

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION TOPICS

PROLOGUE – CHAPTER 10

1.

The Alpha ghosts have put their own lives on the line to keep the people of Phantom Heights safe. How do the humans react to this sacrifice? Specifically, how do Madison and Holly, who were both against making the deal, react? Have the Alpha ghosts earned their trust?

2.

A Fallen Hero showed the Alpha ghosts generally showing mercy whenever given the choice to kill. Now, we see Cato exhibiting an apathetic ruthlessness in battle. He uses his cryokinesis to kill several opponents, even creating ice stalagmites to impale a fallen adversary, and the deaths don't seem to bother him. How does this new side of Cato make you feel about him? Has your perception of him changed? Is he still a likeable character?

Except for the prologue of Book I, we didn't get to see Cato when he was Phantom and can only speculate about what kind of hero he really was. Do you think he was as cold and ruthless when fighting ghosts back then as he is now, or is this hardened warrior solely the result of his trials in Project Alpha? How do you think Cato compares to the former Phantom now that he's two years older and has spent "long hours getting the crap beaten out of me in the Arena"? Would the people of Phantom Heights be likely to recognize their former hero?

3.

Chapter 5 gives us a glimpse into the potential applications of ECANI, the twins' supercomputer. It also lets us see just how intelligent Finn and Reese really are, as we don't often get to see them in their element. Cato notes, "Sometimes, I forgot they were being groomed to be the primary architects of the Weapon after the data collection process was over. It was sobering to see what they could do . . . to imagine what they might have created."

How else do you think ECANI could potentially be utilized beyond the current uses we've seen up to this point (hacking into the AGC, disabling all communications within a tri-state area, causing government satellites to malfunction, automatically deleting any image or recording that matches the facial recognition of any of the Alpha ghosts, creating a similar but more efficient version of the Dome, et cetera)?

Knowing the role Finn and Reese were intended to serve in Project Alpha, how has your opinion of the twins changed from the first book when they innocently asked who turned the sun on? Are they still innocent, frail, and helpless little kids in need of protection, or are they actually dangerous, as Holly had feared all along?

4.

Phantom Heights finally begins to repair itself and enjoy a semblance of peace outside of the Dome. And yet, things can't go back to normal as they were before, and the town undergoes some interesting changes. As an observer, Cato notes how downtown is being renovated but the outskirts are still abandoned, resulting in a clear division between the settled and neglected parts of town. "It was as if an invisible circle had been drawn. I could be standing in the middle of a street that had inhabited buildings glowing with lights on one side and desolate, abandoned houses on the other. Entire subdivisions were empty."

With humankind staying relatively clustered together for safety, roads being in poor condition, and police and paramedics needing to easily maneuver the streets without traffic, people have stopped using automobiles. Everything they need is in walking distance. People also seem to show more care in their town, taking extra steps to beautify it not only by cleaning up the damage, but also by nursing the street trees back to health and adding colorful awnings over shops. Cato calls the town "Jay's phoenix."

Thinking about your own city or town, what are your thoughts about the new Phantom Heights from an urban planning perspective? How would you feel about no longer driving in the city limits, or living with friends and/or extended family with a "safety in numbers" mentality? Do the people of Phantom Heights seem bitter or grateful about this "new normal"? What parallels do you see with the current COVID-19 pandemic?

5.

Ash appears to have a much more positive attitude about the new Phantom Heights than Cato, who insists the humans "should rot in City Hall like we rotted away in our cages." Ash responds to his hostility by claiming that he's lost his mercy since the Agents took him, even saying he's become more ghostlike. To that, Cato replies that he takes her comment as a compliment, and he chooses to embrace his ghost half over his human half.

Do you feel Cato is justified in his negative sentiments toward humankind? Has he truly become more ghostlike and lost most of his humanity? What kind of partnership do Ash and Cato appear to have with each other? Knowing that they are both Elemental kálos but control opposite elements (fire and ice), are you surprised that they have a different outlook on the situation? How do you think their perspectives and personalities will influence their effectiveness as a team?

6.

Jay believes that the reason Agent Kovak was so secretive with the limited information he released to the people of Phantom Heights was due to his reluctance to admit that Cato was among the fugitives. By Jay's reasoning, Kovak wouldn't have been able to hand over complete files on seven out of the eight fugitives without drawing suspicion.

Do you think Jay is right? How does Cato handle the theory? Does it bring him any relief? Why do you think Kovak doesn't want the people of Phantom Heights to know that Cato escaped?

7.

Despite RC's secrets and reluctance to talk about his past, we learn a little more about him. He likely watched his mother die and then ran away from home soon after, possibly due to a poor relationship with his father. But as for his scar and blind eye, all Cato knows is that "he was in a fight with a ghost who cut him with a blade." We also know that RC has many scars on his body, including a strange pair of round scars on his left arm that caused the veins and blood vessels around the old wound to turn black. Cato admits that he doesn't know if RC had those injuries before or after he arrived at the AGC.

What are your thoughts about RC? Knowing that his father may actually still be alive, do you think RC is likely to seek out his blood-family? What do you think their relationship was like? Why is RC so reluctant to talk about the fight that resulted in the scar on his eye? What do you think may have caused the bizarre wound on his arm?

8.

Cato seems to be genuinely upset to learn that his mother never bothered to inquire which Project he was being sent to when she decided to give up custody to the Agents. And yet, Finn and Reese report that despite this, she called the AGC a total of 143 times within the first month of Cato's incarceration, although she spoke to Kovak only twice, and there's no recording of their conversation. She also signed the visitor's log once. ECANI was conveniently off-line at the time. Finn and Reese claim to have no knowledge of the visit or phone calls beyond the records in the logs.

How trustworthy is the twins' testimony? Do the events seem to add up? Do you believe Finn and Reese at face value, or is it possible that they may be following secret orders from Agent Kovak to mislead Cato if he ever starts asking questions? If they had been given such an order, do you think they would obey their master and betray their lab-brother? Could it be possible that Finn and Reese have developed empathy and are protecting Cato from a hurtful truth?

9.

Agent Kovak and Holly have an intense phone conversation in Chapter 9, and Kovak finally confesses about Cato's escape. Although she'd already suspected, Holly is horrified by the news and says, "Oh, no. No, you don't understand. Do you realize what will happen if anyone finds out what I did? I . . . it . . . it would be a disaster. I'd lose everything." Despite her initial and selfish knee-jerk reaction to the news, her concern does eventually shift to Cato. She gets defensive when Kovak refers to him as "A7" and then later becomes so sick to her stomach at the thought of the suffering Cato had endured in Project Alpha that she throws up. She whispers, "I didn't know. I'm so sorry. I swear, I didn't know . . ."

What are your thoughts about Holly's response? Do you think she's genuinely sorry? Does she seem to believe Kovak when he claims that Cato is safest at the AGC, that it's best for him to remain under Kovak's supervision to ensure that he doesn't hurt himself or anyone else with his unstable powers? What seems to concern Holly more—the guilt, or the need to protect her secret sin?

10.

We get a few glimpses into Ash's and Jay's pasts in Chapters 8 and 9. We learn that Ash hates her Divinity because "fire burns the people I love," and she had willingly accepted the neutralizer from Agent Kovak on her Lastday when he'd offered to take her powers away. Jay's mom had fallen ill and died, leaving him all alone, and he'd been on a quest to try and find his father when he'd wandered through a Tear and was taken into custody. This is why he stresses so much about keeping his lab-family together and why he pushes them so hard in training to ensure they're strong enough to defend themselves and protect each other.

Combining this information with what we know about Cato's and RC's lives from before the AGC, the twins' childhood being reared in captivity, and a past allusion to Kit being a "street kid" in *A Fallen Hero* (Chapter 18), plus Axel's horrific transformation at the hands of the Agents, how strong do you think this lab-family really is with all the tragedy and suffering in their pasts? Does the extra baggage strengthen their relationship, or could it potentially cause trust issues? Is Jay's single-minded determination to hold this family of misfits together a realistic goal? Do the other Alpha ghosts seem to appreciate this trait in Jay, or is it causing friction in their relationship?