if an elastic band was wrapped around his weapon, stunting its growth. He hated that feeling. He *needed* the power that the Mellizo Glyph could provide him.

He turned the corner and released his Soul Sphere on the building.

The desert battlefield was bathed in his venomous color. *Whoosh!* Sand was thrown through the air and floated like a grainy humidity. It

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didn't matter that his power was crippled, it was still enough to take out any normal human body.

The soldiers advanced on the rebels.

In the flash of light, Fleischer had seen the battlefield. There were more rebels than expected—many more. They lined the horizon and took refuge behind the monuments to the old world. This was their domain. Could he handle that many rebels? It didn't matter. To risk death while wielding his power, controlling his fate, guiding his soul...it was better than being controlled by Braxton. His next weapon grew brighter and he wound back for another vicious attack.

He lived for the fight.

His soldiers advanced in front of him, but they were being picked off quickly. Only half of them were left fighting. The combat was at a closer range now and, perhaps, with Fleischer's power added, they might just win!

He watched the dark form of two men struggling over a rifle in the distance.

Another body joined the fight.

Zolo sprinted towards the battle. Not far off was a spattering of conflict. Shots were fired like the incessant chirping of cicadas on a summer evening and rebels struggled with advancing soldiers. Zolo was drawn more out of curiosity than concern, but concern was there too. There were a more than enough rebels to fight in this simple conflict and a plethora in reserve at the base. The mystery was: what warranted Lord Vistomus himself getting involved?

Up ahead, he saw Ward struggling with a soldier over a rifle. Ward's was on the ground nearby and both men had their hands wrapped around the soldier's weapon. They pulled in a struggle for survival. Ward's grip was slipping.

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Zolo aimed his rifle and stared down the sights at the teetering soldier. He wobbled back and forth as they fought for control. Zolo's aim would have to be perfect if he was going to hit only the enemy. He didn't have a lot of time to contemplate the risk.

Zolo fired.

The soldier spun off Ward with a cry that fell below the sharp crack of bullets. Ward held the rifle with a grateful disbelief. He searched for the shooter who had saved him.

"Zolo," he called out with eyes wider than a thank you and a voice more urgent. "Behind you!" He raised his gun to save his friend in return.

By the time Zolo turned, there was a gun pointed at his head and a trigger being squeezed.

*Crackle-Fwoom!*

A grayish white bolt of lightning tore down from the sky. It was the purest stream of lightning Zolo had ever seen and it struck the soldier who was about to take his life. The brilliant flash had few natural forks or branches of electricity extending off of it. It came down in nearly one jagged, unnatural bolt.

There was a static touch in the air.

What was with this strange lightning tonight? Fleischer glanced at the sky quickly as he finished his next Soul Sphere. There was no storm or even clouds in the sky. Fear crept on him, but he knocked it back. He scanned the landscape from the cover of his truck. None of his men survived from what he could see. Defeat was sure and throbbing exhaustion plagued Fleischer's mind. All around him were bullet filled carcasses.

He'd drag down as many with him as possible. Never again would Braxton have his grip on Fleischer. At least he would leave this world a free man.

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He left his shelter and stepped into the open.

“Come on you cowards! It’d be boring to take you on one at a time; I’ll kill you all at once.” He screamed with a hiss into the desert and threw his sphere. He knew his bluff wouldn’t faze the rebels, but his bloodlust was brimming, and he wanted more from his last moments.

A strange green-yellow light soared through the air. It headed for Ward and Zolo. All they could do was stare at the mesmerizing light. It came like a faerie glow descending over them.

The lime colored thing fell short of Zolo by twenty meters, but its devastation was unequaled by the rebel weapons. Streams of sand were thrown up and exploded out in a radius around the site of impact. Bits of stone and housing materials were shot with the mix and a burning concussion frothed out.

Zolo was sent flying. His feet left the ground and free flying pieces of the desert carried him through the air. A chunk of brick gashed his arm. His body was torn in different directions until he landed on the face of a dune.

He patted himself down numbly. His ears rang like a drill was plunging through his brain.

Zolo sat up and inspected himself. He was bruised, scraped, cut, bleeding from multiple lacerations, but he could sew them up if he got back to the base. He would survive.

The heavy static feel was the first thing that Zolo felt as his senses returned to him. It was denser than he expected and continued to weigh on him with a physical pressure until there could be no mistake. Lord Vistomus was near.

“There are players in this battle I did not expect. I have great plans for you, Zolo, but I can’t use you if you’re dead. I asked you to remain at the base. *Flee here at once.*” The words were dulled by the wind and

## THE GATHERING I: SHIFT THE BALANCE

the voice came from all around him. He couldn't see the source, but he knew the voice well.

He obeyed and broke away in a limping sprint towards the base. Bursts of the super natural light went off in the distance as he left the battlefield behind.

Fleischer was growing tired. He could barely lift his arms. He sent another attack. He pushed through the pain until it was just like a distraction. The rebels weren't firing back. It wasn't like they couldn't see him, but he was in plain sight. In fact, he was asking to be shot as open as he was. So why?

He flung another blast.

Then the night was silent. No explosions. No cries of pain. Just the wind and the pattering of sand being carried by it. It was boring really. Why wouldn't they fire?

Before he could prepare his next weapon, the rebels surrounded him. Their guns were pointed at his sleazy, white figure. That didn't stop him. Centimeters at a time his next weapon grew. He would hear a few more screams before he was through.

The sea of dark rebel forms parted suddenly.

Their leader emerged. It was too dark to physically see more than his outline, but he had a tangible presence about him. "Braxton's laboratory had a successful test subject...*how unsettling*. What's your name?"

"Kurt Fleischer," he responded with a vile look.

"I admire your spirit Kurt Fleischer, but your skills are pitiable."

Fleischer flinched at the words and he started a hiss of retort, but the leader continued.

"However, it is spirit that cannot be taught. I propose you join us."

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The man spoke quietly, but his words had a great deal of influence about them. Fleischer was too stubborn to accept defeat that easily. “I don’t do things unless I get something out of it.”

Lord Vistomus’ intensity deepened with each word. “In return, I will teach you...true power.” He held his hand out. A swift wind swept through the area around him. He called forth a bolt of lightning to his hand. It highlighted his cloak in a pure white luminance and cleared the sand at his feet in a ring of powerful demonstration. In an instant it was gone, but a glowing energy still remained in his hand. He clenched his hand and extinguished it into a vapor that cast a dirty, ominous light around the man.

To Fleischer, the words had some kind of magic to them. No, it wasn’t magic. It was passion. It was soul. This was a man who believed strongly in his cause. The words commanded Fleischer, and the temptation of true power overwhelmed him. This was a man he could follow.

“Of course, you may die here at the hands of my men if that is what you wish. If a meaningless death is what you want, then I will give it to you. However, I think your insatiable thirst for battle will be better filled if you join us.”

A diabolical smile slithered across Fleischer’s face.

“I’ve always thought of myself as a survivor.”

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“Eos, can you hear me? Are you asleep?”

Shaking himself awake, Eos responded to Glenn’s voice.

“Yeah. I’m awake,” Eos yawned through the bag over his head. Instantly a panic ran over him. He tensed his whole body. Had he missed his opportunity to escape?

## THE GATHERING I: SHIFT THE BALANCE

“I think we’re alone.” Glenn said.

“What makes you think that?”

“Well only that Zolo guy stayed behind from the sound of it. They all went to help out their *Lord Vistomus*,” he mocked the way they addressed their leader in a whisper. “They’re like a bloody cult.”

Eos sat up. He wriggled into an upright position with his hands bound behind his back.

“Are you sure,” he whispered back.

“We aren’t being told to shut up or be more respectful at the moment, are we?”

No more evidence was needed. Someone could be watching and remaining silent...there was a chance, but they would have to risk it. Maxima couldn’t afford any hesitation from him. Eos set to work on a Soul Sphere. It took only three seconds, but the control required was immense. He fine-tuned his tool to wield it in less explosive manner and keep it controlled.

With his hands tied, he contorted his wrist until the crimson sphere was cutting at the ropes. The smell of burning fibers quickly met his nostrils. His hands were nearly touching and holding them in such a twisted way made his joints ache. With only centimeters of rope in between, he had to be sure not to release any destructive power on his own arm.

Steadily he twisted his wrist deeper into the rope. He was almost through.

He cut carefully until, finally, the rope loosened and slipped off his wrists.

Outside, a bolt of lightning struck.

Eos turned his attention to a complaining Glenn.

“Are you out yet? Don’t leave me tied here all day,” Glenn moaned. All the while, he lay on his stomach with his hands restrained behind

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him. He inched spastically like a fish out of water towards Eos...or where he thought Eos was. He pulled his knees to his chest to wind up and flailed forward in the wrong direction; his butt was embarrassingly pointed toward the sky.

“Stop moving Glenn,” Eos whispered lowly, “I’ll get you free if you just hold still. He cut away at Glenn’s ropes with another Soul Sphere. His hands were free, and he had a childish, lopsided grin.

“I was moving away from you, wasn’t I?”

Eos nodded.

“What now?” Glenn asked, “Lord Vistomus stole that necklace we found. How do you plan to get it back?”

Eos closed his eyes solemnly. “I don’t,” he confided. “We can’t risk that. I promised Maxima I would see her again and that I would get her out. I won’t give up or go back on my word because of this set back. There’s no looking back now; only forward. We’ll just have to find another way. Let’s get out of here and make a new plan to take Maxima back by force.”

But take her back from who?

Glenn stroked his beard stubble, “How about what that kid Zolo said? What if she isn’t with Braxton anymore?”

“What else do we have to go on Glenn? Those are the words of one rebel.” Eos said, but he was less sure than he sounded. He knew the name from somewhere; not Zolo, but Jace. With a full stomach, or without the sleep deprived pings of pain in his brain, or without the intense stress of his sister being held hostage and needing to escape himself, he might have been able to think better.

They climbed stair cases cautiously in a search for a way out. Soon they found a hatch that lifted onto a rooftop in the desert. They dashed out of their captivity, free men for the first time in days. With a soft pounding, they jogged through the dunes. Glenn struggled to keep up.

## THE GATHERING I: SHIFT THE BALANCE

A bolt of peculiar, white lightning crashed in the distance, but they were much too far from the infinite sandstorm for that to be the source. He looked back to see Glenn falling behind.

Glenn hustled as best as he could, but the lack of sleep was wearing him down.

Something stopped him as he reached the peak of a small dune. He was yanked backwards viciously, hit the sand, and tumbled down the hill he had climbed.

A hand covered his mouth.

He tried to call to Eos, but his cry was muffled.

Glenn squirmed and let out a dampened noise of distress.

A voice spoke shortly in his ear, “Shhh,” it insisted. “If you stay with him now you’d be killed. In a few moments, this will all blow over. You’ll only be in the way.”

Eos continued at his own pace. He had to get as far away from the rebels as possible before they realized he was gone. He glanced back over his shoulder. Glenn was nowhere to be seen. He slowed his run to—*thud!*

It was like slamming into a wall. Eos fell to the ground. His nose burned, and his lip was bleeding from where his tooth had stabbed into it. There had been nothing in his way before he had turned around, that much was sure. He looked with watering eyes up to see what had stopped him.

Moon light reflected off a pair of blue and amethyst eyes above him.

Ares spoke, “We have a habit for running into each other...*brother.*”

Eos reeled and crawled back in fear but found the large incline of the dune behind him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“I went through all this trouble to steal Maxima from Braxton and here you go just presenting yourself to me a second time.” He laughed coolly.

Eos couldn’t believe what he was hearing or seeing. “Wha...what do you mean? You have Maxima?”

Ares shrugged. “Well I guess it’s just insurance against General Braxton then. I’ll re-extend my offer from last time. Where did we leave off?” His voice trailed as if remembering, “Oh yes...*join or die*, wasn’t it?”

He summoned his Soul Chains into his hands to add to the threat.

Eos stammered in the ghostly glow of the weapon, “Join wh...who?”

Ares let the chains slide through his hands as his shoulders slumped in exasperation and disappointment. “The Mitad, Eos. Join the Mitad.”

“Who are the Mitad and what do you want with us?”

Ares put his hand to his forehead, “You have so much to learn. We are the wielders of the revolution! The Hyperboreans who want to change our world.”

Eos could only think of Major Clark dying at the hands of such men.

“I don’t understand, but I know one thing. I’d never join you, Ares.” He stood with defiance.

Ares spun the tip of his chain whip threateningly.

“Why don’t we head back to discuss the matter?” He was hardly asking.

Eos formed the thought of a Soul Sphere.

Ares stepped closer; just feet from Eos.

*Bwoom!*

## THE GATHERING I: SHIFT THE BALANCE

An orange light rose from the ground and enveloped Ares in an explosion of Soul Energy.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



### THE SCATTERING

**A**res was on his knees when the orange explosion cleared. He was surrounded by glowing shards of Soul Energy. They shimmered with his own murky color all around him. His head was wilted, but he managed to lift it up and look past Eos.

“So, you’re still alive?” Ares said with a bark of annoyance.

Behind Eos was the prisoner from Laboratory One. He stood atop the dune with a commanding posture. His wild tufts of hair blew around frantically in the wind and he stroked his short, pointed beard.

“Counted me out, did you?” Aizo gave a gleeful laugh. “Well...I’m back!”

Ares rose and said, “You may have shattered my Solido because I was off guard,” the foreign word referenced the quickly dissipating

## THE SCATTERING

shards of energy on the ground. The ultimate defensive technique had worked to spare Ares' life, but now he was left weakened. The dense layer of Soul Energy that had morphed around his body was in splinters. "But I still have Maxima. Eos, join me in the north, where the Thelon River pours into Baker Lake in Nunavut, Canada. Be there exactly one week from tomorrow if you want her back."

In a heartbeat, Ares Soul Stepped away and was gone in a flurry of soul propelled speed.

"He has Maxima?" A nauseating feeling fluttered inside Eos. Zolo had been telling the truth. Then his thoughts shifted to the newcomer. "How did you get here, Aizo?"

Aizo squinted and spoke in his high-pitched voice. It contradicted his stocky stature. "Yes, he has Maxima. She's safe for the moment though. We have one week until the Mitad make their move. I broke out of that prison not long after you left and followed you." He grinned giddily and soaked in the freedom, "I've done it a few times before. I would have contacted you sooner, but by the time I caught up, you had gone to Lab Four like I had intended for you. So, while I waited, I went back to watch over Maxima. No sooner than I got there, Ares was off with her over his shoulder. Now we find ourselves here."

Eos glowered with dark thoughts. "I'm going to make Ares regret that."

"In time, Eos. Strategy will be our friend in this endeavor."

He realized Aizo probably would want to know about his success... and failure. "I stole the Mellizo Glyph from Braxton, but I have no idea what it is. And unfortunately, I haven't figured out the meaning of the prophecy yet, but now that you're here you can explain it."

Aizo cocked his head, "Oh that...the meaning of the prophecy..." His voice rose as if trying to build anticipation, "is...nothing."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“What do you mean, nothing?” Eos recoiled from the answer.

“Just that,” Aizo shrugged, “I made it up. I just needed an excuse to get a message to you without Braxton catching on. You have to admit, I’m quite the poet.” His bushy eyebrows bounced up and down as he snickered, “You don’t really believe in prophecies, do you?”

Eos was about to defend himself, but his mood fell as he realized he had yet to deliver the news of his failure. “I lost the glyph. The rebels stole it from me.”

Aizo grew serious. “That is grave news. The rebels are a front for the Mitad while they’re on Earth. It helps them blend in. They have taken in non-Mitad members though. I haven’t figured out their true intent here, but I can assure you it will not be beneficial for Hyperborea or Earth.”

“Hyperboreal!” Eos exclaimed. The codex of answers was finally before him in the form of this man, Aizo. “Please tell me about Hyperborea, and the Mellizo Glyph, and the Mitad, and—”

“Slow down. I’m sure you have a lot of questions. Let’s talk as we walk. I have a camp site set up a few miles from here. I will explain everything.”

A warm, fulfilling pleasure flooded Eos. He would finally learn about Hyperborea ...about his homeland. He knew that was where he belonged.

Then he remembered, “Glenn. Where’s Glenn?” He blurted.

“He’s waiting for us over the hill. Come, follow me.”

When they reached Glenn, he was frantic. “What was all that? There were explosions and flashes of light. I thought I *was going to die!* And who is this guy?”

“He’s the one who sent me to Lab four, Glenn. This is Aizo, the prisoner I mentioned.”

## THE SCATTERING

Glenn gave Aizo an incredulous look, “Thanks for that. It’s was a real joy breaking into there and all.” The two ignored Glenn and walked to Aizo’s camp.

“I’ll start with the Mellizo Glyphs,” Aizo began his monologue, “There are actually two. Braxton had both, but they are Hyperborean artifacts. Until I brought them here, no Earthlings knew of their existence. Even on Hyperborea, they were known to few others. The legend goes that they were first given to a man named Morax. He was the first wielder without a wielding lineage on mainland Hyperborea. There are those who were soulborn, like yourself. They are born of wielding lineages. Then Morax introduced the glyph-made men—those whose powers came from the Mellizo Glyphs. Throughout history the two artifacts have changed many hands and been warred over, but during the recent years, they belonged to your father, Talus Bellator. They are extremely powerful tools. Everything else we know can be summarized by their three main functions. The first is that they can grant a person the ability to wield. The second is that they provide a large reservoir of Soul Energy for the user.” Aizo wound around pillars of stone remains that protruded from the ground, “The third, and most important function of the glyphs, is to open the gate between Hyperborea and Earth.”

The information felt so natural to Eos, so much a part of his true identity, that he didn’t question the mythology that Aizo presented. He only craved to know more about the lore.

“Then how did Braxton get the Mellizo Glyphs?” He asked.

Aizo stopped walking. A guilty look crossed his face and he put his head down, “I gave them to him.”

“Why would you do that?” Eos asked.

Aizo looked off distantly. “To explain that, I need to tell you how you came to be here. Know that I only did it to protect you. The camp

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

is just ahead. Let's start a fire and cook dinner. I'll tell you while we eat."

Plant life was starting to overtake the desert now, as far north as they were. Still, the desert had not completely given way. The infinite sandstorm no longer looked so infinite; Eos could make out the distinct edges where roaming storm's reach ended. They reached a place where two pillars had collapsed onto each other forming a wedge forming the entrance to a small cave like inlet of a collapsed building buried in the hill. Inside, four rabbits were strung up near a bundle of wood.

Aizo reached in a bag and drew out a knife. He prepared a spit fire for the dinner. Eos forgot how long it had been since he'd eaten because of all the excitement going on, but seeing food brought the wrenching hunger pains back. He sat silently, except for a rumbling stomach, and waited for Aizo to say something.

"The best place to start, as it usually is when explaining something complex, is with a brief history. You couldn't fully understand without the knowledge of Hyperborea." Aizo said quietly as he held out a hand. He called on his Soul Energy and produced a tiny shower of orange sparks.

"Please tell me about Hyperborea." Eos begged.

Aizo nodded to himself in a similarly crazy manner as he had in the prison and grunted. A fire whooshed into fragile life. Eos helped feed it with small brush and sticks. Glenn watched from a few feet back and listened.

"The important part starts about twelve years ago, I suppose. Talus held a large influence on the main continent of Hyperborea, called Cor Land. As king of our nation, Anite, he used his political sway as justly and morally as he could. You might even say too justly. Your father was too much of an optimist...always thinking the best would come

## THE SCATTERING

out of humans, but it rarely does.” He realized he was beginning to ramble to himself. “As I told you before there are two very distinct races on Cor Land: the Corlanders and the Krogs. They’re always feuding, and it hardly helps that the Krogs spent many centuries suppressed as slaves by Corlanders before our generations. Even today some countries try to hold on to the slave practices, but Talus broke most of that up. Then you have the mixed breeds; Mezclado as they’re called. They get bullied by both races into being a lowly slave like class of people.”

Aizo shook his head in the fire light.

“Your mother was left to rule your home nation of Anite while your father formed a Council of Races to try and stabilize Hyperborea’s Cor Land. It was working for a time, but the Mezclado grew too large in number and too outraged with their conditions before progress could be made. Soon the wrong Krogs backed a radical Mezclado leader and... one day it all collapsed.”

Eos listened intently and absorbed every detail of his heritage.

Aizo stabbed two forked branches into the ground and placed the skewered meat over the fire. The flames ate away at the small sticks until they were blackened. He fed it larger pieces of wood and the fire grew. It grew like it had grown right under Talus, and just as Talus had unknowingly fed it. He recalled the day that it all collapsed and recounted the story.

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Smoldering remains of his great empire surrounded Talus. The white marble gates of Pacem Derex, the free city, in the mountain pass had been a symbol of unity and safety for all. It fell in chunks of charred contention between the two races that inhabited Cor Land.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Talus looked over at his most trusted friend, who lay bleeding from two bullet holes in his left shoulder and bicep. His bronze hair was wild and eccentric, and his sideburns were even more so, shooting out in untamable tufts. Tears were building up in his eyes.

Aizo grasped Talus' hand and got to his feet. He observed the gravity of the situation in one complete turn. It was hard for him to accept what he was seeing. In one week of defiant and subversive revolting, all progress had been undone. The only sight reminiscent of hope was the north gate. Although broken and nearly beyond repair, the revolt had not breached its walls.

He turned to Talus, "Everything we spent our lives working for has been destroyed. The unity of the Council of Races, the peace between Corlanders and Krogs...our kingdom has fallen. It's all gone." Aizo cried out, "Hyperborea is dyed with blood and spurred by hatred. I doubt there'll be any way to go back."

Talus tore a strip of cloth from his sleeve and tied it around his friend's shoulder to compress the bleeding. It was a long time before he felt able to speak.

"To think that it was my own son who aided this uprising," Talus spoke softly.

Aizo let out a hysterical sound of both pain and frustration. "He was never your son Talus! I knew taking in tainted seed like him would be your downfall; I just didn't think the fall would be this far. You should have never kept him around—"

"But I did keep him around! It was the right thing to do," Talus interjected.

"You saw him, didn't you? He is just a boy and his powers could one day soon rival both of ours. He will be the most dangerous wielder on Hyperborea someday."

## THE SCATTERING

“Yes,” Talus let out a sad sigh, “I know. The only one more dangerous than him is the one who can control his young mind to such a degree.”

“You’re assuming that someone can in fact control him.” Aizo said.

The decorative clasps that held the massive strands of Talus’ beard bobbed as his head shook. “I’m assuming exactly that. Ares doesn’t have the kind of political power to stage something of this scale, nor does he have the ability to obtain the weapons used tonight. Surely you noticed. Your wounds speak for themselves.”

Another pained moan was Aizo’s acknowledgement. He touched his arm near the wounds tenderly “I...did...they resembled the technology we brought back from Earth years ago: guns.” There had been far fewer guns in the battle than soldiers, but it still meant that the technology was spreading through Hyperborea and into the wrong hands. There should have been no way for the technology to get through the gateway between worlds...so how?

“Listen to me carefully. I must ask of you the biggest favor I have ever asked,” Talus spoke urgently, “I’ve sent for Eos and Maxima. I will bring them to the Council Commons.”

“I should stay with you Talus. We should fix this together!” The words held all the weight of the city in them. They came out in an angry tremble just as Pacem Derex had trembled before falling to ruin.

“No! Look at yourself. You need time to heal. You are the only one I can entrust my children to at this point. Now please, meet me at the Council Commons tomorrow night. It will be empty now that the Krogs have destroyed the alliance. It is the safest place we can meet.” Talus’ voice was that of a desperate man.

Aizo put a reassuring hand on Talus’ shoulder, “I will do it for you, but you must know that I want to stay here and help you rebuild.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“I know, but there will be much more blood spilled before any rebuilding.” Talus responded solemnly, “I already have a plan to restore the peace, but it will take time. For now, please get what you will need for a long stay on Earth. Gather some warm cloths and supplies. Hurry, *go!*” He urged the last word in a whisper.

Talus crept stealthily into the Council Commons the next night with a half asleep five-year-old in one arm. A beautiful little girl lit up the darkness with her smile in the other. The commons was as dark as the sky outside; this was expected. Usually there would be council members debating through the night, but there was no use maintaining the illusion of order now.

He lit a torch with his Soul Energy. The circular room was full of abandoned seats, all except the center area.

It was there, the focal point of the room, the Mezclado stood. He was the one half-breed allowed to hold office in the council. It was well understood that Talus had been lucky when the council agreed to give even one of their kind a position of power. It was even better understood that Talus had to use a great number of favors and threats to give the Mezclado the tie breaking vote over a fifty-fifty Corlander-Krog council. Thus, Talus ushered in Saida, a growing leader among the suppressed race of mixed bloods. Here he was on this monumental night; here he was, his red-amethyst eyes blazing through the gloom.

Saida paced the council floor anxiously, his hands held behind him. He turned to Talus, “You’re surely wondering why I, among all of the council members, remain here tonight Talus.”

“I’m surprised, but I reason the past few days have had the greatest effect on you, who alone represents your entire people. You had the most to lose from this upheaval.”

Saida gave a steady chuckle, “How blind you are Talus. It was we half breeds who had the most *to gain.*”

## THE SCATTERING

“So those eyes of yours reflect which race you side with? You never cared about unity, did you? Peace was never on your mind?” Even as the words left his mouth, the idea was becoming clearer to him. Rage built in Talus as he realized the error in his judgment when he had delivered a position of power so readily to Saida.

Saida chided, “*Those eyes?* I had you down as someone above slurs against the lesser races. Did you not notice the truth? As true as it is that there were a great number of Krogs who fought, the vast majority were actually Mezclado.”

“I should have known it was someone in a position of power that had tainted Ares mind, but I never suspected you. We were supposed to create peace together, Saida.” Talus let his deep voice raise to a rarely heard level for such a calm leader.

“Oh Yes, *great king of peace.* We are beyond that now, aren’t we?” Saida mocked. “Of course, my organization chooses to side with the down trodden races. All the better for leading a revolt.” Saida’s profound and authoritative voice flowed from his mouth like a politician’s words should. His face was permanently locked in a devious and victorious grin.

Suddenly Talus noticed a change in the atmosphere. It became charged as if energy was resonating throughout it. The feeling was strong, even slightly overpowering for Talus. He knew Saida was the source of this unique sensation; his aura of Soul Energy filled the room.

“So, you’ve hidden your ability to wield from everyone. I must admit that you are strong, maybe even as strong as me... and to think that you could remain covert among so many of us.” Talus was shocked at his failure to notice that Saida possessed such powers. How had he learned to wield? The Mellizo Glyphs had been locked away.

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He was not a glyph-made wielder. There were virtually zero Mezclado wielding lineages. He was surely not soulborn either.

“I will usher in a new era and it will be led by the half breeds... like me,” Saida moved towards Talus, “But we must not keep a name that is in such low regard! Tonight, the Mitad are born!” He howled with a golden gleam of the torch light glazing over his violet eyes.

Talus readied himself, prepared to battle this traitor. His children were still in hand, but he would set them down if Saida made an advance. He needed to keep his greatest treasures safe.

He had a decent idea what Saida was after, “Then your motive tonight is to steal the Mellizo Glyphs? One more step and you better be willing to lay your life on the line for them.” He prepared his soul for battle.

“Ah ah ah, let’s not be rash. Do you think you could fight me off and protect your children at the same time? That assumption would be pure arrogance on your part,” Saida jaunted. He swaggered past Talus gloatingly.

With instant realization of Saida’s true desire, his demeanor fell to disbelief.

How he wished it was something else. How could Saida not be after the Mellizo Glyphs? Such powerful artifacts and he was disenchanted.

Saida already had his Krog-like hand, dull and ash toned with long talon like phalanges, on Eos’ face.

“The artifacts are not of my concern just yet. There are members in the Mitad that can replicate their abilities well enough for my purposes.” He brought his jagged index finger up to the boy’s face, “Your focus is always misplaced Talus; that is why you lost Ares after all. How much more can you lose?”

“Daddy,” Eos let out a disturbing call for his father.

## THE SCATTERING

Talus was helpless.

A sturdy build appeared from down the hallway. A voice broke the egotistic monologue, “I think I’ve heard enough of this Saida.” Aizo marched forward confidently and stormed the hallway. One arm hung less mobile than the other from bullet wounds.

Saida slashed his finger into the boy’s face with flash of white Soul Energy on the tip of his sharp nail. Maxima, tiny and uncoordinated, reacted to her brother’s scream by lashing out an arm. It struck Saida in the face and for the smallest amount of time, Talus could have sworn he saw a spark of blue. Saida retreated hurriedly like a ghost in the darkness and disappeared in a blur of speed. Talus wiped the trickle of blood from the corner of his crying son’s eye. The wound was minor, only a small cut near his left temple.

From the other end of the corridor, Saida called to Talus and Aizo through the wailing of a child, “Though I rival you both individually, I can’t risk all I’ve gained by fighting you both at once. For now, that is, but soon...” his voice trailed off as he disappeared.

“Should we go after him Talus?”

“No, let’s just get Eos and Maxima off Hyperborea before worse can happen.”

Aizo argued one final time, “Earth is hardly in better condition. It won’t be safe there either.”

Talus closed his eyes and pushed away the stress that had weighed on him for days. He felt older than his years today. “Saida revealed the true intentions tonight. This new group that calls themselves the Mitad...they want my children for some reason. I can’t let that happen.” He produced the Mellizo Glyphs, the precious artifacts, from a pouch at his side. He felt a tinge of loss as the chains sifted from his hand and into the possession of his children’s protector.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“The key to your return,” Talus whispered after he had handed the glyphs over. He put a hand on the head of each child and delivered the last fatherly words that he would speak to them.

“I love you.”

He turned to Aizo, “Protect those two above all.”

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Aizo divvied up the dinner and handed it to Eos and Glenn who devoured it eagerly.

“Those were the last words of your father. It was not long after I got here that I realized I had been followed by the Mitad. They were after you and Maxima...and the Mellizo Glyphs. During one confrontation, I learned that top ranking members of the Mitad were chasing me. I couldn’t protect you two forever given the situation. They were too dangerous; too powerful.”

“What’d you do?” Glenn asked. He was as engulfed in Eos’ history as Eos was himself.

“Talus and I had explored Earth a few times before in our younger days. They were always short stints, but I had made a few,” he paused, “...contacts. There was one woman who I had spent much of my time with. Her name was Lori Lee. You were too young to remember me, but perhaps you remember a few days with her. I left you in her care. The Mitad wouldn’t find you there. Still, they came after me. I played the decoy and steered them away from you two and then,” he stared deeply into the embers of the dying fire. There was a look of deep, life fissuring pain, “I turned myself and the artifacts over to General Braxton. I knew his curiosity would get the better of him and he would hold me and the glyphs where we couldn’t be found.” The fire crackled with pops of heat that filled the silence between sentences. Aizo

## THE SCATTERING

finished slowly, “Just as I had hoped, he hid the Mellizo Glyphs where not even I could find them.”

Eos reflected on all this man had sacrificed to protect them. Aizo had given up his life so that they could have one. He was their savior...their guardian. “Thank you, Aizo. I know that must have been an incredibly hard decision.”

Aizo’s hands shook uncontrollably as he thought. “One of the hardest I’ve ever made. I came back for you though. Two years I waited. Then I thought I could escape without the Mitad following me. It took time to work out an escape plan. When I went to reclaim you and go home, I found all of you gone; even Lori and her son.” Aizo clenched his hand in agony at just the memory of it. His enormous forearms trembled, “I thought I had lost all of you, but I went back into captivity and stayed close to Braxton. Soon, he revealed that there were two children with powers like my own and that he wanted to study me.” His voice cracked, “Hearing news of you was one of the happiest moments of my life.”

“Then how did the Mitad not find me?” Eos asked.

“Braxton is a selfish and egotistical man. I knew he would hide you from public view. After I sealed up that curse that Saida put on you, there was no chance of them tracking you.”

Eos’ eyelids were falling slowly. The small nap in the rebel base hadn’t been enough. Even Glenn was dozing off now. He forced another question out. It was what he always wanted to know.

“What *is* this on my arm? What is this seal everyone talks about?”

Aizo slapped his thighs with his hands and stood up.

“That can wait for tomorrow. Get some rest. Tonight, you were educated about the history of Hyperborea. We have one week until you must face Ares. Tomorrow you start training,” his thunderous

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

voice announced throughout the mouth of the cave. You're going to get a crash course in being a Hyperborean Soul Wielder!"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



### SLANTING PILLARS

**A**s Zolo approached the rebel base, he caught the barely discernable movement of someone leaving into the night. Another person followed right behind the first and they ran together from the hideout. He knew it was the hostages, but he didn't go after them. Not immediately. For the moment, he only noted which direction they were running in. Then, he entered the base.

When he came back out, his fingers slipped inevitably into his pocket.

The chilled smoothness of metal links reassured him that the item he had regretfully acquired was indeed there. Zolo owed Lord Vistomus his life and for that he would repay with devotion, but he didn't like the way Lord Vistomus had spoken to him.

*I can't use you if you're dead.* Was he only an instrument for Lord Vistomus?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

If that's what Lord Vistomus willed for him, then so be it. Still, he was getting a promotion...did Lord Vistomus see him as more than just a tool to use?

He didn't like unknowingly taking part in Ares' kidnapping mission either. Watching Lord Vistomus steal from the prisoners had been too much—the blow that irreversibly weakened the foundation of his faith in his leaders. There was something more going on that he couldn't explain. Every member of the Mitad was acting abnormally. What's more, both Eos and Lord Vistomus had the same unusual aura to them. He wouldn't easily get the answers from Lord Vistomus, but perhaps Eos would be easier to talk with.

Zolo had no hope of tracking the escaped prisoners through the dark, but chance was kind to him. Just as he gave up hope of finding Eos Bellator, a clash of super natural powers confirmed not only the runaways' location, but also his hunch about Eos.

Because of the dangerous nature of Eos' ability, Zolo kept his distance while trailing him. Not long afterwards, he lost sight of them again. It was an easy thing to do in the dark.

Once again, a light appeared to guide him. This time, it was in a much more natural form: a camp fire. He waited behind a slanted stone structure that rose from the sand, just outside of the fire light. He stayed there until the fire was dying and only the wind spoke.

Zolo approached the camp under the cave of pillars.

To his surprise there were three men. He carefully tapped Eos on the shoulder and made hushing motion so that the other two would remain asleep.

Eos barely recognized Zolo. He had seen the face for only a couple of seconds in Lord Vistomus' chamber. This could be a trap, but Aizo was nearby. One outcry and he would wake him. He stepped cautiously away from Aizo and Glenn. The risk was minimal, but Eos wouldn't

## SLANTING PILLARS

follow beyond the faded edge of the fire's light. He walked with vision that jumped jarringly between memories and sand. Surprise hammered at his chest.

Boyhood memories sifted back into his brain in fragmented bits. He realized that he had been like a brother to Zolo—no Jace; if only for a few months. It was Jace who had stood in front of the gun that had been pointed at Eos and Maxima in Lori's living room in the days of their youth.

Aizo watched through the slits of his crafty eyes.

Zolo tried to draw Eos further out, but he relented and spoke first in a whisper, "I saw when I followed you...the explosion," he kept his distances and avoided eye contact. "I get the same feeling around you as I do around Lord Vistomus. You have something in common, a supernatural power. What is it?"

"What're you doing here, Jace?" Eos asked.

"So you do remember me. Answer my question." Zolo looked with the same kind of stubborn and determined eyes as Eos. Neither wavered for a while and both understood that they were a few circumstances and events away from each other's path. They had come from the same house once. Only now, Eos stood within the reach of the firelight and Zolo was firmly in the embrace of shadows. They stood on opposite sides of the distinction, but it wasn't a sharp line. It was blurred in a wavering gradient.

Eos couldn't make out the rebel's intentions. "It's called Soul Wielding. I don't know much about it myself, but your leader is definitely capable of it...and more I'm sure." Perhaps he could lure Zolo in and expose his intentions another way, "A great wielder is going to teach me tomorrow and explain everything. Why don't you stick around and learn what you want from him?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Zolo said nothing in response at first. He stared out, away from Eos in contemplation. He couldn't afford to be missing from base for a day. The dying embers under the pillars stole his attention. He looked away from the light, but it had temporarily ruined his night vision. The darkness was a sheet, but he stood in it all the same.

Eos realized that Zolo wasn't going to respond. "You were right about Maxima. Ares has taken her. I've been thinking about the name you gave me back in the hideout, Jace. You were my brother for a while... but can I trust you when you work for Ares?"

"You can't." Zolo said.

Then he dug into his pocket and removed the item he had stolen. It wasn't right that it was taken from Eos. The prisoner from Sires...the brother he had once had, was just as lost as he was. They were both caught in some game orchestrated by higher powers. They were both slowly climbing their way to the upper echelons of the mystery. Only, Eos had a sister staked in the game.

"Go save Maxima." Zolo threw the Mellizo Glyph onto the sand near Eos. Immediately he felt a horrible gnawing in his stomach of conflicting feelings; integrity and betrayal churned in him. He was unsure which emotion was appropriate.

When Eos realized what had been thrown, he snatched it up in disbelief. By the time he looked up at Zolo, the mysterious rebel was gone.

He wondered if he would ever see his lost brother again.

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"Father! Father! I did it—just like you."

A young boy with pale, grayish skin ran up to his father excited and beaming with pride.

## SLANTING PILLARS

His father glanced down at the young boy, who held in his palm a small, pale Soul Sphere. The small object circled hypnotically in his hand. The boy stared, almost as spell bound as his father.

No child had ever manifested their soul at such an age. He marveled at the idea: to wield at the age of five. A small ember of fear was fanned with the event. “You did? You did...fine...uh, a fine job.” Talus was taken aback. He scanned the hall cautiously while holding baby Eos.

This was not the response the young Ares had been hoping for. “I thought you would be happy father. I’m like you now. I’m a wielder,” he murmured, his radiant pride shrinking, “Can I join you at the banquet tonight?” His voice lifted at the thought.

The man eased himself down on his knee and leveled himself with the boy, all the while keeping the Eos asleep in his arms. He stretched his royal arm out to the boy’s shoulder. How he wished he could, “One day I hope to take you to a banquet with me, but not today. The others aren’t ready for you yet. Now, go back to your room and don’t be seen. That is very important.” He let out an exhausted sigh.

“But you’re taking Eos, and I’m older! When will the others be ready for me?” Ares complained.

“When I finish what I’ve started. That day is coming; be patient my son. One day soon. Now go back to your room, Ares. You can’t come out unless your mother or I escort you. *Remember that.*” He just hoped that Ares would accept his living conditions for a while longer. Keeping a child secret from the public was no easy task, but if it was discovered that the King of the Anite Empire had kept a hafling son that wasn’t even his blood...the unrest would shake the foundations of everything he had been working towards. Once the races began to see each other without hostility...then Ares could be free.

Talus walked out of sight, holding Eos tenderly.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

That is what father always said: soon. Talus loved Eos more. That much Ares knew. He had spent every moment of his isolated existence trying to become a wielder and he wasn't acknowledged even for that. Eos was a spoiled favorite and Ares hated him. Since the day he could stand he had been treated like an unwanted creature that someone had brought into the castle, but one day he would make his father notice him. Then and there he swore to himself that he would make Talus recognize his abilities.

A burning sensation consumed his chest and his breathing was tight. Talus would see him. He would be proud one day or... he would be afraid, but Talus was going to recognize him! The feeling rose in Ares and swelled; it was a poison that defined him. It was growing every day...growing more concentrated with every shunning dismissal from his father and every minute he was hidden away in his room. Eos had never known the isolation and pain that he felt. If things continued this way, he never would.

Ares snapped from his recollection of childhood and returned his focus to the dimly lit room. In front of him was a perfectly calm man who juxtaposed every aspect of his current, volatile mood.

That poison was bubbling in Ares once more on this night. It was a pain that tainted his mind. Eos had still never felt that pain. Even now, Lord Vistomus was giving him special treatment that prevented Ares from sharing the pain with Eos. He had finally had the second chance to confront Eos, but *that man* showed up. Aizo was an unforeseen twist in the Mitad's plans.

"Lord Vistomus," Ares said, "You had Eos here and you let him slip away! How did you fail to recognize him?"

A tea cup sat steaming on the table in front of Lord Vistomus. He sat in closed eye meditation and decided to tune out the interruptions. First it had been Zolo to explain what he already knew: the prisoners

## SLANTING PILLARS

had escaped. He informed Lord Vistomus that they had taken the Mellizo Glyph. Zolo had attempted to give chase.

Now this yapping from Ares.

Ares hated being ignored. He held back his pent-up anger for a little longer, but it was evident that he couldn't control himself, "Answer me—Aizo is alive and stronger than ever, Eos has escaped, and according to Zolo they ran off with the Mellizo Glyph! Yet you have nothing to say."

Lord Vistomus sighed heavily. There was no use trying to finish his meditation. Ares would keep making noise until he was acknowledged. He opened one eye and ceased to mask the aura of his Soul Energy.

Zolo was instantly pinned to the floor in the position he was sitting. He tried to stand but found himself stuck under the weight. Ares had to make a visible effort to move.

"Perhaps it has all worked according to my plan, Ares," he chided. "No, you wouldn't think of that, would you? Rest assured I have been controlling this game all along...moving my pieces slowly."

"Bu...but," Ares stammered under the thick aura.

"Look how weak Aizo has made you. Still he poses no threat to me. I *allowed* him to live. I have *allowed* Eos to escape for now. He still bears the mark. He's a prime candidate to join us when we ascend the throne. He simply needs training. I no longer have time for that at this stage because Aizo hid them for so long. Enlighten me Ares...who do you know that could do this for me in a short time?"

Ares swallowed the bitter pill of humility. "Aizo," he forced out.

The second eye opened and now the room had his full attention. He masked his aura once again. Zolo got to his feet. He knew what to call that feeling now. He had an opening and perhaps he could save Ares from further shame by changing the subject.

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“Lord Vistomus, please,” he bowed his head. “I beg you to tell me about wielding. That is what that feeling was, wasn’t it? I want to understand everything about the Mitad.”

The freshly opened eyes looked at the boy in surprise.

“I will deal with you after Ares.”

He turned back to Ares and drank his tea calmly.

“As for the Mellizo Glyphs, they are a secondary concern for now. We will take them back soon. You have orchestrated this exchange of Maxima for the Mellizo Glyph without my consent. Tell me how is she now?”

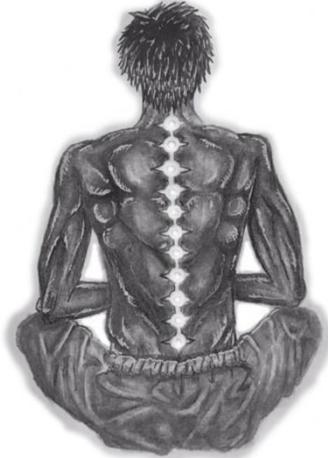
Ares hesitated like a child who knew he had done wrong, “She realized the nature of her situation... Tessio and I thought it necessary to sedate her.”

“I see,” Lord Vistomus somehow remained calm even with the news of an additional impairment to his plans. “This may work in our favor if we end up with the glyph that’s in Braxton’s possession. However, it makes it much harder to convince either of the Bellators to join us. Maxima and Eos have both demonstrated struggle.” He added a few drops of something and stirred his tea with his index finger. He talked more to himself than Ares. “The window of opportunity for them joining of their own will is closing, but you will not be punished. If we gain the glyph all amends will be made. In fact, Eos will be drawn to the meeting in a week and deliver the second glyph. It is not the order I wished, but...”

He tasted the tea with his index finger.

“It’s all coming together nicely.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



### BREAK THE LIMIT

**N**ow that you've got the basic idea of Soul Step down," Aizo raised a finger, "It's time for combat training!" He exclaimed to Eos, who was already pouring sweat because of the lesson. He now understood how the Mitad member with the spear had levitated down from the roof of the air hangar that day. He understood, but still, that level of control was so far beyond what he currently possessed.

"Yes," Eos said. He was hungry to learn more.

"First, let me explain the principles of Soul Wielding." Aizo picked up one of the y-shaped support sticks from the dinner roast the night before and drew in the sand. Eos followed the stick intently as every movement of Aizo's wrist unlocked another secret. He recognized the shape Aizo was drawing. There were two pieces that made up a triangle; one laid inside the other. A flame of Soul Energy resided in the middle.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“I’ve seen that,” Eos said, “That was carved into the Mellizo Glyph.”

“Indeed, it was. This is the symbol of the Human Essence. Each point on the triangle represents one of your states of being. There is the mind, he pointed to the bottom left point. There is the body, he pointed to the bottom right point....and there is the soul. He tapped the stick on the top vertex of the triangle. In a wielder, all three are connected.”

“The Human Essence,” Eos followed along intently, “So everyone has this...essence?”

“No, not everyone. You see, all humans have their body attached to their soul. This is what uniquely defines each of us.” He retraced the right piece of the symbol that encased the left. “Just as every human has their mind attached to their body. This is how we go about our daily lives. These ordinary bonds are what form the outer shell of our existence.”

“Then what about the connection of the mind and soul?”

“Ah,” Aizo said as if he knew the question was coming, “That is a bond that can only be formed by the Mellizo Glyph ritual or, in your case, by birth right. It was passed to you by the blood line of your father and mother. You are soulborn. When this inner shell is formed, you are a wielder.”

He let the words sink in and mystify Eos’ new wielding mind. The words held an innocent kind of magic and each breathe of knowledge excited the inner child of the toughened boy.

“These bonds can be broken in rare cases. If your body is damaged enough, your mind’s bond with the body will break and you’ll die. If body and soul are detached...well that is the principle of Soul Wielding you could say. We let our soul leave the body in the form of Soul Energy, but never enough to completely sever the bond. This is a skill

## BREAK THE LIMIT

called: *Severance*. It is the mark of a someone on the path to be a true wielder.”

Eos had to interject, “What about the third bond?”

“That can never be broken once attached. Let me continue. We access our soul through a concept we call the Soul Reservoir. This is a vessel that your soul pours its energy, your life force, into. The Soul Reservoir is locked by the seven gates of your soul. As you open each gate, you must sever your soul-body bond a little more. You have yet to open any gates. In a sense, you still haven’t truly wielded your soul—just excess energy that surrounds your reservoir. I sealed the curse Saida put on you and locked your reservoir at the first gate.”

“Then take it off!” Eos demanded. “I have to be able to beat Ares. I need to be stronger than him to get Maxima back.”

“Don’t be so hasty. The foreign Soul Energy that poisons your reservoir is much stronger and more complex than anything I can understand. That is why I only sealed it instead of removing it completely. I don’t know its nature, but the poison has clearly built up in your arm. This is where you manifest your energy. It’s not the only way to manifest your Soul Energy, but it is the most common and easiest to visualize.”

Eos looked with a fresh perspective at his blackened arm. “How can I reach my potential and unlock the gates with this seal? Won’t I need to remove it?”

Aizo shook his head disappointedly.

“Your haste will get you nowhere. Even I haven’t unlocked all the gates. Doing so would completely sever your soul from your body. It is foolish to rush into this. Besides, I can’t destroy the seal. Only you can do that. You must learn *Severance* by pushing past your limits and forcing the seal back through the gates. This has physical and mental implications. I will warn you, it is far too dangerous to let that curse

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

overtake even half of your reservoir. Because of that, I will only teach you how to open the first two gates.”

“How long does that take?”

Aizo squinted and cocked his neck to the side as he thought.

“For a talented wielder with me as their teacher...,” his voice rose to a thinking hum, “At minimum, three years. More likely five, and remember these are the easiest gates to open.”

“We don’t have five years! We have a week.” Eos rebutted.

“I know, but then again you have the bloodline of Talus running through you. I’d say...that removes at least a year from the training.” He huffed and nodded to himself.

Eos got a fiery look in his eyes.

“I’ll do it in five days. That’s all I have.”

His tone was a decided one. He had made up his mind.

Aizo smiled proudly, “We’ll see about that. I have a method that might make it possible. Then again it might kill you,” he threatened, testing Eos’ commitment.

Eos didn’t back down. He ran his hand over his face and put his index finger on the scar near his eye. “Ares has Maxima. There’s no other choice.”

“Good,” Aizo concluded, “Not to mention we can’t get home without a Mellizo Glyph.”

That reminded Eos. The dream like event of the night before fell on his mind and became more concrete. He felt his pocket. It was there. He reached in and held out the artifact.

Aizo stared.

“Where did that come from?”

“Last night an ally from within the rebels brought it to me.”

Aizo stopped to ponder the meaning of this news. “Can we trust him? Our location is compromised now.”

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That was something Eos wasn't fully sure of himself. On one hand, Zolo had done everything to show his trustworthiness. On the other, he worked alongside the Mitad as a rebel. He hesitated to answer. "I think so. He did give me the glyph and he grew up with me when we lived with Lori. He was her son."

Aizo had not expected to hear that. He frowned as if slightly pained by something Eos had said. He had watched the events unfold last night, but it was quite shocking to hear the visitor who had returned the glyph was so familiar to Eos. "Well, let me hold on to the glyph. You can't push your limits successfully with a supplement."

Eos didn't want to let go of it. He had sacrificed so much to find it and paid such a toll up to this point that handing it over felt like defying fate. After all, it had found its way back to him in the end.

The hesitation was evident and Aizo put out an open hand, "Eos, we can't continue training until you let go of it."

Still, Eos held on. The buzzing in his skull returned ever so faintly. Then, it grew louder.

Aizo tried again, "The glyph's offer of power is hard to part with."

"You feel it too, Aizo?"

An expression of confusion met the question. "Feel what, Eos?"

There was a pause of misunderstanding.

"You can't become strong enough to save Maxima if you rely on it." Aizo tried again.

Eos knew that was the only thing that mattered. He tossed the relic on the sand. It landed on Aizo's drawing, wiping it away into a piece of history that only the sand knew.

"Let's get started." Eos said.

"Thank you. Now we will start with an exercise. I want you to hit me with your Soul Sphere." He picked up the glyph.

Eos looked blankly at Aizo as if he had misheard.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“You heard me. Hit me!” He boomed, “I need to gauge your abilities.”

Eos hesitantly formed a sphere. He realized how far he had come in the past months when his sphere manifested in seconds.

“As powerful as you can!” Aizo encouraged him.

So, Eos fed it. It grew and grew until he held a marvelous weapon that churned nearly as wide as his shoulders. At Aizo’s beckon, he threw it at the crazy man. It struck him with a static explosion that crackled and swam through the humid desert air.

When the light and Soul Energy cleared, Aizo stood in a wide stance with his hands on his hips and an orange glimmer over his body. This was the technique called Solido that Aizo had told Eos about before Soul Step training. He said that Eos would have to wait for another time to learn the defensive technique.

“Bwahahaha. It’s like the wind is trying to blow me over.” Aizo burst out in laughter. “Are you sure you’re Talus’ son? Try concentrating your energy into a smaller attack! That loosely packed thing hardly deserves to be called a Soul Sphere. Try again. You’ll have to do better than that.”

“But it isn’t nearly as powerful when I make it smaller.” Eos said with confusion.

“Density, my boy. You must pack as much quality into a small space as possible, just like the training method we’re going to use. Put the same amount of energy into a smaller space.”

He tried the new method and streamed a thin line of Soul Energy carefully from his hand and into a sphere. He pulled a glowing red, ether-like thread from his Soul Reservoir and unspooled his energy. Carefully he packed it into the sphere until there was no more space to be occupied.

“Keep going,” Aizo urged.

## BREAK THE LIMIT

Eos tried again. The stream slowed to a near halt until he realized that it was overlapping itself and occupying the same space as previously packed energy. The sphere spun with a roar and soon was overflowing with misty tendrils of red.

This would show Aizo he was deserving of the name Bellator.

When he felt the strain begin to weigh on him, he attacked his teacher with something to prove. The impact was exponentially more noticeable. Aizo was lifted from his feet and he slid across the desert. The explosion didn't pierce his Solido, but it sent him soaring a good five feet.

He stood up and dusted himself off with a cough, "Now that had a little kick to it! That must have been nearly half of your reservoir. At least as far as your seal limits it. I wasn't ready for something like that." He cracked his neck as he prepared for the next stage of training.

Eos couldn't hold back a grin at his success.

"Your soul is going to take on its own nature once you learn Severance. That is the goal at least. Once you open the first gate, you gain a large amount of Soul Energy to tap into. With the second gate, your soul will manifest in a new way that is unique to you."

"Like Ares' Soul Chain?" Eos asked.

"Exactly; I suspect that is the beginning of his power... perhaps as early of a stage as the second gate. Severance is a manifestation of your human essence, and to do this I'm going to make you enter the Soul Void. It's an incredibly unstable plane of existence within yourself where your soul resides—a portal for your mind to see your soul with. We don't have time for normal methods, so we are going to do some experimental training with the Soul Void and have you make contact with your soul. I am one of a few who deeply understands how to open these gates. To do this, the physical training must be more demanding, and the mental stress will be more extreme. There is a high probability

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that you will die once you enter the Soul Void. Once you enter, the only way out alive, is if you have learned partial Severance. Are you okay with—”

Eos stopped him there. “I told you that nothing was going to stop me. There is only one path and I’m going to take it to save Maxima. We don’t know how many Mitad members will be up there. One thing I know for certain is that I can’t be too strong when I face my brother.”

“Hm,” Aizo rumbled with satisfaction, “Now we fight.”

“Wait, we what?” Eos’ mouth fell in surprise.

Aizo was wide eyed with excitement. “I’ll try to dampen my attacks to a level that will only knock you around. I can’t have you dying on me before I get you to the Soul Void.”

“Is this part of the training?” Eos asked off guard.

Aizo scooped up a hand full of sand.

“It most certainly is. This is the most important part for you.”

The sand in Aizo’s cupped hand glowed an orange hue momentarily. Then he threw the sand in the air. It scattered in the wind with an orange glitter like specs of magical dust.

“You’re my teacher. I don’t think I should try to hurt you,” Eos said and stepped forward, “I—” A small charge of Soul Energy exploded near his footstep and swept his feet out from under him.

“Because I’m not your enemy, I’ll explain my power. However, your opponents would never do you such a favor. Eos, when I sever my soul past the second gate...I can implant small explosives of my energy in my surroundings. That sand I scattered has become a mine field all around you. You’ll have to learn a combination of tactics and fighting skills in a trial by fire. Like I said, I won’t try to injure you too badly, but that will inevitably happen if you don’t fight back with tact.” Aizo winked, “Try to have fun. Remember, we’re attempting to expand your limits here.”

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He dashed at Eos in a crouch. Peaks of sand shot up in small fountains of soul enhanced desert behind his limbs. Eos didn't know what to do. He fell back on his habitual technique; his only technique.

A red Soul Sphere weaved itself to life in his hand.

Aizo was almost on him, but his attack was ready. He flung the energy directly ahead at his mad teacher.

Aizo didn't waiver. He kept on his same path, dragging his hand the whole way.

The Soul Sphere struck him head on.

Moments after the flash, he emerged from the cloud of dust with the same velocity. He was on Eos now. He scooped his hand, full of soul infused sand, and flung it at Eos as he rolled past him to the left.

Sand came at Eos; a deadly display of beauty. The flashy particles shot at him quicker than he could react. The first few landed on his chest and thrust him back with small explosions that rattled his brain and forced out his breathe. It wasn't pleasant, but it wasn't lethal or damaging.

The myriad of grains that hung in the air splattered him with similar blows, until he thought he was going to pass out from repetitive pain. Aizo was behind Eos as he picked himself up in astonishment. His body was still vibrating from the blasts, but he had to be ready for the next attack.

In seconds, he had gone from learning about wielding to having his world rocked by an expert.

"That's twice in the same attack you would have died," Aizo said. He didn't sound pleased. "I told you not make fluffy attacks and I even came at you head on. What do you do? You forget to condense your Soul Energy."

"I didn't have time to—" He stepped as he spoke. His foot landed on another mine.

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“You forget. This whole area is littered with my traps. How are you going to get around them? This doesn’t look good for you.” Aizo came at him again head on.

He was too close to build up a condensed sphere, but Eos remembered how to deal with rapid attacks from his fight with Fleischer. He would just have to bare another hit and try to keep his focus long enough to prepare his attack.

After being sent flying and landing on another body jarring mine, Eos realized there was no way for him to keep his weapon together while being thrown around.

Aizo looked down at Eos, whose world was still quivering around him. “There are two ways around these traps. The first is that you sense where they have all fallen.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” Eos asked angrily.

“The same way you can control and sense your own Soul Energy while it’s away from you. It’s much harder to do, but try searching for an unfamiliar energy nearby. You might be able to sense it.”

Eos lay on his back, staring at the blue sky. It was streaked with thin expressions of clouds. He cleared his mind and searched as Aizo had told him.

“I can’t feel anything.” He said with frustration.

“Then you’ll have to keep trying or be creative. There is another way to avoid them. Think about everything I’ve taught you so far.” He hopped away laughing giddily, treating the training like play time. “Remember the whole point of this is to attack me. Don’t forget your offense.”

Eos stood up and charged his hand for another attack. The black waves on his arm shifted and crawled up his forearm. The burning sensation was coming, but it was just as bad as the blows he was taking

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from Aizo. The condensed attack had drained him, but he had to try to do it once more.

Eos had been flung around so many times that the count was becoming a blur for him. Aizo, however, was much better at keeping track. “That’s ten deaths now and you still haven’t landed another hit on me.” He called from a distance.

Eos’ forehead crinkled in frustration. His fists clenched so hard that the bones in his hands threatened to break. He was a standing target, getting pummeled over and over. “It’s not my fault you keep killing me!”

His anger manifested into a deep red Soul Sphere as he unclasped his right hand. The curse mark consumed his arm further and made its way to his bicep. In the same way he had carefully streamed energy into his dense Soul Sphere, he did it again now. This time it was much faster. He drew on power he didn’t even realize he had and launched the attack on Aizo.

It barreled across the desert like a juggernaut.

Aizo side stepped it and watched it explode behind him. “You’ll have to get closer than that,” He called to Eos who was bordering on the edge of unconsciousness. “Remember what I taught you before. There is a way around this.”

Eos didn’t hear. He just fell to the ground.

“Oh dear,” Aizo came, scooped Eos up, and carried him back to the cave of pillars.

“This happens when I over exert myself.” Eos mumbled weakly.

Aizo frowned. “This is my fault for putting the seal on you. You can overdraw you powers far too quickly with your limited supply. We’ll rest now.” He set Eos down in the shade of the shelter. “This is good though. You want to feel like this. When you’re exhausted, when you’re on the brink of you limits—that is when you can push forward

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and expand your abilities. Continuing to struggle will push the seal back. We'll try this again when you recover. Hopefully that'll be by tomorrow." He said calmly, but inside he was worried.

Would Eos be able to learn Severance so quickly? It was looking impossible.

The task was monumental, and Eos' limitations were too extreme.

To Aizo's surprise Eos was on his feet two hours later.

"I figured it out!" he said excitedly to himself. "The sand may be a giant field of mines, but if use Soul Step like you taught me...I can just move above the danger."

"Exactly," Aizo confirmed with a wide, wily smile. "It's that kind of creative thinking that will keep you alive in battle. You're doing well."

"I'm ready to go again!"

"Already? You'll need much more rest to replenish your reservoir."

"No. I'm ready. This is what I have to do for Maxima."

Moments later, they clashed! The fight was on again, but Eos was mobile now. He awkwardly stepped over the field of traps on platforms of his Soul Energy. By no means was he skilled at Soul Step, but it was enough to keep him above the mine field and allow him to partially focus on Aizo. Still, he didn't manage to land a hit. It required too much focus to create platforms and plan his steps.

He sat down after his sixth round of fighting with Aizo later that day. Eos' curse mark was nearing his shoulder now.

"This doesn't look good. As you exhaust your powers, the curse Saida put on you grows in your Soul Energy's absence. It tries to break your seal when you're weak." Aizo pondered, "Has it ever gone beyond your shoulder?"

Eos shook his head. His body ached and felt like hollowed rubber. He couldn't take much more...he could barely stand this time. He had

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never pushed himself to such lengths in his entire life. Aizo took pity on him and spoke the words that liberated him from his training.

“We’ll end for today. We start again tomorrow morning. As it turns out, the seal I put on you has been both a gift and a curse. It capped the energy you’re able to draw on. This has limited you all your life, but it has also made you surpass even me in some respects. When a typical wielder exhausts his Soul Reservoir, it takes at least a day to replenish it. For new wielders, it can take a week. Yet you get back up in a few hours. Your soul must have adapted to your limitation by producing Soul Energy much faster than I even knew was possible.”

Eos liked the praise. “I replenish faster than even you, Aizo?”

“Absolutely. I am holding back my attacks unlike you and I have a great deal more energy to draw from than you currently do. If I were to exhaust myself to the point you are at...It would take me at least a day to recover. Don’t get too big of a head though. You have talent to be sure; as for skills... much less so. You have a long way to go, but your goal of achieving partial Severance in five days may be possible. Get some sleep.”

Another day passed just the same. Then another. Eos managed to strike Aizo twice. Though the accomplishments pleased him, he was growing irritable. When would he learn Severance? He was getting nowhere. If he was going to achieve something that took years, shouldn’t he be advancing faster than two hits on his mentor?

He sat during one of the final rest periods of the third day of training. His frustration could be contained no more. “Aizo what are we doing? I’m reaching the end of my patience. This is a waste of time. We’re battling out here day after day instead of you teaching me to sever my soul or open the gates! I need to learn something that will help me save Maxima.”

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Aizo nodded repeatedly before he spoke. “Impatience is not your friend, Eos. The results we’re getting can’t be seen until you’ve accomplished your task. Here we have a time limit closing in on us. We have a seal on your ability and we’re trying to condense years of work into days. We have all of these limitations and boundaries, but we must not act like we do. We must progress forward in our own way and at our own pace. You have accomplished so much over the past three days, yet you refuse to see it because your mind is fixated on the future. Be here. Be in this moment and not that one.”

Eos ground his teeth together, “I am here in this moment. In this moment, I haven’t learned anything in the past three days. We just fight until I’m too tired to continue and repeat.”

Aizo shook his head in disappointment. “You said it yourself. You’re at your limit. This is where you grow. Everyone can go to their limit, but can you push past it? That is what will separate you from other wielders...*that* is what will help you save Maxima.”

“But Aizo, what *have* we been doing?”

“Look at your curse.” Eos looked. The black mark had crept up his elbow. “What round of training are we on for the day?”

“Eight,” Eos answered.

“On the first day, the curse was near your shoulder at this point. Now it is held at bay. This is because you have expanded your soul reservoir by pushing the seal back. You have more energy to tap into now and it replenishes even faster. This is why the curse hasn’t moved up your arm anymore! You simply can’t access all that potential because you haven’t opened the first gate. Once you do...the seal will be weaker, and you will be vulnerable to Saida’s curse.”

Eos folded his hands together in a plea to Aizo, “Then, please, show me how to. I won’t let the curse consume me.”

## BREAK THE LIMIT

Aizo thought to himself in a conflicted manner. “Tomorrow I will teach you to open the first and second gates. Then, we’ll see if you can enter the Soul Void. Once the gates are open, most would have to hone their wielding for at least a year to discover the essence of their power and how to use it. but this method will allow you to know your Human Essence directly.” *He hoped.*

Eos fell asleep satisfied with this answer.

Glenn brought back two more rabbits from the traps Aizo had taught him to set on the first day. He found Aizo and Eos both asleep.

The next morning Eos stood shirtless at the center of the cave of pillars. Aizo circled around him, assessing something. He paused on his third time around the lean, striated body and tapped two fingers against the boy’s vertebrae near the base of his neck.

“Severing your soul from your body is dangerous to your existence. Your soul knows this and has created gates to block you from tapping into this power before you are ready. To perform Severance or any partial form of it, like you are going to, you must be in perfect balance in that moment. Not everyone has this balance and those who don’t have forced their way to the technique. Their potential is limited and in extreme situations, it can destroy the mind or permanently detach the soul.”

Aizo continued tapping down Eos’ spine.

Glenn watched orange, flittering energy emerge from the teacher’s fingertips, but Eos didn’t notice. He just felt the strong *thk thk thk* against each segment of his spine.

“Soul Energy flows through you like blood through your veins. It circulates inside you, but the outside world can create distractions and limit the flow. Imagine it as small imperfections floating through these channels of Soul Energy. Your soul prevents these imperfections from traveling deeper towards your Soul Reservoir, where your essence

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exists. It blocks them with the seven gates. Close your eyes and visualize the channels within you and the gate that blocks your way.”

Eos let his mind be free of the surrounding world for the moment.

Aizo directed Eos, “Now focus on wielding, but instead of manifesting your Soul Energy, I want you to manipulate it internally. Focus on pulling it to your core. Here,” Eos felt Aizo’s fingers jab him hard above the belly button; a less than comfortable indicator. If his eyes were open, he would have seen the orange wisps run from fingertip to abdomen. “I was called a master of seals in Anodorn—back in Cor-land on Hyperborea. In truth, I was far from it. I picked up a bit of knowledge here or there; from a traveling guru when I was young and from Xaro Monte in exchange for helping protect his mines. I am no master like him, but there are less than a handful with any knowledge at all. I am going to place a seal on you.” He bellowed a humming sound as he worked. “It’ll attack your gates and walls like a virus, but the introduction of foreign energy is just strong enough that you can’t overcome it without your reservoir intervening. This will provide you an opening to enter the Soul Void and find your Human Essence within your reservoir. It’s dangerous. You will be brushing elbows with death, but it’s the only way. Do you accept that?” Eos hummed a soft confirmation and Aizo tapped one more time at the base Eos’ neck. “It is done then.”

Eos drew his energy within him. He cycled it through himself—it was a new feeling. There was a buzz of volatility in his belly as he pulled his Soul Energy to his core where Aizo had jabbed his finger.

Suddenly, Eos pulsed in and out of the cave. In and out of the physical world.

He continued to wield internally as he had been told.

His stomach spun. His body became weightless.

Black and white strobed behind his eyelids.

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It was the strangest feeling of calm combined with a sense that his body was about to be ripped open; like watching his own death and feeling nothing. And then...

Glenn saw waves of orange energy rise to the surface on Eos' back and form the seal. The pattern swirled into a round shape that spiked out in curves and bends. Glenn opened his mouth. Sound came out, but Eos couldn't see or hear him. He was in another realm of thought and before him was an infinite wall of taupe stone. It stretched as far and as high as his eye could see. Even as it punctured the clouds, he knew it went higher.

The only feature on this wall was immediately ahead. A circular stone gate, fifty meters in diameter, was tightly shut. Eos heard Aizo's words echo from the sky in his meditation.

"This is the first gate and it blocks all fear from entering."

There was a rumble in the sky as dark clouds gathered over the wall and blocked out most light. Eos struggled through the dimness to see the wall.

"Well, I'm sure you'll do fine. Good luck!"

Eos waited for more in disbelief, but the sagely Aizo of the past few days vanished in favor of the prisoner who had first met Eos.

Suddenly in the darkness there was a glow. Pale chains broke through the shadow on the wall. Eos recognized the Soul Chains well.

The chain was thrust at him!

Eos ducked and rolled to the right on his shoulder, narrowly avoiding the attack. By the time he looked up, there was another standing beside Ares. Both of their faces were obscured in his mind, but the spear in the second figure's hand gave away his identity. This was Clark's killer. The spear extended, and the chain whip unraveled at him. He dove to the ground again. The clouds rumbled in a hymn of doom and fear.

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“Eos,” Maxima’s voice echoed off the wall. Her voice was weak, “Get me out of here. Save me.”

Chains and spears stabbed at Eos in a rapid succession. It was everything he could do to keep moving and dodge them.

“Eos, please,” Maxima urged again.

Aizo watched Eos sweat profusely in the cave of pillars. He stood limply with his head fallen like a marionette held up by strings. He moaned and mumbled and fidgeted. Aizo quickly gave Eos guidance before he was pushed out of the state, “Don’t run from these fears. Don’t fight them. Accept that they exist, but don’t let them define you. Stand with your fears and walk through them. Or else they may walk through you!”

It was hard to accept the words spoken to him let alone follow them. Eos dodged and ducked and rolled until he was at his physical limit. The chains were catching up. Each near miss was closer than the last. Maxima’s cries rang in his mind. The spear and chains whirred by his ears as he maneuvered. Maxima’s cries were heard once more. He hesitated.

Eos felt fear taking over his mind.

What if he couldn’t save Maxima?

What if he wasn’t strong enough to beat Ares or the man with the spear?

What if he wasn’t even able to finish his training in time?

He couldn’t bear any of the thoughts and he let the fear paralyze him.

The spear was coming at him and he couldn’t move in time.

Eos focused on what Aizo had said. *Don’t fight them. Accept that they exist.* He knew he had to face all of these fears if he wanted to save Maxima from the two men he faced now...he would do it for her. He stood strong and stared down the two attacks, fueled by his desire. He

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didn't do so fearlessly or bravely. He was still terrified by the glowing Soul Chains. They could end his life, he knew. He stood with trust in Aizo and knowledge that the only path that didn't lead to death was moving past his fear.

*"I will."* Eos said through gritted teeth.

When the attacks were about to pierce him, Eos closed his eyes and walked into them.

He felt no pain.

With eyes open, he watched the chain and spear fall short.

Eos sneered angrily, "I was searching for you, Ares. I've always wanted to find my family—to find the people I belong with! Instead, I found you," Eos relaxed his jaw. "That's okay. My biggest fear was that I wouldn't like what I found. That it would be worse than my current situation. You've made me realize that my family is not just blood, but bond. You cut that bond a long time ago, but I've built new bonds...with better people. I will take back my family. I will save Maxima from you."

Eos walked forward.

A rush of air met his face.

The dark clouds parted, and all was silent again. No one was around.

Eos looked ahead at the second gate in front of him and then back. Behind him, the first gate had opened. The stone disk had parted in the middle and retracted back into the wall.

Aizo knew it was done. The sweat broke and Eos' mumbling and involuntary squirming stopped. "You have opened the first gate. Now you know that there is nothing to fear compared to sparring with me all day." Aizo hummed, amused. "Next up is the second gate. This one blocks your soul from the shame and regret of your mortal life. What

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do you hold yourself accountable for, so much so that you won't forgive? Perhaps it's that you lost to me so many times this week?"

Eos approached the second gate. It appeared exactly as the last one, but he noticed the walls were peeling. Here and there little flakes of the stone curled up like old wallpaper and weak, orange light came from underneath.

A deep black and red shade fell over the area, bathing it in a guilty dusk. Something fluttered at his feet. Eos bent down and picked up a small square of paper.

It was a photo...the same one that he had picked up outside of the air hangar. A bloody fingerprint was still imprinted on the corner where Major Clark had held it in his last moments of life.

Tears welled in Eos' eyes.

He would have done anything to save Major Clark, but he wasn't strong enough. It was his fault that Major Clark had tried to protect him. The Major's body lay before the gate in a serene position surrounded by a bed of flowers and a memorial headstone. He looked peaceful, but his family...his friends...Colonel Kane...no one would forgive him for this. They all appeared around the memorial. Each was sobbing and looking hatefully upon Eos.

The red shade darkened in hue.

"You must not worry what others think about you or let the negativity of the outside world distract you. First you must forgive yourself; the rest can be resolved in time." Aizo's guiding words echoed around Eos in a calming tone. Then his teacher's tone became spiritedly wild, "At least that's what worked for me, and look how I turned out!"

Eos hadn't known Aizo for long, but he knew how he turned out: mad as can be. A genius in every respect, but mad all the same. He decided to focus on the genius aspect and followed the advice.

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Eos washed the negativity of the situation from of his mind. This was between him and Major Clark. He couldn't have stopped Ares then... or the spear man. It was out of his control that Major Clark had ran in when he was supposed to stay back. It was beyond his ability to fight the Mitad back then and still out of reach, even now. What could he have done? Still, he struggled to let his guilt fade. That felt like forgetting Major Clark.

Eos walked up to the memorial.

"I'm sorry Major Clark. I... I miss you so much already."

Eos placed the photo in Major Clark's breast pocket.

The attendees of the memorial faded, and the gate opened around Major Clark. Eos could have sworn a proud smile was on the Major's face as he walked on.

"Now what do you see?" Aizo asked.

On the other side of the gate, Eos found an entirely different sight.

"There is a wall of black energy. It looks like the curse on my arm but moving more violently. It looks angry like..." A pike of black, tar like energy shot out from the wall at Eos. It approached him aggressively; a swarm of goo that wriggled like a sea of worms, but an elastic nature pulled it back into the mass from which it came.

"I see. That is the sealed-up curse. You must not touch it. Slowly let everything fade and bring yourself back to the desert."

Eos opened his eyes.

Aizo smiled and placed a hand on each of Eos' shoulders. He spoke excitedly. "You have purified the first two partitions in your Soul Reservoir. You progress at amazing speed. Do you feel the Soul Energy pulsing through the pathways of your body?"

Eos sensed the intense pulse throughout him. It was like every ray of stray light absorbed in his skin, an ecstasy shuddering gold waves inside him.

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“Let that feeling be all you focus on until you become that feeling. Until that feeling is you. You must fight like this...and break all limits you set upon yourself. Even if that means you pass out. When you exert yourself to that point, in theory your gates should open momentarily to remove the new seal I put on you. The quick flow of Soul Energy is an emergency response that prevents any serious damage to your exhausted body. In that instant...you will bypass the gates and enter the Soul Void.” *In theory, at least.*

His Soul Energy warmed him with a comfortable *thrum*. He liked the feeling these opened gates provided. The flowing energy continued to surge throughout him long after leaving the gates behind and even during his next round of fighting with Aizo.

This round lasted much longer than the previous fights.

A dense Soul Sphere knocked Aizo over, in the quickest blow Eos had ever dealt his teacher. He had a whole new source of energy to draw from. A new wealth of untapped potential was now opened. Aizo and Eos’ sparring became a much more closely contested match.

*Bwoom. Phwoosh.* Sand rained down on Eos after Aizo struck him with an explosive. He jumped to his feet and stepped over the terrain with his Soul Step. He quickly found himself holding another crimson weapon.

The sparring match continued for much longer than usual. They danced their violent brawl of clashing souls at a whole new pace. With time Eos’ realized that, even holding back as he was now, Aizo was still far too skilled to compete against. But they fought on. Aizo kept his level of combat skill to just within the realm that Eos could reach for.

Eos fought until every last drop of energy was gone. Even then he pushed forward...he refused to be held back by limitations. He fought

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on and on; a boy surrounded by insurmountable odds...one who wouldn't back down and persevered through sheer will.

The willpower only carried him for so long. Eventually it was too much to continue. The familiar burning of the curse greeted him and grew to be unbearable. Eos blocked out the pain the best he could, until he threw the final Soul Sphere and went unconscious.

Dark. Withdrawn inside himself. Removed from conscious thought. Leaving the burning sensations of the physical world. Only the sound of hollow pinging echoes of his pulse.

This time, he didn't dream of Hyperborea nor have foggy memories rush back to him in glimpses of his vaguely remembered past. His conscious was sucked away to a much different place. The extreme stresses had caused the gates to open for an instant like a pressure release valve. He was torn away from his body and the outside world as he plunged into the Soul Void.

He found himself standing at the foot of the infinite sandstorm. It was raging before him like a fantastical painting—too massive, too much uncontainable power, and too much an expression of nature's untamable rage to be real. Sand spit in his face and thunder reverberated through his body to remind him—it was very real. At least as real as he was when inside of the Soul Void. Through tumultuous fits of wind and dust, a glow penetrated through the density of the storm. The purples and blues of lightning illuminating dust clouds were like dull imitations of light compared to it—a beacon from the center of the storm. Briefly the currents of the storm would part just enough to glimpse a far-off object that hovered off the ground.

Eos knew this was the Soul Void. He could feel the floating object in the center calling to him in a similar way as Mellizo Glyph had. However, this call was more warming, more wholesome.

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He stepped forward carefully into the storm, shutting his eye to a barely open squint and walking for what must have been an hour through the overwhelming fits of wind. He was drawn to the center of the Soul Void, but no matter how many steps he took—he got no closer. It was a monotony of sinking footsteps in the sand as he was blown from side to side by the storm’s rage.

Eos covered his face with his hands as he put his head down and trudged forward.

In the desert, Aizo carried Eos back to the cave and set him down next to Glenn.

“It’s dangerous for him to be like this,” Glenn said. “Only Maxima has been able to bring him back recently.”

Aizo explained to Glenn, “Only he can help himself now. He’ll have to find his Human Essence if he wants to live. I know it is hard for you to understand. This is an extreme method, but the occasion calls for such measures. He’s a Bellator. The son of Talus and Terava. He can handle this, so please don’t worry.”

Glenn rolled his eyes, “You tell me that there is a chance of Eos’ dying and then ask me not to worry.” He waved a dismissing hand at Aizo.

“I know I’m pushing him, but—”

Glenn gave a deadly glance, “I raised that boy. He better come out alive.”

Aizo stared at the dying campfire with Glenn. “I know it’s hard to accept these things—”

“Don’t think I can’t understand because I’m not like you wielders. I understand. Eos will do anything to save Maxima; even if it means risking his own life. That’s the kind of person he is. He puts the one’s he loves before himself. I...I just couldn’t stand to lose him.”

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Aizo consoled the deeply troubled man, “I’ve been meaning to thank you, Glenn. You did what I couldn’t and watched over Eos and Maxima while I was gone. You raised them like Talus had wanted me too and for that I can’t ever show my full gratitude.”

“Of course, what else could I have done with two children in my care? I had to raise them.” Glenn let a handful of sand sift through his fingers and pretended to focus on it. “As I think back on everything, I can’t help but feel that my role in all of this is becoming irrelevant. I helped them grow up to this point, but now what? I can’t do anything more. I feel so useless. What place do I have among all of you, and what will I do once they go back to Hyperborea?”

Aizo understood. “Your role as a non-wielder in this strange game must be a hard thing to grasp, but raising them was your most important accomplishment. You brought them up to be everything their father had hoped for. I want to give you something after the events in three days. I want you to hold on to something for me while Eos and Maxima are in Hyperborea.”

Glenn grunted his acceptance and poked the smoldering cinders of the camp fire with a stick. He was lost in thought. He was lost in memory of raising the little super powered boy and girl that had fallen into his initially reluctant care. He looked at that boy now...how he’d grown.

His body lay perfectly still, but his face was paler than usual and the sealed curse on his arm was moving on its own. Glenn put a hand on Eos’ forehead.

“He’s so warm.”

Aizo wasn’t surprised, “Where he is now, we can’t begin to understand it. The conditions there must be harsh. It’s the soul’s own protection mechanism. It wouldn’t be like this if he had opened all the

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gates and spent the proper years to do so. He won't have long. Let's just hope he returns to us soon."

Eos' feet sunk with every step until his ankle twisted and a gust of wind brought him down in a hard fall. He was still no closer to the center and running was impossible on the sand. He was getting frustrated. Why wasn't he getting closer to his goal? He was so close to what he needed, but it refused to let him near.

He continued forward resiliently and plodded onward.

Each step was a test of footing. His impatience got the better of him and he fell once more. He noticed the dunes around him were sifting into the ground as he rose the second time.

This was just like Aizo's mine field. He would just Soul Step over the terrain. Eos lifted his foot as he summoned a platform beneath him. Nothing came; he couldn't wield here. His foot fell through the space where it should have landed and threw him off balance. This third fall assured him that he was making no progress.

The desert groaned threateningly. Dunes began moving like hourglasses, but Eos couldn't tell through the dusty air why the dunes were shifting.

Why couldn't he wield in the Soul Void?

He felt the flow of Soul Energy all around him. He tried to summon it into his hand, but nothing happened. The red light wouldn't manifest itself. Why?

A blinding light streaked the ridges of dunes and crests of the dust clouds in a golden red. The source was a floating emblem at the center of the storm. The source of his power was there. He could sense it. If he couldn't manifest his Soul Energy here and the beacon of light was reacting in the emblem over there... *could he, perhaps, wield the emblem?*

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He concentrated on the flow of the Soul Energy around him and fed it into the emblem at the heart of the infinite storm. It glowed with life and Eos called it to his hand.

The distance began closing! He was standing still and yet the layers of sand were shrinking before him. As he approached, he realized what the floating emblem was; a three-dimensional version of the symbol that Aizo had drawn. It was same as the one on the Mellizo Glyphs. It was the Human Essence, and it was coming nearer. The triangle's center, the Soul Reservoir, was the source of the golden red light.

It was within reach now. It rotated freely in the air and thrummed with satisfaction at being close to Eos. He put a hand out to hold it, but a sweeping form blocked his path.

A man in a white mask stood between him and the essence.

"You can't get that close with me sealed up like this. You must free me to wield your full power ...you must break the seal on your arm." The strong and persuasive voice came from behind the mask. It was a nearly blank canvas; a slightly contoured oval with one wide triangular stroke across the left side of the face that covered the cheek, mouth, and nose in a blood like paint. Two smaller strokes ran alongside the main one.

"Who are you?" Eos asked.

The masked man replied, "If you don't know then you don't belong here. This place is unstable in your current state. *Leave.*"

The sand began sifting through the ground under his feet. The whole surface of the desert creaked and suttered in a deafening groan that rang off the dunes. The noise was maddening, like the world was about to be ruptured. It made Eos' eardrums ache.

Amethyst eyes watched him from behind the mask as Eos tried to move away from the holes of sinking sand, but they were becoming too numerous to avoid.

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Suddenly, the floor gave out and the world began to crumble. The void was collapsing.

Eos fell through the desert, floor but he was not caught by anything below like he had expected. Below the thin floor of sand...was nothing; a blank void of free fall that Eos tumbled through alongside sharp shards of glass.

It was an infinite nothingness.

He let out a primal scream for fear of his life.

He kept falling with the sand and glass, and nothing was going to catch him. The light of his essence was slipping farther away.

Eos looked to his left and noticed the masked man walking patiently alongside his free fall. His hands were casually in the pockets of his black cloak *Who was he?* It couldn't be that this man was his...his soul? It was a moment before Eos realized that the masked man was walking parallel with the gravity that was dragging Eos down. Somehow his slow methodic walk was keeping up with Eos body jolting velocity.

"You'll die like this," the man said to Eos. "When you hit the bottom."

Eos was even more frightened by the words than his current fall.

"What bottom?"

"It's coming closer."

"What bottom?"

"You're almost there."

"*What bottom?*" Eos demanded with a scream as he fell to an impending fate.

"You aren't worthy to wield my power."

The man stopped walking as Eos fell away from him. Far in the distance he saw his Human Essence fading. Its light was dying. He was

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going to hit the bottom; whatever that meant. He was going to die. Aizo had said it. The masked man had said it.

He couldn't die here. He needed to save Maxima.

He couldn't die here.

He wouldn't give up!

Eos desperately summoned his Human Essence again like he had in the storm. The emblem glowed with a renewed life, but it was so far away now. He didn't lose hope and commanded the energy that filled the Soul Void...the energy that was within him. The glow was brighter than ever and gleamed a golden red off of every mirror like piece of glass that fell around him in a spectacular array.

Eos drew upon the Soul Void until his seal crawled up his arm and his body burned, but he didn't stop. He wouldn't let himself hit the bottom!

The emblem's light spread until a sonic boom filled the void along with a burst so bright that Eos was blinded. The bottom was close now.

Eos could sense the end about to meet him.

When he opened his eyes, the light had faded, but there was something new flying at him.

A noble bird, made entirely of his Soul Energy, was gliding down in a blur of red. It flew furiously down at Eos. He had called for it.

Though he couldn't see it, the bottom was just below him. Shards of glass that had fallen before him were *clinking* against the floor of the Soul Void. He was going to meet the same fate in a matter of seconds.

The falcon like bird overtook him in the final seconds of the fall and passed by with a smooth body of red, gold tipped wings, a ferocious beak, and dignified talons. Eos wasn't sure why he had expected something from the bird he had summoned. Somehow, he

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had hoped for it to save him, but it had passed him by. Now he would splatter on the floor of the void.

No.

He would have to do more than hope to save Maxima and himself.

Eos strained and summoned the falcon back; no, he *wielded* he wielded it back.

It swept up from its nose dive and caught Eos in its talons of fiery Soul Energy. Eos' stomach nearly left his body as he was jerked up by the bird, but he was saved. He was alive because he had wielded his soul and advanced past the confines that once held him back.

They charged up at the masked man together.

The falcon beat its wings with powerful grace, leaving streaks of gold and red behind.

As they approached, the same black wall that had formed in front of the third gate, also took hold here. The tendrils of the sealed curse entangled themselves into a wall of impenetrable black and wriggled violently. Just before it blocked out the masked man, he said his parting words.

He lifted his mask up. As he removed it, Eos saw a pleased smile.

The black mass hid him from view just as the mask came off. "This is as far as you go while I'm sealed. Next time we meet I hope you free me so we can fight together."

Eos and the falcon slammed into the wall of the seal.

Eos was back in the cave, awake and surrounded by Aizo and Glenn.

"You cut it close, Eos. We weren't sure you were going to make it." Glenn said.

Eos looked around slowly; glad to be sitting in the sand.

"I wasn't sure either."

"You learned it, haven't you?" Aizo asked. "It did work?"

## BREAK THE LIMIT

Eos gleamed ambitiously but was still slightly shocked from the experience.

“Yeah, I...think so. I saw my essence like you said I would.”

Aizo slumped back in relief, and Glenn jumped on Eos in a hug.

“I thought I was going to lose you, Eos.”

Eos hugged him back. “I’m fine now, Glenn.”

“That you are,” Aizo said, “Tomorrow we’ll train with your technique and construct a plan. Then we’ll head north to the meeting place where the Mitad will trade with General Braxton.”

“Aizo,” Eos needed to tell him about what happened in the Soul Void. “When I was in there, I was falling. I tried to wield, and a bird made of my Soul Energy saved me and then carried me out. There was a man there too. He was blocking my way.” Eos spewed out the overwhelming experience in a jumble that sounded even crazier than it was—if that was possible.

Glenn snickered, “Maybe Aizo didn’t cook the rabbit enough last night.”

“A bird you say? Then you must have inherited the essence of you father. You see Talus’ essence is the fastest bird of prey on Hyperborea, the revered elsu. As for the man, that troubles me.” Aizo rattled the tips of his fingers together.

“It’s okay, Aizo, I think he was my soul.” Eos laid back and closed his eyes.

“Still, we need to monitor your seal carefully. Oh, and Eos...”

“What, Aizo?” Eos was almost asleep and half expected to hear that there was another pain staking step left in his training.

“You were early. You learned partial Severance in four days.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



### THE GATHERING II: NEW WORLD

**A**n arctic wind blew over the Thelon River. The gust would have skated over the frozen landscape for miles without much more than an occasional glacial cliff face to break it. Today there was a convoy of trucks, ten in all, which the wind had to surmount.

Colonel Kane and General Braxton felt the temperature right down in the marrow of their bones. So, did Captain Draven, Captain McLane, Major Seth Skye, and their men—who stood on each side of the trucks along with an additional support squad.

“Why here of all places,” Braxton shivered and clattered his teeth while trying to maintain a dignified pose, “It’s too early in the year for snow on the ground.” He complained bitterly as he stood beside Axel Kane on a fine white powdery. Their breaths clouded before their faces in anticipation. The world was on display for them. They could see the

## THE GATHERING II: NEW WORLD

horizon in all directions of the white kissed tundra and smooth surface of the frozen Baker Lake. A few miniature mountain clusters were all that disturbed the unbroken expanse.

General Braxton looked over at Colonel Kane, who stood unperturbed by the climate in his black coat. The calm stance unnerved him. “We’re here now, Colonel. Before the Hyperboreans arrive, do you mind telling me why you joined this mission despite the fact that I didn’t request your personal assistance?”

Colonel Kane’s green eyes cut holes in the white canvas around him, “If all of my men are on the same mission, I make sure I’m there to lead them.”

“You’ve already said that. Cut the antics.” Braxton snapped.

“I’m here to lay my life on the line for the North American Sector, sir. I’m here for my home... and to see if you are worthy of that sacrifice.”

General Braxton didn’t like that response one bit. “You’ve always been a bold one, Colonel.”

“I have to make sure you aren’t compromising North American security in the arctic; all alone with ten truckloads of munitions and an otherworldly artifact.”

General Braxton let out his low rumbling growl, “Such a level of disobedience and audacity...you realize what it means for your career? I needed the best squads we had and so you were allowed up here because of their loyalty to you, but after this you’ll be court marshalled—”

“I know. The price is something I’ve already reconciled with.”

General Braxton wiped some frost from his mustache and was quiet for a while. “As hard as you might find it to believe, I can respect that, Colonel. You won’t like what you’re about to see, I can promise you that, but I have no choices left. They have me cornered.”

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Colonel Kane let out an amused hum and watched the snow drift by at his feet.

A small group of people came into view. Ares led two figures with Mitad cloaks over their coats and seven other men. All were bundled in layers. The Mitad member to Ares' left carried a spear with edges like folded bat wings. Bellia was on his right and she led Maxima, keeping her upright.

Braxton watched the young man, who had pinned him into this situation, with menace. Ares glared across the distance with enough arrogance to send Braxton into a fit. The Mitad were congregated across from the North American Sector soldiers. No one made the first move.

General Braxton wouldn't give Ares the pleasure of voluntarily handing over ammunition and the Mellizo Glyph without even being asked.

Ares was still waiting for something.

The wind moaned sharply across the land and the stare down continued.

Captain Draven held a cigarette between jittery fingers and had his other hand on his slung rifle. The tense situation had him on edge. Sergeant Malin seemed much less so.

"Well ain't this cute. It's like an old western standoff," Malin said to the squad members who were close enough to hear him. "Real charming and manly and all, but I'm freezing my bullets off! I'd appreciate it if someone would draw so I can get to shootin' the nice people trying to intimidate us."

Draven emptied his lungs of smoke, "Shut up, Malin. Those *nice people* have abilities even stronger than Eos had. So, let's not shoot anyone if we can help it."

## THE GATHERING II: NEW WORLD

Malin smirked, “Then we just need to should all quick like so they don’t have time to—”

“Sereant, that’s enough!” Draven growled.

Malin ignored Captain Draven but kept reluctantly quiet. The rest of Squad Three was lined along the trucks, except for First Lieutenant Skye who was missing from the congregation. Dagon McLane’s bright red hair poked noticeably out of his fur hood. His nine men were on the other side. Major Skye’s unit finished up the wall of protection ahead of Squad Three.

A set of high cheek bones and blonde hair caught General Braxton’s attention.

“Fleischer!” He screamed in surprise, “I should have known.” His voice carried through the openness and drew Kurt Fleischer from the Mitad cluster.

He stepped forward, “In the flesh, General. Don’t be hard on yourself. The opportunity presented itself a week ago. It was a split decision, but I won’t be working for you ever again. Instead, I’ll just take everything you brought with you today and be on my way.” He snickered tauntingly inside his black parka. This was the first time that General Braxton had ever seen him wear a color besides white in all the years they had worked together.

Ares walked closer to Braxton, bringing Maxima along. “As much as I’d like to make the trade and move on, we’re still waiting on one party to show.”

Braxton was confused, “We’re still waiting on someone?”

His energy source stole his attention as she was jerked in front of Ares, “Maxima, what have they done to you?” Braxton bellowed the question.

“Wha...what’s going on?” She shivered and spoke in a disoriented voice.

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Ares explained, “She’s a little sleepy. We had to sedate her as a precaution, but it’s wearing off now. You have a dangerous girl on your hands, General.”

“Well I don’t care who you’re expecting,” Braxton said. “It doesn’t concern me. Let’s make the trade and get out of this hell hole.”

Ares countered, “It *does* concern you. You both have something I want and you both want Maxima.”

Braxton realized who they were still waiting on. “Eos.” He spat.

Colonel Kane was shocked. Eos was coming here?

“Yes,” Ares said, “Eos is coming to retrieve his sister. In the meantime, my men will drive the trucks of ammo to a location we control. That is still something you owe us from the last deal.” He waved his men to the trucks and they were given the keys. “As for Maxima, I’ll set her free once you hand over the Mellizo Glyph and Eos does the same.”

Colonel Kane’s mind was churning through thoughts rapidly. Ammunition wasn’t a huge risk; he could let that go, but the artifact they called the Mellizo Glyph...that might be to be too valuable to let fall into the Mitad’s hands. Now Eos’ sister was another factor. He hadn’t known she was part of this, but now that he did, it changed everything.

The trucks were driven off, a few at a time, until the three squads had nothing left to protect except the General and their Colonel. Then the silent standoff resumed much to Malin’s dismay.

“Will someone please start shooting,” Malin muttered.

Draven realized that the big brute was just as nervous as the rest of them. He just had a different coping mechanism.

Maxima’s sedatives had almost worn off completely, and she was realizing who she was with. Ares took his hand off her. She could stand on her own now.

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“Here they come,” Ares announced as he felt the presence of wielders arriving.

Everyone looked around, but there was no sign of newcomers.

A minute later they appeared in the distance. Eos and Aizo, who carried Glenn on his back, were Soul Stepping swiftly towards the trade point. They wore heavy coats that Aizo had stashed from previous escape attempts in preparation for a journey this far north.

Two minutes later, the third party arrived at the standoff.

They took in the situation.

“Eos!” Maxima called to her brother.

“Give her back, Ares!” Eos screamed across the short distance between the North Americans and the Mitad. He was surprised to see Colonel Kane and the rest of Squad Three there. The Colonel gave him a nod that communicated to say nothing.

Ares presented the outcomes, “There are a number of ways this plays out. The easiest is that, Eos, you at least join the Mitad temporarily and we leave for Hyperborea.”

“You know that will never happen.” Eos seethed in anger at his sister’s kidnapper.

Maxima was gradually regaining conscious. “Eos, isn’t that what you’ve always wanted...to go home?” She asked softly. It contradicted everything her intuition told her, but the offer to go to Hyperborea wouldn’t likely come around again. Perhaps the sedatives were influencing her words.

“Maxima, they’re holding you hostage! How could you say that?”

Ares sighed, “Such a dramatization. We just have... different goals.”

Maxima shuddered at her options and the reality of abuse she had received from her half-brother, Ares, and General Braxton. “Do you really want to go back to Braxton and miss our chance?” She decided

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

the Mitad were the lesser evil if they led to Hyperborea. A decade's worth of servitude under Braxton overshadowed Ares' treatment of her. Her half-brother *had* saved her from the generator.

"Ares," Braxton screamed, "Don't think for a second you're taking them as well."

"Everyone, *shut up!* I will go home on my terms. Maxima, with the Mellizo Glyph we can go to Hyperborea with Aizo. We can be free." Eos wondered if he should reveal the heartbreaking news to her. He saw no other way to convince her of the impossibility of leaving with the Mitad. "Not with them though. They...they *killed* Major Clark. We can't accept them after what they've done."

"What? They killed him?" Her face scrunched into a pained contortion. "Why would they..." She tried to understand. Major Clark had treated her with more kindness than anyone she had ever met. She regretted the suggestion of leaving in the hands of such murders. Regret turned to anger. If her hands weren't tied by Tessio's metal bar she would have attacked right there. She grimaced and tried to force her hands out of the make shift cuffs. It was no use; the cold metal only rubbed her wrists through the jacket.

Ares threw his head back, exasperated. "Well it appears the easy way is off the table. Eos, General Braxton, you will each meet me in the middle of our two groups and hand over your respective Mellizo Glyph. I will let the two of you fight for Maxima."

Eos tightened his grip on the Mellizo Glyph until his knuckles turned white. Braxton picked up a miniature case that lay by his feet.

Captain Draven threw down his cigarette. He murmured to his men in a discreet hush, "Here we go. Remember, our priority is to protect General Braxton and, if possible, retrieve that case." He flipped his rifle's safety off.

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“Bellia,” Ares called the blonde girl over. She held Maxima in place while Tessio removed the bar that wound around her wrists with deity like control over the metal. Her hands were free, but she was surrounded by Mitad members.

Eos and Braxton walked side by side towards Ares, each carrying a glyph.

Aizo and Glenn watched from the distance.

Colonel Kane gritted his teeth. So, these were the ones responsible for the death of his friend. He wanted vengeance. The monster inside of him craved to come out and make the Mitad pay. He stifled the beast for a moment, though it ate at him and clawed on the confines of his being.

Braxton and Eos were in front of Ares. Colonel Kane couldn't let both of the powerful artifacts be handed over, but he couldn't forgive himself if something happened to Eos' sister.

General Braxton handed the case to Ares. He opened it and examined the ebony glyph with white runes carved in it. The shape was the same, but symbol on this one was different. Eos saw it as Ares removed it from the case. It twisted in the wind from its chain. On one side was a carving of a leaf. Each side of the leaf produced a spine, just like the symbol on the other glyph, and formed a ridged circle. The Human Essence was on the other side.

Ares held out his hand to Eos. “You can stay here stuck on Earth forever or you can join us. The choice is yours, but either way, I will have the Mellizo Glyph.”

For the first time, Eos was tempted. He was about to hand over his only path to Hyperborea. He was about to strand himself on Earth. Despite what the Mitad were, perhaps he could find it in him to work together for the sake of going home. Maxima had suggested it as well after all.

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The glyph in his hand would be hard to part with.

Why not join the Mitad long enough to get to Hyperborea?

He could compromise his morals for a better outcome...couldn't he? If for no other reason than for Maxima's sake.

Eos looked at his traumatized sister and rage took hold of him. No—Ares had abducted Maxima. He and the man with spear were the reason Major Clark was gone, and most of all—they would never have been stranded on Earth if Ares hadn't betrayed their father, Talus, and aided a revolt on Hyperborea! He had always yearned to find family. What he got...was Ares. He hadn't been able to choose his blood relation, but he wouldn't let it destroy his connection to his Hyperborean heritage any longer.

The accumulation of sickening disgust for Ares manifested in Eos as a singularity. He remembered what Aizo had told him. They couldn't get home without the glyph. They would be trapped on Earth forever, unable to return to the home he had spent his whole life dreaming of.

His emotions gathered. Last time he faced Ares, he was weaker. Last time he hadn't had a plan.

This time...this time was different.

The buildup of his Soul Energy exploded into a dense, red Soul Sphere in his right hand which he thrust upon Ares!

*Bwoom!* He painted the snow red in his soul's light.

Ares was knocked off his feet and sent rolling across the fine powder on the ground. Bellia Soul Stepped back with Maxima. Tessio strutted forward in pointed leather boots that rose up to his knee and with his spear raised. For the first time Eos saw the man. The arctic air chapped the cheekbones of his gaunt face. His skin looked almost wooden as if it had been carved. He had sharp long features and wavy dirty brown hair like straw that had flakes of snow caught throughout.

Ares stood, furious.

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Fleischer and the lower ranking wielders readied their Soul Spheres anxiously.

The North American soldiers pointed their rifles.

“You’ll pay for everything you’ve done, Ares!” Eos yelled. “Maxima and I are going home to Hyperborea and you won’t stop me. You’ve taken everything from me, but not this!” He readied another Soul Sphere.

Ares howled with disdain, “*I took from you?* Well that certainly has been my goal, but you haven’t suffered my pain yet. It was *you* who took from *me!* My childhood was lived in your shadow; you, an infant who couldn’t even wield. I was treated like a monster, kept locked away like a prisoner!” Ares threw the black Mellizo Glyph to the man with the spear, “Tessio, hold this for me. My brother wants to fight...and it’s been long overdue.”

Ares ordered the rest of his men, “Aizo will likely intervene. Tessio, stop him with the Mellizo Glyph. The rest of you, protect Bellia and Maxima. If those soldiers try to step in—kill them!”

Ares lit a pale light beneath his feet and sprung on Eos!

He didn’t summon his Soul Chains yet. First, he would do damage with his bare hands. When he was close enough to goad Eos into throwing his sphere, Ares created a platform perpendicular with the ground.

Eos threw it viciously, but Ares pushed off the grayish energy and dodged to the side. Snow rained down from the explosion. Ares landed next to Eos and repaid the punch to the nose that he had received at the hangar.

Tessio slung his spear over his shoulder and made his way to Aizo.

Aizo sent Glenn into the soldier’s care.

Colonel Kane ordered a few men around General Braxton and Glenn. “The rest will provide support for the other man Eos brought

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with him.” He said. They raised their rifles, but no sooner than they had lifted them, Ares’ minions stood in their way.

Eos wiped the bloody stream from his nose.

Ares laughed, “So you learned to make a half decent Soul Sphere. You really think that’s enough to compete with me?” He threw another punch.

Eos remembered his hand to hand combat lessons with Malin. Through the cold and stinging of his face, he forced himself to overcome his instincts to dodge backward. He slid down the side of Ares’ punch and dealt one in return to his rib cage.

“Aggh,” Ares cried. It wasn’t pain. It was frustration. He wasn’t one for being outdone and summoned his Soul Chains into a coil around his arm. “Now you’ll see the clear difference between us, brother.”

Eos stuck to the plan. He had to take advantage of Ares one weakness: his arrogance. He had to let Ares be sure of his advantage.

Ares flicked his wrist and sent the whip at Eos!

Tessio shrugged his spear off his shoulder and sank into his fighting stance.

“This won’t go well for you.” Aizo warned.

Tessio pointed his winged spear at Aizo, “Don’t move.”

Aizo put his head down and scooped up a handful of snow. He tossed it from hand to hand. “Tessio, I believe that’s your name. Isn’t the snow amazing?”

Tessio didn’t respond to the crazy man admiring the snow. Had Ares exaggerated this senile man’s power?

“It’s so clean and it blankets everything in purity. It washes the world... in preparation for it to be dyed with blood. Once the blood spills, nothing can go back to the way it was before.” Aizo said to himself; memories of the revolution on Cor Land swam in his mind.

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Suddenly, his hand glowed orange and the wind scattered the snow in his hand all around Tessio.

Colonel Kane and his men fired into the crowd of Soul Wielders. A few were hit, but they were circling fast with Soul Spheres in hand. Explosive lights came at them! They dodged the best they could and attempted to fight back, but they were being drawn apart. Their small numbers were being taken advantage of by the Mitad wielders.

Malin and Draven were back to back, firing away at the enemy in short bursts.

“Gotcha sucker,” Malin whispered and pulled the trigger, downing one of them.

Eos dove to the ground and rolled back up. Ares drew back his whip and prepared to strike again, but Eos was ready. He threw a sphere at Ares!

The Soul Chains faded momentarily as Ares used Solido to shield himself in a misty glass of Soul Energy. The explosion burst all around him but passed by like water droplets rolling off a windshield. He smirked arrogantly, “That was only going to work once. We are on entirely different levels, Eos.” He brought back his Soul Chains. “Hand over the Mellizo Glyph and I’ll allow you to live.”

“Never,” Eos said.

Ares lashed out again, clipping Eos’ shoulder before he could move out of the way. He would have to endure a bit longer.

Tessio wasn’t sure what had just happened, but he felt Aizo’s Soul Energy all around him. No point in taking risks. He would just kill the man here and now. He charged his spear with Soul Energy. It glowed a glacial blue before extending towards the man with bushy side burns.

It came at him with so much speed that it couldn’t possibly be followed by the human eye. Tessio knew that no one could react fast enough to dodge such a blow.

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In the moment before his spear was about to pierce its target, he saw that Aizo's eyes were closed.

Aizo spun on one planted foot and narrowly evaded the spear. As he completed his rotation, he ducked under the ten-foot-long pole that had missed him. He stood on the other side of it now with his eyes open. "I never rely on my eyes in battle, they aren't efficient and often lie to me," he smiled at Tessio peacefully. He had sensed the Soul Energy coming at him instead of using visual cues to perceive the coming attack. He would have to progress slowly in this battle. If he went all out on Tessio, he could be left useless against another wielder. Besides that, he was sure to engage the Mitad again in the future. It was better to keep his full skill set hidden.

Tessio was stunned. Aizo was everything Ares had warned him. He was dealing with a master here. He was...maybe...even out of his league. The pole of his spear retracted in a blue glow and returned to him. He shifted his stance and—*Bwam!* He landed on Aizo's snow mine.

Colonel Kane was losing control. "Squad One, fall back into formation on Captain McLane," he ordered. "Squad Three try and keep some of them pinned down! Squad Two on me. Everyone, focus your fire around them and keep them still."

Squad One was a couple men down, but by all accounts, they were doing alright. Rifle shots blasted the snow on each side of a couple members of the Mitad. They moved in a limited area with Soul Spheres poised for attack.

"Hold your positions," Colonel Kane screamed as the attacks were wound back.

"Colonel they're going to hit us!" A member of Squad One cried.

"You heard him, hold position!" McLane reinforced.

Numerous Soul Spheres were about to be unleashed.

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*Crack!* A .338 caliber cartridge echoed through the tundra as the large projectile searched for its target. It found it in a Mitad member, who collapsed to the ground.

Captain Draven eyed Kane, “Good to have eyes in the Skye, Colonel.”

Malin grumbled, “Well at least she’s good for something.”

*Crack! Crack!* Two more were picked off.

Suddenly they were retreating. The Mitad wielders were falling back!

*Bwoom!* The unmistakable sound of a Soul Sphere colliding with a body was heard behind them. Someone had gotten around their formation. Colonel Kane whipped his head back.

The two members who had been guarding General Braxton and Glenn were dead on the frozen ground. Kurt Fleischer held a lime green Soul Sphere in his hand. He raised it over General Braxton.

Glenn watched as it was brought down on the man.

Dr. Fleischer was going to get his kill. He had told himself he would kill Braxton and now was his chance! He never let go of the orb as he plunged it into General Braxton’s abdomen.

General Braxton gasped a pained breath as his eyes bulged. He fought for enough control to breath out, “I know...what’s below...”

Dr. Fleischer only gave a perplexed look. With a hand soaked in the red of General Braxton’s blood, he turned to Glenn and began creating another Soul Sphere. A smile was already spread from ear to ear on his pale face, but it grew even wider and curled up towards his glasses as he watched his next victim without blinking. “Everyone on my list has gathered together for me. In just a moment you’ll join General Braxton.” A stream of blood ran into the sleeve of his coat as a lime light grew between his fingers. “That little trick at the lab—”

*Crunch.* Glenn rammed his fist into Dr. Fleischer’s face.

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The blonde man folded over at the blow with a new stream of blood dripping into his coat; this time from his nose. His work on the Soul Sphere was lost.

“You expect me to just stand there in fear of your powers? That’s hardly a new trick to me.” Glenn scoffed. He hopped forward onto one leg and swung the other.

Dr. Fleischer put out a hand, but Glenn snapped out a powerful kick that went right past the feeble defense and dug into his attacker’s groin. He jeered at the stumbling man, “Add that to the lump on your head from last time, you freak!”

Tessio stood from his third tripped mine. His legs were bleeding and he was sure the cold was numbing the worst of the damage. So Aizo had planted some kind of soul-explosive in the ground around him. He was a stationary target, no, he could Soul Step over the mines easily. He stood on his platforms of light blue Soul Energy and dodged a handful of infused snow that was sent at him. He brought his spear around at Aizo.

Aizo didn’t manage to dodge this one, but Tessio’s momentum made it so the wings of the spear just grazed Aizo’s calf. The blood warmed his freezing leg. He closed his eyes and focused. This was a dangerous opponent. He would love to know how the trick with the spear worked. Clearly, he was implanting his Soul Energy in the spear as Aizo implanted his in the surroundings, but how did it extend like that?

He closed his eyes and spun around with sure footing, weaving and ducking a rapid flurry of stabs from a constantly growing and shrinking spear. This wasn’t good. Tessio was too dangerous to hold back against.

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Tessio drew on the supplement to speed up his spear into an automatic lashing of death. The Mellizo Glyph allowed him to attack many more times than he typically could.

Aizo fell to the ground with both hands in the maddeningly cold snow.

The other members of the Mitad had fallen back fearfully to Bellia.

Colonel Kane and Squad Three rushed at Fleischer, but it was far too late. General Braxton lay on the ground. A ring of rust colored fluid was spreading through the snow beneath him. Malin shot at Fleischer. Draven and Kane did the same. One bullet struck him in the hand, but he was already on the move with lime green planes under his feet, propelling him as he had been taught.

Fleischer had done it! He killed that wretched man.

General Braxton would soon be dead, but he had a new target to direct his blood lust at. Eos' friend had bested him twice now. There was no time to finish this quarrel. He had too much power to gain from the Mitad to die on this frozen plain. He'd let the blows landed on him fester in his mind until they met again.

Dr. Fleischer fell back with Bellia.

Shots followed him, but Bellia opened a violet gate in front of them. It swallowed the bullets into another world and shielded them from harm. However, her focus broke from Maxima. The sedatives had worn off fully and were further washed away by adrenaline. She was able to control her body again.

Maxima looked to Bellia, who she had initially trusted, "You don't have to be controlled by them."

"You have no idea what you're talking about, Maxima."

Maxima took a step back.

Bellia opened a portal at Maxima's back. "Don't think about it."

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Maxima wielded two Soul Spheres, “It’s a shame. We could have been friends.”

“You won’t touch me with those,” Bellia’s portal appeared between the two of them and then back behind Maxima with a mere side thought, “But you might catch a stray bullet without the protection of my portal. If you try to run again though...I’ll send you through it. You could come out anywhere: under the ocean, above mountains—maybe even inside a mountain. So, sit tight.”

Eos held the wound on his arm.

Ares toyed with him, “Now that you accept my superiority...you can give me the Mellizo Glyph.” Ares spun his whip casually at his side. “Saida wants you alive, but I might have to defy orders just this once.” He smirked.

Ares was off guard now. This was the moment Aizo had told him would come. He was too busy gloating over his victory to expect anything more. Eos calmed his mind of the outside world and opened his first two gates.

The energy surged through him.

This was it.

“Sever,” Eos whispered to himself.

“What did you say?” Ares asked.

Crimson Soul Energy blared from both of Eos’ hands as he severed his soul.

Ten miniature Soul Elsu, the bird that saved Eos in the Soul Void, surrounded him. They beat their wings steadily and encircled the son of Talus Bellator. The one Soul Elsu he could normally manage was multiplied to ten with help of the Mellizo Glyph.

Ares was without words, “How...How did you?”

Eos raised an open hand with his fingers outstretched at Ares. He focused on the feeling of Ares soul and the aura it emitted. He

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commanded his own soul and the birds locked out their wings and flew at Ares in streaks of gold and red.

His eyes were wide. Ares fled from the attack, but the attack followed. He sprinted with Soul Step, but even then, the elsu were closing in.

They chased him at lighting speed. He couldn't out run them. Their beaks were pointed at their target and no matter which way he turned, they followed. They chased, homing missiles locked on to the signature of his soul.

Ares created a stair case at his feet and Soul Stepped higher, but there was no escape. The crimson falcons were on him now, with their smooth lava like bodies and their feathered wings leaving a golden trail in their wake.

Ares was only going to have this one chance. If this didn't work, he would be hit by Eos' attack. How had Eos learned partial Severance in a week's time? It was impossible. Ares screamed in frustration as he created a platform. This one he generated at his chest level. He made it much larger than the rest. When he reached it, he kicked off it with one foot. The Soul Elsu were on him now. The birds of prey would surely strike their target.

He back flipped off the platform he had created and used it to jump back, over the fleet of Soul Elsu. He watched as they soared underneath his upside-down body and collided with the platform he created.

Ares landed safely on the ground. The Soul Elsu exploded into the platform! There was a mushroom of lethal energy, but it was far above him in the sky.

"No," Ares said as he realized what had happened. The explosion was caused only by the first bird that had led the charge. The rest of

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the elsu simply cornered, swooped back down, and were coming at him again.

There was nothing else he could do. He hadn't been prepared. He hadn't expected this from Eos. He put up his Solido.

The barrage of Soul Elsu pummeled him. They drove their beaks into his shell of pale Soul Energy and burst into a fiery explosion of red and gold that overwhelmed Ares. He was lost in the power.

Eos waited for the light to fade.

Through the scope of her sniper rifle, Lieutenant Skye watched as Bellia absorbed the bullets with her strange purple portal. Luckily, the portal opened in a direction that allowed for her red dot to line up perfectly with the blond woman.

She pulled the trigger.

A gust ravaged the snowy plain at that moment.

The bullet found Bellia, but just barely. Burying itself in her shoulder.

Maxima tore away from her and sprinted to her brother as Bellia fell to the ground. Just then a red cloud of Eos' Soul Energy engulfed the area. She continued to Eos' side.

Colonel Kane directed his men to fire at Tessio and aid the poor man who had dodged the extending pole over and over again and now lay on the ground. The light faded from Tessio's spear.

He raised his Solido.

Bullets didn't stop coming. They slammed uselessly into his shield and did him no harm, but he couldn't move. He couldn't drop his guard for a second to attack because of the bombardment of shots.

"Don't let up!" Kane screamed.

Aizo scooped up a handful of snow and let his soul mingle with it. He got up, neared Tessio, held the snow to his own mouth, and blew it at him with a mad laughter.

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Tessio's eyes moved in despair searching for a way out, but he couldn't move without being shot. The glowing snow collided with him and shattered his Solido. He was sent back with broken ribs and lashes in his skin. The Mellizo Glyph flew from his hand and he sunk into the snow with Tessio's body.

Aizo walked over and retrieved the black artifact with the leaf like Earth symbol on it.

Tessio's hand shot up from under the surface!

His gaunt face emerged with a cloud of cold, white powder that rose with him. His fingers were still tightened on the chain of the Mellizo Glyph. "I still have enough to win a tug of war with you, old man." Tessio produced the black wings of his spear from the snow.

The point of the blade came at Aizo who was unready for the surprise. The fact that the wielder was still conscious meant he had severely underestimated the man.

Aizo watched the blade come to meet his throat. With his experienced vision, he knew he couldn't move out of the way in time.

"The hell you can!" Came a voice.

Two hands grasped the pole near Tessio's own grip and wrenched the spear off target. Glenn had rushed across to Aizo's aid. His numb hands didn't manage to keep hold, but the effort had been enough to spare Aizo a grave wound.

Aizo stomped his boot and orange spread beneath the surface of snow.

Tessio was sent flying back. The attack was completely reactionary in nature and only distanced the men. Aizo knew Tessio was still strong enough to get back up.

Ares was on his knees with his Soul Energy in shards that were quickly fading.

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He shrieked in rage and stood weakly. A black mark like the one on Eos' arm took over Ares. Its lapping tongues rose to his face and wrapped around his left cheek.

He was consumed by his hatred now.

Eos watched Ares like he was staring in a mirror. An identical curse marked both brothers. Eos couldn't believe what he was seeing.

When Ares summoned his soul, it wasn't the Soul Chains that appeared. The black mark of the curse was mixed in his Soul Energy.

Eos wasn't sure he could perform partial Severance again, but he would have to try.

Ares' soul manifested in a whip like shape, but this was a more organic form now. It was a serpentine like body that vaguely resembled chains. The blade of his whip was no more; a demonic head was snapping at the end of it instead like a mixed breed of dragon and wolf. Its eyes stared at Eos with a pale grey glow that was marbled with venomous black like the rest of the body, and its teeth were sharpened and ready in the muzzle. Two long whiskers of Soul Energy wavered out of its face; one on each side. Horns protruded from the head. The black curse swirled in the creature as the body undulated like a living whip in Ares' grasp. He cackled maniacally with the tail wrapped around his wrist like a tattoo come to life.

The newly evolved Soul Chain lurched at Eos. The ferocity of the snarling creature sent blank messages of misfiring confusion to Eos' body. The black and gray Soul Energy sliced through the air in a serpentine motion toward Eos. His limbs weren't sure which direction would allow him to best evade; no there was no direction that would prevent him from being struck by Ares' attack.

Eos' hands shot out with palms open. His Soul Energy flowed out, hemorrhaging red into the atmosphere. Uncontained. Without

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purpose other than *to survive*. Nothing held back. Eos poured everything out into a wall of formless protection.

The beast struck with open jaws and flared teeth—laying siege to Eos’ outpouring.

Concussions spread through the snow. Black and red energies clashed, a mini aurora. A violent display of light that lasted only seconds. Then again. And Again. Ares willed the whiskered dragon down. It smashed Eos’ defenses. Eos screamed in the struggle. He bore the force coming down on him as best he could, like a tiny cup attempting to catch a waterfall. He was crushed by the blows until his arms fell down and his energy ceased to flow.

Maxima clapped her hands together and produced two Soul Spheres. She threw them at Ares just as he wound the whip back for a powerful finishing blow.

Ares was bathed in Maxima’s blue light as she reached Eos. He stumbled back, his attack interrupted. In the brief respite, Ares breathed heavily. It was the labored breath of a gravely injured warrior. He had taken a nearly fight ending attack from the Soul Elsu. Whatever power he was tapping into now was taking its toll. He stumbled forward like a dead soldier possessed to move.

Maxima had bought Eos, who was fallen in the snow, a few more seconds. Blood trickled out of his lips, and his body refused to comply in getting back up.

Maxima had two more spheres in each hand as Ares shrugged off the previous attack. She let him have another dose. Ares lashed out and swung his demon whip! It slashed one of the Soul Spheres out of existence and swallowed the other in its fang filled jaws.

The demon whip snarled.

The black that tainted Ares’ pale Soul Energy receded after taking Maxima’s attack. The snout, then eyes, then horns cleared into a

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muddled color that resembled Ares' true energy. The beast's form went unstable. It waivered like a mirage. Ares shrieked in pain. The black recaptured his Soul Energy.

Eos couldn't let his sister face the immense power alone. After everything he had sacrificed to get to this point, it couldn't end like this. He forced himself to his feet in a burning desire. He and Maxima stood side by side.

"Thanks, Maxima." Eos said weakly. "I don't have much left, but maybe we can take him together. I need you to heal me like you did back at the generator complex. There's no time so you'll have to do it in a quick burst."

Eos clenched the Mellizo Glyph and drew upon the supplemental reservoir to aid his depleted supply. He summoned the elsu once more and severed his soul, but he was weaker and had less energy to draw from. This time only three Soul Elsu beat their wings by his side.

Two of the birds were marbled with blue, as Maxima let her energy soak into Eos as she had in the generator complex. She let most of her Soul Energy leave her to aid her brother, and then used the last remains for her own attack.

Maxima wielded a Soul Sphere in each hand.

Ares faced his two half siblings. Had he been in his right mind, he would have questioned how one wielder could control two energies fused together as one, but Ares was barely conscious of anything. His awareness only extended as far as the concentration of emotions that triggered this state. The ink like mark had reached up from his neck and made its way to one cheek.

Eos commanded all three of his elsu forward. They rushed at Ares' beastly form of a weapon.

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The black and gray marbled energy snapped its jaws and jolted to meet Eos' birds. Its whiskers rippled back like ribbons caught in a hurricane.

Blue and red wings left trails of light behind them.

The sky was filled with clashing wills—but not for long.

There was a tremendous explosion that blinded everyone on the tundra.

It engulfed the area of the conflict, and the wielders were coated in a layer of blown-away snow.

When the light receded, Ares' beastly weapon was now marbled with more gray than black. The form shimmered as if debating whether to remain in existence. He howled as if in pain, then fell, but caught himself on his hands and knees. He gripped the tail of the beast.

The beast furled back to strike.

Eos wasn't ready for such a quick counter.

Maxima, however, had been planning. She flung one of her Soul Spheres just wide of the beast's head. The other she directed at Ares.

Darkness reclaimed the dark form and it snapped to the side to consume the sphere, but that left it facing away from the other which met Ares directly. It smashed into his torso and sent him spinning across the tundra.

*"AAAagggghh!"* He screamed on his back into the open sky. His body went rigid and his head locked upward. A cloud of condensed breath escaped his mouth in a foggy puff. His Soul Energy evaporated.

The curse mark climbed his face further and surrounded his eyes.

Each of the three siblings were entirely expended.

Ares' mouth was locked open, a testament to his ongoing pain.

Eos attempted to manifest something...anything. Nothing came.

Maxima was entirely drained.

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The image of Ares' weapon reappeared like a translucent ghost. Willing itself into existence with a mind that could not have belonged to Ares. It moved independent of his still arm, solidifying into a static filled, pure black form. He let out only weak murmurs. His lips moved as if fighting death itself off.

The beast of black flame pulsed uncontrollably. It was an unstable form, smoke trying to contain electricity. It cried out in a physical dance of jagged possession and untamable dark.

The spent siblings looked defiantly at the erratic black flame.

There was beat of pure silence, as if the world anticipated the collision that might come.

Bellia's scream distracted Ares. He turned his gaze, agonizingly, to find her on the ground. Her shoulder was mutilated, and she was bleeding profusely. Despite her pain she managed to force words out.

"No Ares! Aghhh...You can't use the mark to... force yourself. It'll consume you!" She said between bursts of pain.

Ares looked back to his two siblings with his demon whip snarling. Its whiskers swam through the air. His poisonous rage consumed him like it that had all his life. The Mark of the Chosen was just a tool to physically release it. He saw Tessio struggling on the ground. The lesser Mitad soldiers were either dead or tending to Bellia.

Bellia...Ares couldn't leave her like that. She meant too much...she was going to die at this rate. For her, he let his rage subside.

The curse retracted from Ares' face and the demonic whip dissipated into the air. His Soul Reservoir had been overdrawn. Surely death felt nearly like this; it would be a miracle if he made it all the way back to the airplane.

"We'll finish... this another time... my *dear siblings*." Ares hissed with a strenuous pant and forced himself to Soul Step to Bellia. He

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scooped her up and announced as best he could, “Get back to the cargo carrier. We’re leaving!”

The Mitad Soul Stepped away in a southern direction.

Together again, at the icy mouth of the Thelon River; Eos and Maxima stood victorious and embraced as free individuals bound to no one. It was the feeling he had been yearning for. Eos had his family back again.

Maxima fought to speak what had been on her mind, “Eos...I’m sorry. If I hadn’t pushed you that night...if we hadn’t destroyed the generator, none of this would have happened. I let—”

“You’re right. *None of this* would have happened.” He held on to his little sister. “We’re free now. We can go home.”

They walked back to where the others were congregated.

All the squads, Glenn, Aizo, and even Colonel Kane were all huddled around something. They parted as Eos and Maxima came. The two siblings saw why the gathering had occurred.

General Braxton lay too close to death to even clutch his bleeding side. His eyes were falling closed. He choked out his final words to Colonel Kane, “Colonel, there will be a power struggle once I’m gone,” he said almost inaudibly. “Guren and the other Generals are greedy...greedy fools. I won’t pretend that I’m not, but...but...” He coughed droplets of blood onto his chin. “I’ve always wanted the best for the sector.” His final words sputtered numbly from his frozen lips. A few breathes later, General Braxton was absolutely still.

Colonel Kane took off his long outer jacket and laid it over General Braxton’s body. “It’s time for the North American Sector to walk on its own feet again and stop relying on these two.” He gestured to Eos and Maxima. “Draven, McLane, put his body and the other fallen men in one of the trucks. We’re going to have to make a plan on the way back.”

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Kane addressed Eos. “Tell me... *specifically*. Which of those men killed Major Clark?”

Eos hesitated, “The one with the spear, called Tessio.”

Colonel Kane nodded with saddened eyes.

Eos couldn't let his doubts linger forever, “I'm so sorry Colonel. I couldn't do anything...I was useless. Major Clark died because I was too weak back then.”

“Don't blame yourself for something you didn't do and couldn't control. I will ask a favor though. If you run into him again, leave him for me to take care of one day. I want to avenge Bruce myself.”

Colonel Kane turned to his men, “Let's go home.” He sighed with weary eyes.

Eos spoke, “It's time for us to go home too...whatever that is when we get there.”

Colonel Kane beamed down and even cracked a smile, “I'm glad you found a place to call home. I hope it is everything you imagined. Just don't forget about us on Earth, okay?”

Eos grinned.

Glenn stepped forward. “Eos...Maxima...You have to realize that home is here for me. I belong on Earth.”

Maxima nodded, “We know Glenn. We'll come back and visit. It's a promise!”

Eos nodded. “We're family. You two are all the family I need. I still need to learn about where I came from, but you can be sure we'll come back again. What'll you do now, Glenn?”

“I...I don't know. It's hard to accept that my adventure with you is just going to end. You two are far too much trouble for that to be true.” He brushed strands of hair out of his face.

Colonel Kane volunteered his help, “We'll drive him back to the military base and give him a place to lay his head for a while. He'll be

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in good hands. As for endings...I suspect we'll see you two again. I've got a new lead on something, Eos. Hyperboreans have been meddling beneath our feet in the North American Sector." He winked at Eos, letting him know that there would be no more information given away for now.

Aizo pulled Glenn aside and gave him a handshake with both hands. Glenn felt something solid between him and Aizo in the gesture. A small object had been placed in his hand. "This is my thanks to you. I wish I had more to give, but all I can offer is to bring them back to visit soon." He motioned to the object in Glenn's hand. "That is insurance that you'll see them again."

The two men talked a while, removed from the group, as the soldiers loaded into the trucks.

"I'm sure we'll be seeing you again, kid," Captain Draven threw his arm around Eos, "Maybe next time you're around us, there won't be a battle going on."

Devers threw his arm around Eos' other side so that he was squished between the two men. "Unlikely," he said, "We attract trouble with this bunch of hooligans and you're quite the magnet yourself."

"We'll miss having you around Eos," Corporal Grant added.

The goodbyes reached Lieutenant Skye. She nodded to him respectfully, "That was an impressive fight. Looks like I won't have to save you anymore." She hesitated before swallowing her pride, "I never had a chance to say it before...so thank you for rescuing my brother. Despite what these two hope, if we're caught in another battle the next time we meet, I'd like fight alongside you again."

All eyes fell on Malin.

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“Don’t expect me to be all misty eyed. I taught him well. Eos’ll be fine.” He turned and started for the trucks. The others smiled at Eos and Maxima and followed.

Glenn was tearing up as he ran to Eos and Maxima.

“I’m not going to hug you goodbye. You’ll just have to come back and see me again.” He wiped a tear.

Maxima refused him and dove in for an embrace. Eos joined his sister and the trio was united one last time.

“I’ll be coming back for another hug,” Maxima said, “You better shave that beard before then.” She gave one final tease.

Just five of them were left in the snow now.

“Where are you off too?” Colonel Kane asked.

Aizo replied. “The Arctic Circle!” He smiled, “Can’t get home any other way.”

“I hope our paths cross again, Eos. It was a pleasure to know you.” Colonel Kane saluted Eos.

Eos returned the salute.

“Thanks for everything Colonel. Take good care of Glenn.” Eos said.

Colonel Kane and Glenn stepped into the trucks and soon, they were gone.

There was an hour of walking as the battle-worn team recuperated. Eos’ shoulder was already scabbing over. They each recovered enough during the walk to attempt wielding again. Aizo limped along with his bandaged calf in a hobbling Soul Step. This allowed Eos and Maxima to keep up with his pace.

After another hour of debilitated Soul Step, Eos and Maxima stood beside Aizo in the Arctic Circle. They were immersed under an aurora. The Arctic lights were like a heavenly trail of green Soul Energy that rose to a fervent pink.

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“Earth’s soul is beautiful,” Aizo admired the lights.

“How do we get to Hyperborea, Aizo?” Maxima asked.

“Under the soul of your planet, you fill the Mellizo Glyph with Soul Energy. The gateway between worlds can only be opened within the Arctic Circle. Eos do you have it?”

Eos pulled out the ivory Mellizo Glyph.

He put his thumb on the symbol that was carved into it.

“That is the symbol for Hyperborea.” Aizo said. “Go ahead; fill it with your Soul Energy and open the gateway. I haven’t been to Hyperborea for as long as you, and it doesn’t bode well that the Mitad have acquired so many weapons from Earth. I warn you...I have no idea what we’ll find.”

Eos uncapped the vile.

This is what he had always dreamed of. Waiting on the other side would be home...would be family. It was a dream no more. Today he manifested his dreams into reality—like he had learned to do with his Soul Energy.

Just like that, it came over Eos amidst his wakefulness; the dream like quality that overlaps with the world when you first wake to the disorienting silence of the conscious state. There was a fleeting pulse of not knowing, of being born again, but then a lifetime of knowledge and experience came slamming back into his body in a hurricane of life...and he knew. He was with family. He was going home...to Hyperborea.

Eos filled the vile and prepared to step into a new world.