

DOUBT

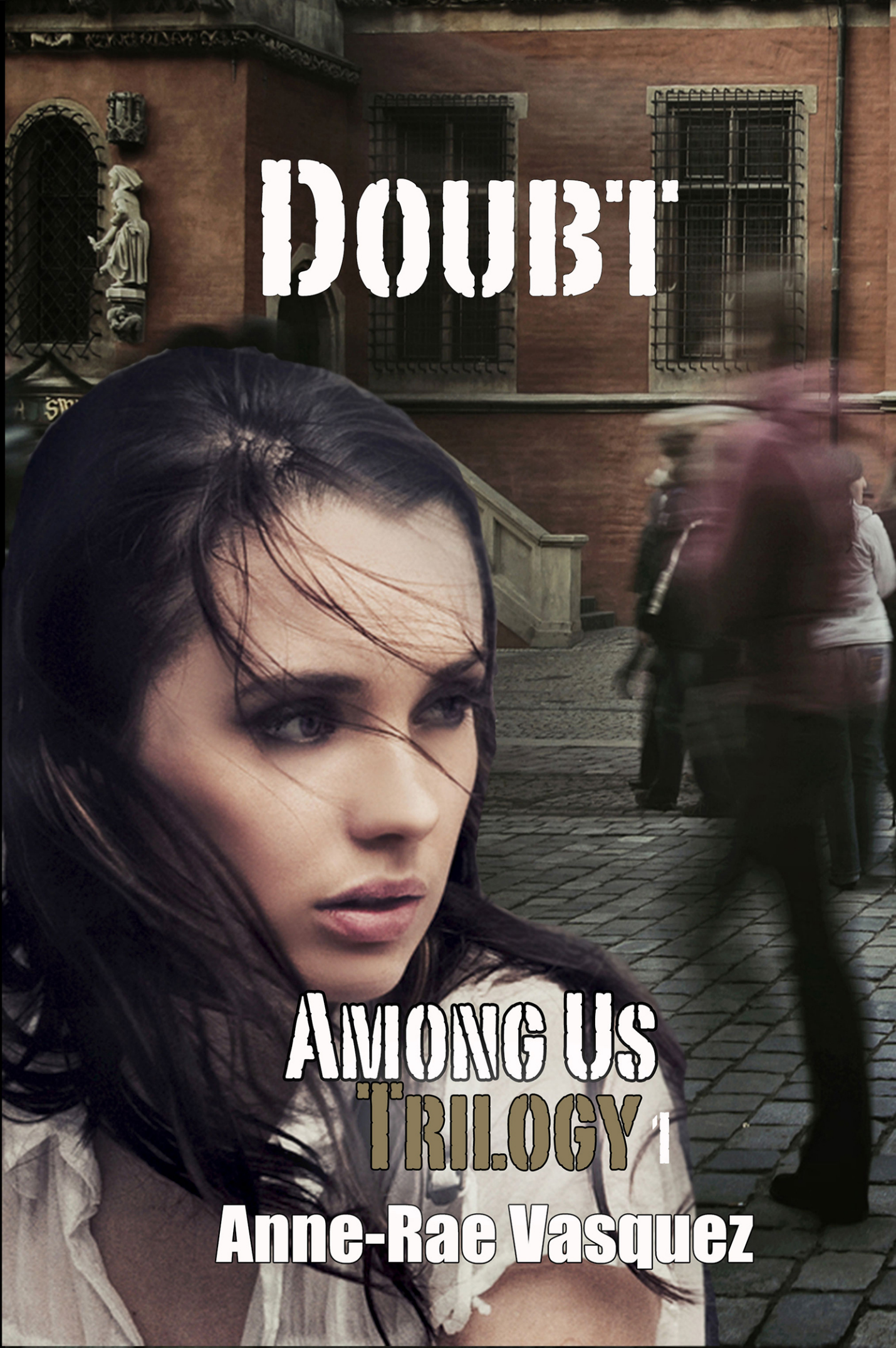
AMONG US TRILOGY

ANNE-RAE VASQUEZ

DOUBT

**AMONG US
TRILOGY 1**

Anne-Rae Vasquez



DOUBT

**Among Us Trilogy
Book 1**

Anne-Rae Vasquez

AR Publishing

This is a work of fiction. The events and characters described here are purely fictional and in no way represent or resemble real life events, places or people.

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AR Publishing

“... As a big fan of the show Fringe, this book appealed to me tremendously. The writing was well done, and the way the “supernatural” forces were introduced was great. The characters, primarily Harry and Cristal, were developed and built up very well, and had enough detail about their lives for us readers to understand them as people, not just characters. Genuinely looking forward to read the rest of the series when it comes out!”- *Melissa Greenberg, Inkspand review*

“It starts with a game designer and shining star programmer, Harry Doubt. ‘How was he going to convince online gamers to leave the privacy of their virtual world to work with others in the real world?’ is the question that ends chapter three. As someone who is married to an online gamer, that strikes me as a really good question...It was an excellent story that I’m sure both adult and teen urban fantasy fans will enjoy. You don’t have to be a gamer or know one to identify with the characters. They’re very well developed and definitely feel like people. I would definitely recommend it to a friend and I’m really looking forward to the second book.” – *Ginger Lego, Inkspand review*

“Doubt, Among Us Trilogy, by Anne-Rae Vasquez, was a good and refreshing read for me. I am not too into books about the supernatural, but the idea of gamers on assignments was intriguing...The author uses this story to show that we are spiritual in nature, either for good or for bad. Cristal and all of her associates often obey orders without question until good eventually overcomes and the reader is left with a lot to think about. I would recommend this book to a friend. I will read book two and three because of the interesting way the subject of angels and demons is approached. A good, clean read for any age.” – *S. Coleman, Inkspand review*

“Doubt is book 1 of an intriguing and exciting trilogy by Anne-Rae Vasquez. With enjoyable, vibrant young characters fighting a frightening unknown entity in a world that is about to self-destruct, Doubt will definitely

appeal to readers of all ages who love sci-fi supernatural thrillers.”- *Owen Choi, author of Amazon Best Seller, Tendrils of Life*

“Captivating, thrilling and compelling. The story is original and fresh—a definite ‘have to read’ for new adult urban fantasy fiction readers.”- *Libby Howell, book reviewer*

“A dystopian adventure, edgy and thought-provoking, which raises questions about what we’re doing to our society and planet. This gritty narrative which is fast paced and full of twists and turns is hard to put down till the end.” - *Cid Andrenelli, author of The Burqa Master*

“International intrigue, encryptions, and clandestine arrangements tumble together in this action-packed plot as young internet gamers use their skills to investigate who, or what, is behind the catastrophic events happening around the globe, led by this season’s newest, and most brilliant, master-mind – Harry Doubt!”- *Emily Hill, author of The Ghost Chaser’s Daughter and the Ghost Stories series.*

“Doubt is a must-read novel that has depth and substance mashed up with fringe science. If you read no other book this year, this is the one to read!” – *William Miller, author of Kyrathaba Rising*

“I like books that go straight to the point without a flood of unnecessary introductory words. And this one grabbed me from the beginning with the idea of time travel... I was also impressed by the fact that there were “pictures” of all main characters, including their avatars. I love being able to imagine exactly how they look like. The author’s style is light and pleasant to read and I read it very quickly. And when thing got more complicated I couldn’t stop reading.” – *R. Chelebiera, Inksband reviewer*

“OMGosh! I just finished reading "Doubt"... INCREDIBLE! I couldn't put it down. Well developed characters with thoroughly explained relationships. Great background info - adds so much to the reader

knowing what is going on at all times. Cristal is a great lead. She is strong, smart, beautiful - a brilliant package.

Harry is a wonderful character - he's the smart, fearless leader whose childhood left him with a slight childlike innocence /immaturity and trust issues. The twists and turns and the espionage involving the gamers and the GN kept me on the edge of my seat. The paranormal aspect was something I wasn't expecting, but was pleased with. The flow/pace was great. The writing was smooth and there were enough ups and downs to keep a reader interested. I'm not sure what to expect next, but know that I can't wait to read more!" – *Lisa W, GoodReads member*

For Joseph whose vision and support inspired me to write this book. For my kids who inspired me to learn about the hidden talents of online gamers. For Kathleen who pushed the boundaries of my imagination. And for Josefina who helped me bring Harry, Kerim and Cristal to life. Finally, for the Truth Seekers who dared to believe.

In loving memory of Manny and Dee who are with us in spirit.

And a special tribute to Aaron Swartz and Harry Fear whose work inspire our youth to fight for truth and justice.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the Truth Seekers for their contributions and participation in Harry Doubt's missions.

Josefina Rosado as Cristal Hernandez (alias Mist)

Anne-Rae Vasquez as Harry Doubt (alias Zero)

Jeanne Lee as Joanna Chan (alias Onyx)

Khaled Talib, author of Smokescreen as Rinaldo Ricci (alias Red Fox)

Donna Bonastella as Angelica Martinelli (alias Venus)

Macqueline Cajandab as Serena Keensky (alias Lioness)

Josefina Rosado, Anne-Rae Vasquez as Kerim Ilgaz (alias Shadow) and Gabriel (alias Graphix)

Kathleen McMahon as Jenna Adams (alias Celestial Nymph)

Dear Truth Seeker,

I believe in capturing history and this is my attempt to leave our story for the future generation of Truth Seekers like you.

I have asked all my Truth Seekers to keep a journal. I encourage each one to write their thoughts, events and ideas so as to preserve the story as close to the real events, thoughts and feelings as possible. I want history to remember us not just from my words but also from the words of my closest and dearest friends—even friends who have ended being my worst enemies.

Your mission is to share these events with other Truth Seekers. Keep the faith that ‘Good’ will prevail. We must stay united in mind and in actions. We must maintain our perseverance to save humanity and the world.

Harry Doubt

Part One

Seeking the Truth



Chapter 1

New York, 2008

COINCIDENCE? HARRY'S MOTHER always told him that there were no such things as coincidences. Only fools believed in that garbage.

This may have explained her erratic behaviour when his father, Aaron Doub, a respected quantum physicist, collapsed in front of them. A simple, impromptu after-work dinner party that his mother Bina was hosting at their home, turned into an unforgettable nightmare.

His father's last words were "We have the theoretical and experimental capabilities to build a time machine to the future. We have also discovered a scientifically feasible way to go back into the past..."

And suddenly, his father’s marble-brown eyes bulged out of their sockets, his mouth opened as if to finish the sentence, and then in slow motion Aaron fell forward, his face landing into the pile of whipped mashed potatoes on his plate. The glaring bald spot, which Aaron meticulously polished and combed over every morning, was all Harry could see from his end of the table. *What would Dad do if he had built his time machine earlier? Would he be here right now?* Harry glanced over his shoulder expecting to see an ‘Aaron Doub from the past’ standing in the shadows, observing the circus freak show unfolding in front of them.

His father’s colleague, Dr. Saeed Nariman, also a quantum physicist, lifted his father’s head from the plate while another guest helped wipe the mashed potatoes from his father’s face. They both carried his father and placed him on the floor. In a daze, Harry stood up and walked towards his father’s inert body. His mother was on the other side, waving her arms in the air, and wailing at the top of her lungs. “They killed him! They killed him!” she cried. *Who killed him?* Harry thought.

Thankfully, a young woman, the wife of one of the guests, guided his mother away. Meanwhile, Dr. Saeed performed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on Aaron. Harry saw his father’s chest rise and fall with each breath of air Dr. Saeed blew into his mouth. Dr. Saeed stopped when he realized Harry was watching.

“Don’t just stand there, Harry! Call 9-1-1!” Dr. Saeed cried out.

HIS FATHER WAS PRONOUNCED DEAD an hour after they arrived at the hospital. Harry had been walking back from the cafeteria when he saw the surgeon talking with his mother and Dr. Saeed in the waiting room. Harry could read from the grim expression on the doctor's face that the news was going to break his mother's heart. "We found a small clot lodged in your husband's brain," the doctor said. "It caused hemorrhagic damage to the surrounding tissue. I'm sorry Ms. Schwartz...we did all we could."

His mother, Bina, pushed the doctor away, screaming, "No! It's not true!"

The doctor waved to a nearby nurse who ran to get help. His mother stepped forward and grabbed the doctor's scrubs with both hands. "He's not dead! What did you do to my Aaron?!" When he didn't respond, she turned wildly towards the other people in the waiting room. "They took my husband! Please help me!"

Although, Harry was used to his mother's over-dramatic displays of emotion, for a brief moment, something in her eyes had made Harry believe what she'd said. She had always been a passionate woman and her Israeli upbringing had made her skeptical of many things. Unfortunately, everyone else in the waiting room ignored his mother's pleas. And why wouldn't they? They'd probably assumed she was having a nervous breakdown.

Three nurses rushed back, grabbing hold of his mother's arms. "Let me go! Let me go!" She struggled as one of the nurses stabbed a needle into her arm.

"You need to relax, Bina," Dr. Saeed said in a soothing tone. He helped guide his mother down into a chair. "Everything will be just fine."

"Saeed, you need to find Aaron," my mother said, before passing out.

Harry had observed everything from a distance, not fully comprehending what was happening. *Funny how a tiny blood clot could bring a man as brilliant as Aaron Doub to his demise.*

Harry was only seventeen when his father died; a university senior writing his thesis, 'Mind-reading computers: intelligent assumptions of complex thought processes.'

Besides the fact that his father was an atheist and that his mother pretended to be one too, growing up in Harry's home had been anything but normal. The rare times Aaron had been home, Harry might as well have been invisible. Several times, Aaron had mistaken Harry for Dr. Saeed, rattling on and on about his theories, and asking what Harry's opinion was on the matter. When Harry tried to respond, eight times out of ten, his father would spin

around, shocked to hear Harry's voice and say, "You're not Saeed! Where is Saeed?"

Harry had to mentally accept the fact that he didn't really have a father.

Now that Aaron was dead, Harry didn't have to pretend anymore. A year later, Harry legally changed his last name to 'Doubt'.

Chapter 2

Bina Schwartz, Harry's mother

FOR YEARS BINA and Aaron tried to have a baby—honestly it was she who wanted it more than he did. When Bina couldn't conceive, she sought help from the best Israeli fertility specialists. When Aaron took the job at Global Nation University in New York City and uprooted them from their home in Tel Aviv, she hoped the change would help.

Her prayers were answered twelve months later when Harrell Doub was born. He was perfect. From his wavy brown hair, to his ice blue eyes and his chubby fingers and toes. Unfortunately, Aaron never cared much about the baby. He let Bina do all the parenting.

“Harry, you were born to do something memorable,” she often said to him. “You were meant to do great things.”

AFTER THE DEATH OF HER HUSBAND, the strange dreams began. Many nights, Bina woke from her sleep with the dreams still clinging to her like the cobwebs that sprawled across the doorway of their garden shed. She started writing in her journal the details

she could remember. She kept the journal locked in her nightstand, safely hidden away.

Now that Aaron was gone, Harry was taking care of the household—buying groceries, preparing and cooking meals, and paying the bills. The inheritance money Aaron left for both of them was substantial...enough to bring all her long-lost in-laws out of the woodwork. Many of them travelled from Tel Aviv, bringing their high profile lawyers to claim their share of the inheritance, leaving Bina almost penniless.

FOUR YEARS LATER, Harry was feeling optimistic about the future. He was in his room at his desk, staring at his laptop, re-reading an email that was open on his screen. He had read it so many times that he knew it by heart.

Dear Harry,

Although you will be receiving the official documents from our legal department, I wanted to write to you personally to say that it was a pleasure meeting you. We at Google Inc. are delighted to acquire the rights to your Truth Seekers online game. The legal documents and bank draft have been sent to your home address.

We could use someone like you on our team so we hope you reconsider the job offer. Feel free to swing by Google Inc. headquarters the next time you are in California.

Sergey Brin
Co-founder, Google Inc.

Harry smiled as he picked up the Fedex box from his desk. His mother stuck her head in the doorway of his room.

“Dinner is ready, Harry,” she said. She watched him as he opened the box. “Is that what you’ve been waiting for all day today?”

“Yes, Mom,” he said. “It’s finally here.” He pulled out a thin binder of documents from the box and set it aside on his desk. He reached in again and brought out an envelope.

“You never told me how much money you sold the Truth Seekers game for,” Bina said, leading into one of her motherly lectures. She walked up to him and continued. “Like I always say, ‘a mother understands what a child does not say’. You know you created that game when you were only eight years old. I hope you didn’t just give it away to those Google schmucks.” She frowned, placing her hands on her hips.

Harry stifled a chuckle. What could he say? She was just being who she was—an overprotective mother. He tore open the envelope and pulled out the bank draft. His smile stretched from ear-to-ear.

“Harry, did you hear what I said?” Bina asked.

He nodded, as he waved the bank draft in her face. Bina bent forward, squinting her eyes to read what was on it. Her eyes widened.

“Is this a joke, Harrell?” She often referred to his legal birth name when she wanted a serious answer from him.

“No joke, Mom,” Harry said. He stood up and gave her a hug. “We don’t have to worry about money anymore.”

She nodded her head but the frown remained on her face. “But Harry, this Truth Seekers’ game is your baby. How could you sell it for that *pitsvinik*? It’s not enough!”

Here we go again. “Mom, are you kidding me? That’s a ten-digit figure. What do you mean it’s not enough?”

She took a deep breath and said, “So, my brilliant son thinks ten digit is enough. Why not twenty digit? Thirty? Your game is your life. You know this is true!”

Harry put his arms around his mother’s waist while planting kisses on her cheeks.

“Stop it, Harry. That’s enough.” She pretended to push him away but he knew she enjoyed the attention he was giving her.

He stepped back and shrugged, hiding his smile. “Okay, if you say so.”

“Oh? You stop so easy? Harrell, don’t you love your mother?” Her mother’s eyebrows were raised with an “I’m hurt” look on her face.

Harry laughed, putting his arms around her again. He gave her an enormous bear hug. “Don’t worry, Mom. I made sure that I maintained the rights to the Truth Seekers’ name,” he said. “I already made a better Truth Seekers game and brought it

underground. It's hosted on multiple private servers. I call it the 'interranet'."

Bina gave him a warm smile and pinched Harry on the cheek. "Ah, my wonderful boy. Your father would have been so proud."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yeah, whatever, Mom." He bent over and gave her another kiss on the cheek. "Please don't ruin my mood by bringing up Dad again, okay?"

She frowned but nodded her head.

"Mom, I'm starving. Something smells real good in the kitchen."

Bina raised her hand. "Wait, Harry. I wanted to tell you this at dinner but it is better if I tell you now."

"Okay," he said. "What is it?"

"I decided I am going to Global Nation in Tel Aviv. I want to be a peacekeeper in Gaza. It is a good time while the peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority are happening," Bina said.

Harry's eyes widened. "Are you crazy, Mom? Why do you want to go there? You and dad came here to New York to get away from all the politics and now you want to go back?"

"I have to go Harry. I need a purpose in life." Her voice broke.

He looked at her for a long time, his anger diminishing. “Are you sure you can take care of yourself, Mom?” he asked.

She smiled. “Look how many years I took care of you and your father. *Makbshava me tumtemet le-gamrei*. What a stupid question.”

TWO MONTHS LATER, Harry received a phone call.

“Mr. Doub, you are listed as the emergency contact for Bina Schwartz. We regret to inform you that Ms. Schwartz did not report to work two days ago at our Gaza office. We are doing our best to locate her and are working closely with Israeli officials to find her.”

Chapter 3

Global Nation, 2012

A NEW STATUS ALERT BOX popped up on the bottom corner of his screen displaying a familiar avatar—a dark shadow of mist in the silhouette of a woman standing tall, hands on her hips with her long hair blowing wildly over one shoulder like black flames. *Cristal.*

He made sure that the closest members of his team contacted him via the private 'Truth Seekers' game messaging system, which he simply called 'TSVC' or 'Truth Seekers' video chat. Harry had overridden the personnel spy software, which the president of GN, Shelly Lionheart, had ordered his team to install on all GN desktops and laptops. Even though he was confident that no one could hack into his system, he made sure that everyone messaged each other using alias names and coded phrases.

Mist: Received the latest mission you sent. I will bring Shadow to Graphix at confirmed time. See you online.

Harry smiled as he typed his reply.

Zero: Are you bringing Onyx with you?

Mist: You chose her as a recruit without my input. So you take care of her yourself.

Harry started to type a response but paused. He could have easily walked five cubicles down to talk to Cristal (aka Mist) in person. Her recent snide remarks about Joanna (aka Onyx), his latest recruit, were becoming difficult to ignore. Joanna was only a junior programmer in his eyes. And although she had one of the highest scores in the 'Truth Seekers' game, she lacked the ability to see the big picture—a talent and skill that he found only in Cristal.

CRISTAL WAS THE ONLY ONE that could see through him, seeing past his boyish good looks and bravado. He preferred to use text messaging so he could avoid looking into those kohl brown eyes with flecks of gold, like lasers that could detect his deepest darkest fears.

Mist: I'll meet you after work to discuss next mission.

CRISTAL WAS STANDING OUTSIDE the building waiting for him. He saw her through the glass doors when a gust of wind blew her long chestnut hair away from her oval face revealing her dainty nose and lips like pink rose petals. Her taupe silk dress hugged her curves. *I have never been so jealous of silk before*, he thought to himself.

When Harry invited Cristal to join the Truth Seekers, she gave up her scholarship at MIT and transferred to GN University. Both of them had been 15 years old, the youngest students in GN's history to attend the university. Now at 22 they still felt out of place being the youngest staff working at Global Nation.

“Coffee shop is too busy and we really need to focus,” he said.

“Okay, so where do you want to go?” She looked briefly at her watch.

“Thought we could go to my place,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

She raised an eyebrow but then smiled. “Yeah, sure. I'll be the first Truth Seeker to get to see Zero Doubt's new crib.”

He laughed. “Just don't post that on the website, okay?”

“Too late, I already tweeted everyone, posted it on Facebook, and all the gaming blogs,” she said with a giggle.

A group of GN staff exited from the building and walked by them, chatting amongst themselves.

Cristal grabbed his arm and said, “Let's go.”

She pulled him towards the bus loop.

“Afraid to bump into Joanna? You really have something against her, don’t you?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Come on, Harry. Can we please **not** open that topic again? I have better things to think about right now. Like, why you want me to hack into Shelley Lionheart’s private folder on the GN cloud network?”

He looked away from her and sighed. “You know, I can’t tell you that. Your job is to complete your mission and not ask questions, right?”

“Yes, Mr. Doubt,” she said, her sarcasm seeping between the words. “So sorry...I forgot that you’re all work and no play.”

Now it was his turn to roll his eyes.

LATER THAT EVENING, Cristal and Harry were sitting at his dining table with their laptops set up in front of them. Cristal was busy scribbling notes on her pad of paper.

“You have the best laptop money can buy and you’re writing on paper,” he said, shaking his head.

“Writing with pen and paper helps me brainstorm.” She frowned as she concentrated on her scribbles.

All Harry wanted to do was touch the strands of hair that fell seductively on her porcelain cheek. He watched as she snapped a barrette on the wavy locks against her face.

“Geez, my hair is driving me nuts. One day, I’ll lose my patience and shave it all off,” she mumbled under her breath.

He frowned. “You don’t mean that, right?” *Doesn’t she realize how beautiful her hair is?*

She made a face and said, “Long hair is just a pain to keep up. It would be much easier if I cropped it really short, like yours. Don’t you think?” She put both her hands under her chin, gave him an innocent smile and blinked her eyes.

Not only was she amazingly adorable, she had a great sense of humour. He chuckled to himself.

“What’s so funny, Harry? You don’t think I’d do it?” she teased. She punched him on the arm playfully.

He shook his head and turned his eyes away from her.

“Why do I care if you cut off your hair or not?” he said, shrugging his shoulder.

“Oh, whatever Harry. I can’t figure you out sometimes.” From his peripheral view, he could see her sulking in her cute way, her lips in a pout and her eyebrows furrowed together.

Focus on the mission, he scolded himself. He didn't have time to be distracted by anyone. Not even her.

EIGHT MONTHS EARLIER, Harry had put his first mission into motion: landing a job at Global Nation's head office. It wasn't hard. After getting his PhD, all the biggest companies were lining up and offering him dream jobs with six figure salaries.

So it came as a surprise to them, when he applied for and accepted a low paying job working as a middle manager at the GN central IT department.

“Don't you think you're a little overqualified for this position? The pay isn't even half of what Google was probably offering you,” George Beaver had asked him during his interview. His first impression of him was that he looked like a potato-head Elf—his huge bald head balancing on top of his short stocky body.

It was obvious that Beaver didn't understand most of the technical terminology he was reading from the interview questionnaire, mispronouncing terms such as 'GUI interface'. In the IT world, it was pronounced 'gooey' not 'G.U.I.'

“I never really had a real job before so I think I have to earn my stripes like everybody else.” Harry cleared his throat hoping that he had responded in a humble tone. He would bet his last dollar the Beav’ had a Napoleon complex.

The answer must have satisfied Beaver because he smiled and wrote down a few notes on the paper. He asked Harry a few more questions and then stood up.

“Wait here a moment, Harry,” Beaver said, grabbing his papers.

“No problem.” Harry took a deep breath and fixed his tie as he waited. A suit and tie guy he definitely was not.

Minutes later, the door opened and to Harry’s surprise, Shelley Lionheart entered the room. Stylish, in a manly way, she carried herself like an Amazon queen. She was someone who would stand out in a crowd. She was in her mid-forties, wearing a fitted matte black jacket and pantsuit; her raven black hair cut short close to her scalp; blue-black nail polish and lips painted with a dark burgundy colour which contrasted against her dark chocolate skin, and slanted cat-like eyes that seemed to glow like coal-hot ambers. On top of all this, at six feet tall, two hundred pounds of muscle, she was definitely not one to joke around with.

Quickly he stood up and stretched out his hand, ready to shake hers. The night before, he had repeatedly practiced in front of the

full-length mirrors in his bedroom. A confident handshake is a good first impression, his mom had always told him.

Lionheart looked him square in the eye and squeezed the circulation from his hand.

Satisfied by his lack of response she turned to Beaver nodding. Beaver quickly pulled back the chair.

“This is Shelley Lionheart, president of Global Nation and GN University,” Beaver stammered. Harry waited to see if he would pull out a trumpet to herald her regal presence.

Lionheart sat down gracefully despite her size, almost as if she was floating into the seat.

Harry pulled back his hand quickly and sat back down.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Lionheart,” he said, trying hard to not let his voice waver.

She folded her hands on the table and leaned slightly towards him.

“Let’s get to business. We have GN offices in every continent. We need someone like you to help set up the security firewall for our networks and database servers globally. We had, what we call, an ‘incident’ at our GN charitable office in Manila, Philippines. Long story short: The web servers were compromised and

experienced breaches in security after the recent riots. The breach involved unauthorized access to personal data of a number of our very important charitable donors. As you can see, this is a delicate matter, which needs to be resolved immediately. Beaver will arrange for you to fly out tomorrow.” She attempted to smile but the expression on her face resembled someone who just took a bite into a bad burrito.

“I haven’t been offered the job yet,” he said quietly.

“Don’t be cute. Or maybe I won’t offer you anything, Mr. Doubt.” The glimpse of a smile disappeared from her mouth, as she continued. “We both know this job was yours before you walked in the door. The interview was just a legal formality. The job is yours. As you know, we are a non-profit charitable organization. And our GN universities are funded partly by the state with some funds coming from tuitions and fees. Of course you already knew this, being the recipient of this generosity. We count on our generous donors to help run our charitable and educational operations. So, yes, it’s not a glamorous job and probably the pay won’t be as attractive as what the private sector can offer you but at least you’ll get to travel. Or perhaps you can call it pay back? Consider that a fringe benefit.”

He nodded his head and smiled. “Before I accept...When I reviewed the current support model you have now for IT, it is no wonder that GN offices are experiencing security breaches in their

networks. GN doesn't have a dedicated IT Operations team despite having multiple offices and universities all over the world. Without the proper security systems in place with regular maintenance and upgrades to the firewalls, it is a shock that the breach didn't happen sooner. So Ms. Lionheart, before I can accept, I'll need you to provide me with the best team of programmers to be able to do my job," he replied, trying not to sound too cocky.

The grimace reappeared on her face. "Call me Shelley. No need for formalities. We're all one family here."

Beaver nodded his head like a bobble-head doll. "Yes, one happy family." He stopped when Lionheart raised her hand.

She tilted her head slightly and said, "Okay, that is a fair observation. What you propose is exactly what we need here. If you take the job, you can hire three people for your team." She paused for a moment. "By the way, you seemed to have impressed George Beaver in your interview. Lucky for you that he will be your senior manager and you are to report to him directly."

Beaver smiled and said, "We normally don't offer positions right after the interview. Now you want to create three more staff positions out of thin air? I guess that you must think you're really somebody special." He looked over at Lionheart and stopped smiling when he met her glare.

Harry almost laughed. Lionheart put Beaver's panties in a wad with one look. Classic.

Lionheart continued. "We checked your references, Harry. Your professors all gave you shining recommendations. It seems that your father's genius has rubbed off on you." Her eyes seemed to drill into his.

He wasn't sure if this was a compliment or her way of testing him. *It's now or never.* He took a deep breath to finally say, "My last request is that you let me be the one to interview and hire the programmers for my team. I need the best of the best and since I'm responsible for this team's success, I want to be the one to choose who we hire."

Beaver frowned and turned to Lionheart to see her reaction. She was expressionless, which to Harry was a good thing. It meant that she was considering his request.

"The sacrificial lamb, so to speak," she mumbled to herself. Lionheart drummed her nails on the table. After an uncomfortable silence, she said, "Very well, then. You will get to hire who you want for your team." She waved to Beaver to get up. "We have concluded this conversation. Beaver will get HR to get your paperwork in order and arrange for your plane ticket. Make sure you check into our health services office to get your vaccinations and meds in order before you fly. We don't want our shining new Manager of IT Operations to get sick on his first assignment."

She stood up and walked out of the room, or to be accurate, she levitated out of her chair and glided out of the room. *Very strange woman*, Harry thought to himself.

“Let’s go, Harry. There’s a lot of stuff you have to do to get ready for your trip,” Beaver said in a bossy tone.

Harry followed him out of the room.

MISSION ONE ACCOMPLISHED. The next challenge was bringing in online gamers to join him on his crusade. How was he going to convince online gamers to leave the privacy of their virtual world to work with others in the real world?

Chapter 4

Serena (alias Lioness)

SERENA BENT OVER TO KISS her father good night. He barely moved, his eyes glued to his iPad, reviewing his notes from his consular meetings that day.

"Good night, father."

He mumbled something that resembled 'good night', kissed the top of her head and returned to his notes. She straightened herself, turned and walked out of the room. Ever since the riot that devastated downtown Manila and the reports of hundreds of people who went missing a few weeks ago, her father had stayed past office hours at the consulate every night.

Her thoughts raced as she walked down the hallway. Suddenly she felt a hand on her left shoulder. Parts of her wanted to start running but instead she froze in her tracks. The spicy scent of 'Gucci pour Homme' cologne enveloped her nostrils. She must have sprayed that scent on thousands of male customers last summer at her part time job during the 'Shangri-la Plaza's Back to School' promotion.

“Don’t be scared Serena. We need to talk,” a deep strong voice whispered in her ear.

This clown was about to learn he was messing with the wrong girl. All she needed was an opening and her training would kick in. She nodded her head and continued down the hall. The stranger pressed his hand into the small of her back. She could feel his firm body through her pink cotton pajamas as he guided her down the corridor. She squinted to see her reflection in the twenty-foot mirror at the end of the hallway. Her short dirty blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, revealed her pale white skin. She appeared more like a bewildered child and not the confident twenty-two year old she was known to be among her circle of friends. As they walked closer towards the mirror, she could faintly see the outline of her captor; his hooded jacket hid his facial features. Possibly six feet tall, his frame overshadowed her mere five foot two inches of height. She made mental notes, so that if she failed to disable him and he got away, she’d have all the details to give to the police.

“Let’s go inside your room.” It was more of a request than a command.

Why did he sound so familiar? Who was this person? She opened the door into the darkness of the room. Her hand reached out for the light switch, an automatic reaction. He grabbed her hand and held it tight.

“Keep the lights down for now.”

The streaks of pale moonlight streamed through the open window onto her bed.

Serena tried to think. She could have easily caught her captor by surprise and kneed him in the groin or better yet gouged his eyes out if she wanted to. Having taught self-defense classes at Global Nation for the past two years, she was not about to lose her advantage of her hidden talent till she ascertained what kind of weapon he carried.

“Have a seat on the bed.”

Unsure of what his intentions were and yet as equally curious, she sat down on the corner of her bed, obeying his request. Her eyes moved up his dark pants, up his jacket until it reached his face. He raised his arm. She held her breath anticipating a blow but realized he was only removing his hoodie from his head. Before she could react, he sat down beside her, removing the backpack on his shoulder onto the bed beside him. He fumbled for a minute and brought out a square object. He placed it onto his lap and then opened it. The bright light from the laptop caught her by surprise forcing her to rule out robbery, rape or kidnapping as a motive. He had to be the lamest intruder on the planet.

Unable to contain herself, she jumped up. “What is this? Who the hell are you?” she finally burst out.

He turned to her, his blue eyes piercing into hers. His lips curled into a smile, like a child who had a secret to share.

“Harry... Harry Doubt. Nice to finally meet you in person, Serena. Or should I say Lioness? I have a mission for you. Many Philippine citizens have ‘disappeared’ or have gone missing in the last year.”

“Are you nuts?” Serena sputtered. “You don’t break into peoples’ houses and say ‘Hi, I have a mission for you’. I want you to leave.” Serena stood, pointing at the door.

“Perhaps I went about this the wrong way,” Harry said with a sigh.

“Ya’ think?”

Harry reached out to shake her hand in attempt to introduce himself. Serena grabbed it and made a swift classic ‘ippon seoinage’ judo move, disabling Harry with a one-arm shoulder throw to the ground. She pinned her foot over his throat and twisted his arm. *That teaches you a lesson.*

“So talk to me. What’s this about?” she demanded.

“Manila, Global Nation,” Harry managed to choke out. “Disappearances.”

“So? Tell me something I don’t know. Global Nation has been offering help to the local police and army to try to find out about the disappearances.” She pushed her foot even more firmly on his throat.

“In my front pocket, there’s a flash card. Take it.”

She reached for the flash card and frowned.

“We need you to find out what is on your father’s computer. We have information that GN is involved.”

Chapter 5

Cristal (alias Mist)

Mist: Zero, are you there? Hello?

Zero: Yes. We're confirmed for video chat with Onyx at 1 pm.
Do I need to remind you to be nice?

Be nice? Cristal looked at the screen frowning. Of course I'll be 'nice'. *Who do you think I am?* Before she could respond, he logged off. *Argh!*

When Harry recruited Kerim Ilgaz without asking her, she was 'nice'. She had voiced her concerns about Kerim's technical skills that were not up to par with the others on the Elite team.

"There are other talents we need, not just programming or gaming ones," he said. Harry didn't share what those 'talents' were, so she respectfully kept her mouth shut.

And wasn't she 'nice' when Harry recruited Angelica? Again despite her not even being in the top 500 of the 'Truth Seekers' game, she agreed to train her.

“She will be a significant asset for us when we need it,” he assured her.

Serena, on the other hand, was really cool to work with. Stationed in the Philippines, which was twelve hours ahead of New York time, Serena often video chatted with her late at night or early in the morning, all without complaint. She took the missions seriously just as she did.

But what was the big deal with Joanna? During the online game missions, Joanna always broke the rules. She once led the team into enemy territory with not enough weapons or ammunition despite Cristal's warnings. They did succeed in destroying the enemy's munitions building but at the expense of losing three members of their team. Nothing Harry could say would convince her that Joanna was nothing more than a ladder-climbing fraud.

She took a deep breath. *Don't worry, Mr. Doubt, I will deal with Joanna when the time comes.*

TEN YEARS AGO, Cristal Hernandez started playing the online game Truth Seekers. In her real life outside the game, she didn't fit in with anything or anybody. Classmates called her 'the loner' or 'weirdo', taunting her on the playground because she was always nose-deep in a book.

She enjoyed losing herself in the fantasy world where the problems of her life didn't matter. Since she was little, she was very aware of things that made her different from other children. Her father used to spend time with her, teaching her how to control her 'abilities'. She was able to open a book and read it from beginning to end in half an hour. The words used to lift off the page and flood into her head in waves of sentences, phrases and paragraphs. She used to tell her father that it felt as if she was 'consuming' a book, not reading it.

When she was in first grade, her father began molding her interest in computer programming. Instead of dolls or toys to play with, she received thick programming books to read. He told her that these skills would be very useful for her in the future. She enjoyed 'consuming' the books and found the programming activities inside them creatively challenging. Soon she was building online applications and web tools. The power of creating something out of physically 'nothing' tantalized her curiosity.

"Dad, I want to do more projects. What else can you teach me?"
She begged him.

“You were meant to do special things, Cristal,” he always told her. When she was with him, she felt she could accomplish anything she wanted. But one day, everything changed.

On her tenth birthday, her father never made it home from work. He was reported officially missing after her mother placed a missing person report forty-eight hours later.

“He can't be gone Mom! He just can't!” She ran into her room and slammed the door. She remembered how at that same moment; her heart began racing; her lungs expanding as if drawing in all the air around her, and the room slowly started spinning. The floor shifted beneath her feet and then the walls started to shake.

“Cristal! Stop!”

“Dad?” She whirled around. There was no one in the room but her. Her heart rate slowed; the room was no longer shaking. Her books were strewn on the floor, evidence that the event happened. Had her father not called out to her, who knows what damage she could have done.

After that night, she was convinced that her father would return.

When the police closed the missing person's file a year later, her mother became ghost-like—floating around the house, wordless; an empty vessel.

Cristal had no choice but to fend for both of them. She knew that is what her father would have wanted. She made sure her mom made it to her psychiatric appointments and her ‘Help Group’ at the local church. She learned how to buy the groceries and cook. All the while, she never gave up the hope of seeing her father again. Even if she had wanted to forget, her dreams wouldn't let her.

Her father is standing at a distance, surrounded by a light mist, waving and calling out her name. She runs towards him, screaming, "Dad, I'm coming to you!" but her voice has no sound. The faster she runs, the farther he seems to be. Still she runs faster, harder. Clouds of white merciless mist block her from reaching him. "Dad, don't go!" She cries out in her head. But now his image is fading, melting into the blanket of whiteness and silence.

TWO YEARS AFTER her father's disappearance, her mother started dating a dentist from her ‘Help Group’. Short, bald with a terrible case of bad breath, he was the complete opposite of her father. It wasn't long before *Dr. Halitosis* married her mom and moved into their home.

“Cristal, get off the computer. You have school tomorrow,” her mother called out from the living room.

“Mom, fifteen more minutes!” Fifteen minutes usually meant an hour.

“You know how your Dad hates you playing those online games. He's going to be home soon.”

“He's not my Dad,” she grumbled under her breath. *Why does mom put up with this creep?*

Instead of hanging out at the malls like most thirteen year old girls, she spent her spare time battling against evil. It was about the time when she received a full scholarship to study at MIT, the summer before her fifteenth birthday when she first met Harry.

She had gained 10 million points, the most any player had ever reached. Everyone was talking about it in the discussion forums. That same day, she received a private message. The message invited her to join the Elite team, which was headed by Zero (aka Harry), the creator of the Truth Seekers. He was known to invite only the best of the best.

Zero: Inviting you to be a member of the Elite Team. You have 24 hours to accept the invitation.

No one would even dream of receiving a private message from Harry. Other gamers could only hope of having the infamous Harry Doubt comment on their discussion posts. When Harry posted a message, gamers would rush to post a message in hopes that he would reply. *What a bunch of losers. Who the heck was this Harry Doubt anyway?*

But the challenge to be in the top team was hard to resist. So she responded to his invitation.

Mist: Mission accepted. Awaiting further instructions.

After the first successful mission as an elite Truth Seeker, Harry began messaging her regularly. They started to spend hours online brainstorming strategic maneuvers to conquer other players in the game.

Many times while video chatting with Harry, her stepfather would bang on her door yelling, "If you don't stop playing on the computer, I'm going to shut off the Internet!"

"Is everything okay?" Harry would ask her.

"Yeah," she answered with a shrug.

She always pretended that things were fine. *Never show anyone your weaknesses*, her father always told her. *Especially your closest allies.*

Chapter 6

Joanna Chan (alias Onyx)

"IS HE SERIOUS?" JOANNA ASKED herself, running her hand through her long straight black hair. This was the fourth quality assurance project assigned to her. What an insult to her programming expertise. She wasn't the top gamer in Truth Seekers for nothing.

She drummed her peach manicured nails on the armrest of her office chair.

Instead of working, she was entertaining herself by playing the Truth Seekers' alternate reality game. The fun part was doing it with no one noticing. It wasn't hard to do since she was the newest kid on the block and her cubicle was the size of a postage stamp stuck way back in the dungeons of the office, far away into the corner next to the archive cabinets. The nearest cubicle was ten feet away from her, so she had all the privacy she needed to play her games. Out of all the games she played, Truth Seekers was the most breathless and demanding, just like the programmer genius that

developed it. And like in any game, she wanted the top prize, so she had no doubt that Harry was hers to attain.

The game's private message bounced in the corner of the monitor demanding her attention.

Joanna's eyes sparked with excitement.

Zero: Onyx, let's meet at the coffee shop across the street in ten minutes. Mist hacked into the database and found some information that might help both you and Graphix find out more about the disappearance of your family members. You can work to decode all the encrypted data. But we can talk more when we see each other.

Without hesitation, Joanna logged out of her computer, grabbed her purse and ran out the back door. She ran across the street, the spiked heels of her black boots tapping the cement. She could see Harry sitting by the window table of the coffee shop. Finally, here was her chance to work alone with Harry on a real Truth Seekers' mission.

Harry Doubt, the icon of alternate reality game creators, was a private guy. Gamers could only play by his personal invitation. Joanna, who had been playing obsessively on Truth Seekers every night, took the job at Global Nation (GN) at the GN

University campus in New York City when Harry sent out the following message via the 'Truth Seekers' private message system:

“Looking for a real Truth Seekers' mission? Only inviting 5 of the top gamers here. You'll get to work closely with me on missions which are yet to be disclosed.”

Joanna didn't think twice. She was twenty-four years old and had just graduated from the Emery College's Game Art and Design Program in San José, California. She was itching to do something fun. She bought a one-way ticket to New York City.

Harry had made sure all the hiring paperwork was taken care of. He even found an apartment for her to live in and paid one year of the lease up front. She was so thrilled to be one of the few gamers to have the opportunity to meet the famous Harry Doubt that she heard so much about in the discussion forums.

His father Aaron Doub, professor of theoretical physics at Global Nation University of New York, had been pretty famous too. He was intelligent and entertaining without even trying to be. People had paid top dollar to watch him speak at conferences. He'd introduced himself as a "futurist" and as a "mad scientist." His quirky habits had been his signature. He'd constantly pushed his black horn-rimmed glasses up on the bridge of his beak-like nose, waved his hands around excitedly, explaining a breakthrough in something unheard of, like worm holes. He'd worn a tshirt that said, 'I'm from 2025'. His presentations were captured on thousands of

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YouTube videos, which Truth Seekers shared on discussion forums. Too bad he'd died so suddenly. Harry must have been so devastated to lose such an ingenious father.

AFTER WORKING FOR EIGHT months at GN, she barely saw the 22-year-old genius. The only time Harry spoke to her directly, it was to ask her something about a GN work-related matter. It was always Cristal who met with Harry to brainstorm ideas after work. Sometimes Gabriel (aka Graphix), one of the top Truth Seekers (and Harry's buddy), would be invited on those overnight mission-planning sessions. For some reason Joanna was always kept out of the loop.

Not this time. Harry personally invited her for this mission. And knowing that it could help solve the mystery around the disappearance of her father made it even more attractive.

When she stepped into the shop, she did a quick sweep of the store. Like in the game, she always made a point to check her surroundings.

There were two customers waiting in line at the counter. Joanna looked to the back. There was an old man sitting and reading the paper. There were two teen girls eating. She could see Harry sitting at a table; working on his laptop with his head leaned forward. He wore a brown sport jacket, white t-shirt, and jeans. Nothing seemed suspicious.

Joanna straightened her skirt and walked up to Harry's table. *Be normal. He's like any other guy. Just go up to him and say, "Harry, I won't let you down on this mission."* She shook her head. *No, that sounds dumb. Say, "It's going to be fun to be doing a real mission with you, Harry."*

By the time she was by the table, all she could blurt out was, "Harry, I'm here."

Without looking up, Harry motioned for her to sit down across from him.

"Great, glad you're here. Cristal and Kerim will join us on video chat. We all need to discuss our next mission."

What? She could feel the blood in her temples pulse.

"Oh? Okay..." she managed to say as she sat down.

Her eyes focused on Harry's face while her heart pounded in her chest. *Could he hear the beats like tom-tom drums on her ribs? This is strike one. I deserve to be the mission lead. I have more influence points, power and assets in the online game than Ms. Cristal Know-it-all.*

"Joanna. Do you understand your tasks at hand?"

She smirked to acknowledge but Harry's eyes didn't leave the screen. Before she could respond, he repeated her mission tasks.

She knew she was the best programmer in Harry's team-- albeit, Harry often touted Cristal as being the other. *Working with Cristal will be interesting.*

Chapter 7

Before all hell breaks loose

Zero: "We found some information that might help Graphix find out what happened to his family. Meet him in 10 minutes to show him the files. Bring Shadow with you as backup. You are the only one who can decode all the encrypted data. But only do this if Shadow is with you."

She looked down at her watch. She had been standing outside the Global Nation's building for thirty minutes. *What was taking Kerim so long?*

Before she started texting Harry, she heard an engine roar from a distance. She looked up and saw Kerim Ilgaz (aka Shadow), dressed in a leather jacket and black jeans riding into the Global Nation's parking lot on his black and yellow Ducati. He slowed down and stopped his bike in front of her. He removed his black helmet, to reveal his dark wavy hair, slicked back against his head. He pushed his sunglasses on top of his head, his grey steel eyes shining against the sunlight.

He waved for her to climb onto his bike and handed her an extra helmet. *Really? He wants me to ride that thing?* She paused for a moment, before placing the helmet on. Kerim motioned with his head for her to climb on. *Is he serious? Am I one of his fan girls?*

She did not move; her arms crossed in front of her. He rolled his eyes and sighed. Still she did not move.

Finally, he reached out his hand, waiting for her to grab it. She paused for a second, pushed it away and climbed on the bike by herself.

"Hold tight Cristal," he called back to her as he started the engine.

Mmm, I love his sexy accent. She stopped and shook her head. *Where did that come from? Disgusting! Focus on the mission.*

Cristal leaned closer to him but tried not to hold too tight. No need to give him the wrong impression. She closed her eyes as the motorcycle started moving, the sound of the motor roaring underneath her. The bike sped through the streets, but she dared not open her eyes. Her heart was pounding hard; her knees felt weak, and her head was spinning inside the heaviness of the helmet. *If I'd known he was going to be riding a motorcycle, I could have taken a cab,* she thought to herself.

After what felt like a roller coaster ride, she opened her eyes, noticing that the engine had stopped. She looked around and saw that they were parked in front of Gabriel's apartment building.

She let go of Kerim and slowly got off the bike. He climbed off and removed his helmet. Her legs felt like rubber bands beneath her. She swayed off balance. Kerim grabbed her by the waist with one arm. She felt her stomach squirm. *Get this helmet off, I can't breathe!*

As if hearing her thoughts, Kerim reached over with his other hand and unsnapped the strap under her chin and gently removed the helmet. The cool air caressed her cheeks. She took deep breaths; drinking in the oxygen. Kerim's other arm was still wrapped tight around her waist. Once her head was cleared, she looked up at him.

This close, she was able to see that his skin was a smooth olive colour; his nose perfectly straight and Romanesque, and his grin was mischievous but playful. She shook her head again. *Why am I thinking these things? Ugh...*

She removed his arm from her waist and firmly pushed him aside. He stepped back, letting her pass. She turned toward the entrance of the building and walked straight up to the buzzer. She stopped for a moment trying to remember Gabriel's buzzer code. Finally, she entered the number '24'. The sound of the ring tone

rang out from the speaker. After several rings, Gabriel's voice echoed out of the speaker.

"Who is it?"

"Can you please open the door? It's Cristal."

"Sure. C'mon in."

A loud 'beep beep beep' came from the speaker, and she pulled the glass door. Kerim reached his arm out to hold the door open and followed behind her. She walked into the small lobby and straight to the elevator. There was only one elevator in the building. It so old, she swore that one day it would give way while she was in it, plummeting her to the basement.

The building was built in the 1940's; the lighting was poor, and the walls were covered with orange, suede-fabric, flowery wallpaper which may have been installed in the seventies; and the carpet, once a bright red, was now a greyish brown. It wasn't the aesthetics of the interior that made her stomach queasy. It was the strange feeling of someone or something watching her every time she was in the building.

As if sensing her unease, Kerim reached out and touched her arm. She glared at him and shook his hand away from her. The elevator finally arrived, creaking and squeaking as it opened. She

walked in quickly and pressed the button. Kerim stepped inside and stood beside her.

They rode in silence until they reached the third floor. When the doors opened, Kerim followed a few steps behind Cristal as they walked down the dark hallway, the crackle of old incandescent bulbs hanging from the ceiling the only sound accompanying their footsteps. Even though he irritated her, she felt a sense of calm knowing he was there. Finally, they reached Gabriel's apartment door. She looked at Kerim briefly before knocking.

The door squeaked as it opened a crack, before swinging wide open. She was greeted by an unshaven, uncombed Gabriel. He was smiling, but she could see that his brown eyes were reddened, probably from hours spent on the computer. Dressed in a worn grey bathrobe, t-shirt and jogging pants, he looked like he must have been playing another 'all-nighter'.

Cristal opened her mouth to speak when she heard Kerim cough. Gabriel's eyes widened, and his smile disappeared. He looked past her shoulder towards Kerim who stood behind her.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

"My name is Kerim. Harry recently recruited me to the Truth Seekers," Kerim replied calmly.

Gabriel shook his head. "Harry never told me about you. And he never said you'd be coming."

Cristal frowned. *How could Harry not tell him? He was always careful about new recruits.* And Kerim's cocky attitude wasn't helping matters. If Gabriel lost his temper, he wouldn't let either of them in. The point was that there was a job to be done, and for some reason, it felt as though time was running out. She took one step forward.

"Gabriel, we all are here to help each other. Let us in."

He looked at her but did not move. She stepped closer, letting her eyes meet his stare.

With an authoritative tone, she said, "You know I am the only one that can decode all that encrypted data. Harry told me specifically to bring Kerim. Okay?" He stared blankly at her.

After a few more seconds, Gabriel shrugged his shoulders. "Okay, whatever, come in," he said, stepping back.

Kerim walked past both of them, straight to the living room and plopped down on to the black leather couch, placing his helmet beside him. Cristal gave Gabriel a weak smile. She walked down to the opposite end of the couch distancing herself from Kerim.

"Hey Gabe, do you have any coffee? I've got a terrible migraine," Kerim said.

Gabriel frowned at him before turning to her.

"Would you like coffee too?" he asked.

She nodded. Gabriel half-smiled at her, then disappeared into the kitchen which was really part of the living/dining room, separated only by a 1970s' style orange beaded curtain. Gabriel always said the '70s was the coolest time in human history. She and Harry used to burst out laughing when he would bring out his round table and play his vinyl records of the '70s classic disco hits.

"Okay, so now what?" Kerim asked.

She turned away from him. She needed to get set up and didn't need him to distract her. The coffee table was cluttered with gaming magazines, pop cans and chocolate bar wrappers and a tissue box. She piled the magazines together neatly and put them to the side. She pushed the empty pop cans to the other side. She pulled her laptop out of her backpack and opened it up onto the coffee table. The screen already had the terminal open, ready for her to start working. Kerim shifted closer to her, his knee almost touching hers. She glanced down briefly and moved her knee away.

"Do you think you can really decode the encrypted file? Harry seems to think so. But we all know that he has a crush on you." Kerim turned to her with a wry smile.

I could smack him right now. She tried to focus on the code in front of her, letting her fingers fly across the keyboard. The characters and numbers that flashed before her were comforting. No emotional misunderstandings or tension to deal with—just pure straightforward code.

Kerim's hand found its way to her knee.

Cristal leaped up from her seat, her arm flailing up to push Kerim away, knocking over Gabriel who had entered the room. He was carrying a tray of coffee mugs that slipped from his hands onto the table, sending boiling coffee onto Kerim's lap and her computer.

"Hey! Take it easy, man!" Kerim cried out.

"What the hell are you doing?" Gabriel shouted. He reached out and grabbed the box of tissues from the table.

Kerim stood up, coffee dripping down from his pants to the carpet.

"You guys are both insane!" Cristal took the tissue box from Gabriel's hand.

"Hey, I need those," Kerim said. He reached out for the box.

Cristal pulled the box away, taking a handful of tissues and wiping the sticky brown mess off her computer. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Gabriel's fists were clenched. *This is crazy.*

"You know, you're a real jerk," Gabriel growled.

"What did you say?" Kerim asked in a quiet voice.

"Oh you heard what I said," Gabriel said, his eyes blazing. He lunged towards Kerim, swinging at him. Kerim smoothly turned his body avoiding the punch. He grabbed Gabriel by the wrist and twisted his arm behind his back.

"You've got to be kidding me," Cristal mumbled to herself.

She noticed that her hands had started to shake. *Oh not again!* She needed to get out of there soon. She grabbed her laptop and backpack.

"What are you doing?" Gabriel asked with his hand still locked behind his back.

"Where are you going?" Kerim added, letting Gabriel's arm go.

She stopped and whirled around to face them.

"I don't have time for this, whatever this is. We need to finish the mission and obviously you two want to arm wrestle."

Her hands were still shaking. She walked past the kitchen towards the dark hallway. She looked to her right and saw a room with a desk and an office chair. A disco ball hung from the ceiling. The few times that she and Harry came to see Gabriel, they never went beyond the living room area. In the corner of the room were

a twin-sized bed and a bookshelf full of action figure dolls. The bed was neatly made; the wall was covered with posters of video games and 70's music bands.

She walked in and cleared the papers off the desk, placing them in the drawer. She put her laptop on the desktop and opened the video chat window. Before she could continue with the decoding, she knew that she needed to calm down. She sat down on the chair and closed her eyes. She took in a deep breath and then let out a long exhale.

"Be careful Cristal." Her father's voice hummed in her head.

After a few minutes of deep breathing, the shaking stopped.

"Are you okay?"

She opened her eyes and looked up to see Gabriel and Kerim standing in the doorway. They both looked like repentant little boys begging forgiveness from their mother.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she replied. "Did you guys make peace?"

Gabriel nodded his head. He turned to Kerim and said, "Hey how did you learn those cool self defense moves?"

Kerim gave a small smile. "I was in the Turkish army for four years for mandatory service."

"Could you teach me some of that? I'm really good at fighting in the game but man, it would be really cool to be able to do it for real." Gabriel threw him a fake punch to his stomach.

Kerim doubled over. They began fake wrestling together, bumping into the doorframe.

"Okay, boys. Are you guys done yet?" Cristal shook her head with a smile.

Suddenly, a high-pitched sound blasted into the room. The floor began shaking beneath her feet. She paused for a moment, wondering if she was causing this. She looked at her hands. They were not shaking. She noticed too that her breathing was even. She glanced up to see Gabriel's hand on the doorframe and the other one holding onto Kerim's chest, his eyes closed tight. Kerim's arms were outstretched, his hands holding onto the doorframe. His eyes were staring at her, wide open; his face pale.

Perhaps since she had experienced many instances similar to this (minus the high pitched sound), she was feeling quite calm. As if in a dream, she watched her laptop slide off the desk along with her mouse, the jar of pens and other miscellaneous office supplies onto the ground. Her chair seemed to sway with the waves of turbulence, almost as if the legs had shock absorbers installed. The shaking seemed to be in slow motion for her, although she knew that it wasn't the same for Kerim and Gabriel. She could see the doorframe shaking violently, the wall almost seeming like it was

going to implode. For brief instances, it seemed that Kerim and Gabriel disappeared.

She had opened her mouth to call out to them, when the floor stopped shaking. She noticed that the high-pitched sound had also vanished. Everything grew eerily still.

Kerim let go of the doorframe, his arms falling down to his sides. Gabriel was still clutching to him; his eyes closed.

"Oh!" Gabriel whimpered. After a few seconds, he opened one eye and looked around the room. He glanced up at Kerim who was frowning down at him. He half smiled, letting go of Kerim. "I mean, wow, that was really freakin' amazing, huh?"

Kerim shook his head and walked towards Cristal.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded her head slowly; still unsure if she were the cause of what seemed to be a mini earthquake.

"I'm okay."

Kerim bent down to pick up her laptop. The light from the screen was still on—a good sign that all her work was not lost.

"Looks like your laptop is just as tough as you." Kerim put the computer on the desk.

On the screen, the video chat window was open and Harry and Joanna were looking at them.

Joanna's mouth was open, her eyes wide with shock. Harry was smiling from ear to ear. He was speaking, but there was no sound. Behind them, people were picking up things off the ground— from what Cristal could make of it, mostly cups, cutlery and fallen chairs.

Cristal reached over and pressed the volume button until Harry's voice was audible. Gabriel came over and stood behind her. Kerim moved to the other side.

"...that was spectacular, guys. Dr. Saeed and I were working on some tests. Thank you for helping prove that my theory is correct. We want to talk to all of you in person tonight. I will text you the details."

Chapter 8

Questions that need answers

CRISTAL STARED AT HER monitor in disbelief. The video chat window went black.

"Were you in on this?" Gabriel asked, turning to her.

Cristal shook her head and sat back. Suddenly Kerim leaned towards her, grabbing the chair's armrests with both hands and turning her towards him. With his hands still on the armrests, he leaned over, looking directly into her eyes.

She heard Gabriel ask, "What was that, guys?"

She couldn't move. Kerim's eyes were staring deeply into hers while she was trying to process what Harry had told them.

"You were very calm during the whole thing," he said to her raising one eyebrow.

She nodded her head slowly. She could hear Gabriel moving around behind her. "She didn't seem calm to me," he said.

Kerim looked over her shoulder towards him. "Gabriel, you had your eyes closed the whole time." She felt her body relax for a moment.

"Well, not the whole time," Gabriel replied. "Okay, most of it."

Kerim's eyes met hers again. She felt her body tense up. "Before you answer, Cristal," Kerim said, "I want to know, can we trust him?" He was pointing at Gabriel.

"Hey! Wait a minute!" Gabriel cried out.

She pushed her chair back, releasing Kerim's grip on the chair, forcing him to stand up. She looked from Gabriel to Kerim.

Question is, can I trust either of them?

"If you really want to know..." she said slowly.

She could see Gabriel smiling and pleading with his eyes for her to continue. Kerim was still frowning at her. *Oh God... here we go.*

"This isn't the first time this happened to me."

Gabriel leaned back on the desk. "What do you mean?"

Kerim stepped forward to her, kneeling down on one knee. He placed his right hand on the armrest. His steel grey eyes seemed to penetrate hers, digging into her mind.

"Do you want to know what I saw, Cristal?" Kerim asked in a low voice.

She couldn't seem to move. Her arms were paralyzed and her legs stiff.

Kerim continued. "You started the earthquake and the bright light, right?" he asked in a hypnotic tone.

Cristal clenched her fists. *Why can't I move?* She used all her strength and pushed Kerim away. She stood up, causing him to stumble backwards onto the desk. With her fists on her hips, she leaned towards him.

"Is this an interrogation, Kerim?" She could feel her emotions getting out of control.

"I was watching you and there was a beam of light coming out from your chest to the ceiling and to the ground. It was like the light was coming through you." Kerim took a step forward. She did not move. *What is he talking about?*

Her hands fell to her side. She couldn't stop looking at him. His face was so close to hers. If he leaned any closer their noses would have touched.

"I don't know anything about that." She didn't know what else to say.

"When the room was shaking, you were motionless. Your eyes were empty. But I could see things above your head."

Gabriel turned to look at him. "What things?"

"I don't know how to explain it. It was like watching a movie from an old projector onto the white screen. Except the screen was the light that was coming out from inside you."

She blinked and shook her head. This is impossible. I have to get out of here.

"Cristal, did you feel or see any of that?" Gabriel asked. "Are you okay?"

"I'm not okay. I gotta go. I'm sorry." She stood up, pushed Gabriel to the side, grabbed her laptop and her bag and headed to the door.

She walked down the hallway. She could hear them following her. When she reached the living room, Kerim grabbed her by the arm and turned her around. Gabriel was standing right behind him.

"Cristal, you can't leave now. We need to talk about this," Kerim said.

"No, we don't. I need to go, I need to find Harry. Let me go, please." She pushed his hand off of her arm.

"Harry?" Gabriel asked. She noted the sound of concern in his voice. "No, I agree with Kerim. We need to figure this out as much as we can before meeting Harry and the rest of the group tonight."

She couldn't think properly much less talk about it. *Beam of light? Projections above my head? What next?* Kerim let go of her arm. She stared at both of them, not saying a word.

Just then, her cell phone beeped. She reached for it in her backpack. New text message from Harry. The sound of Gabriel and Kerim's cellphone text message ringtones followed soon after.

Zero: Meet me at the GN University, Physics Dept., Room 1130 at 6 pm today. Confirm receipt.

She was about to respond to the text when her phone started ringing. Harry's name came up on the screen. She swiped the screen to answer.

"Yes?" Cristal asked.

"Cristal, checking to see if you are okay." Harry's voice seemed serious but she could hear a hint of excitement.

She closed her eyes. She felt stronger when she was not looking into Kerim's prying eyes. The sound of Harry's voice should have calmed her, but it only made her more anxious.

“No, not really. You have got some explaining to do.” She tried to keep her voice steady. *Should I tell Harry about the light that Kerim saw?*

“I’ll meet you back at GN and we can talk then.”

Before she could say anything, he ended the call.

Chapter 9

Who to trust

CRISTAL SIGHED. Her thoughts were spinning.

"I have to go," she said still staring at her phone.

"Okay, I'll drop you off," Kerim replied. He went into the living room towards the couch to grab his helmet.

She shook her head. "No, I'm taking a cab back to the office."

Kerim stopped, turning to face her. He glanced at Gabriel who shrugged his shoulders. He looked back at her.

"Okay then. See you tonight," Kerim said slowly.

Gabriel shook his head. "We should talk about this some more, but that's just what I think," he mumbled to himself.

Maybe Gabriel is right. She paused for a moment but then shook her doubts from her head and walked out the door.

OUTSIDE OF THE BUILDING, she welcomed the fresh air. She stood still for a moment, taking in deep breaths, hoping to relax. She looked around. People were scattering on the streets like the fire ants that sought safety from the garden hose she wielded as a child. She remembered the colony that had infested the cement pathway in the backyard.

"There is no signal," a young man said to her. He was waving his cell phone. "Do you have a signal?"

She shook her head, knowing full well that her cell phone was working fine. It was connected to a satellite and not on a regular cellular network. Harry had made sure that all the Truth Seekers were able to communicate with each other at all times.

She looked around. Something was very different. She looked up towards the sky. Angry strokes of crimson red with charcoal rain clouds hung above them. What was strange were the streaks of lightning that were criss-crossing each other like an intricate woven rug. If she squinted, she could make out an image, almost like a painting. *Odd, very odd.*

She started to walk down West 34th Street, hoping to find a cab. Abandoned cars were making the normally traffic-congested street even more difficult for cabs to get through. She started picking up

her pace. She was going to have to walk to GN, which was on Lexington and East 33rd Avenue. It was probably a good 25-minute walk.

She walked past pockets of people. She noticed one thing they all had in common. Their eyes were opened wide, blinking fast as they raced past her. A woman with snow-white hair and clear blue eyes caught her gaze. She was walking towards her, clutching her black purse. Her shoes were black with thick heels. Each step she made was like a crack of thunder in her head. She covered her ears but it didn't stop the sound. *Walk past her. Look away.*

She looked away briefly but her eyes were drawn back to the woman. They were now face to face with each other. She stopped, her feet frozen.

"You. It was you," the woman said in a quiet voice. Standing in front of her now, the woman seemed fragile and small.

"I think you are mistaking me for someone else." She took a step to the side intending to walk around her.

The woman grabbed her arm. "I saw you in my vision. When the earth was shaking."

Cristal stopped, turning slowly towards her. Her skin felt like the fire ants from her childhood experiments were crawling up her arms.

"I don't know what you mean," she said, half-believing her own words.

The woman continued. "It **was** you. There was a bright light coming down from heaven through your body into the earth." She clutched the gold cross around her neck with her left hand.

Cristal shook her head. "No, not me... it wasn't me." She pulled her arm away from the old woman and started running down the street. Her heart was pounding, her palms sweating. Her backpack bounced against her, the straps rubbing her shoulders.

She kept running, oblivious of the people bumping into her. The words repeated in her head like a mantra.

"It wasn't me. It wasn't me..."

She looked up and realized that GN was at the next corner. She dodged traffic and ran across the street. As she ran up to the busy intersection, another voice entered her head.

*"But it **was** you, darling."*

Chapter 10

Earthquake or not?

CRISTAL'S PULSE WAS RACING.

"*Was it me?*" she asked herself.

She pushed her way past the people on the street and ran across the intersection. Some GN staff were standing in groups in the designated safe areas. She saw members from her team gathering at the end of the street. She searched for Harry in the crowd. She could hear comments as she walked past.

"It's the climate change that did this," a lady from the accounting department said.

"I bet you it had something to do with terrorists," another said.

"It was scary. I thought we were going to die," a man from the helpdesk support team told a fellow team member.

As she came closer, the sound of their voices filled her head. The sound seemed to be rising as if someone had turned the volume on full blast. She stopped and closed her eyes. She needed to calm down and take control of herself. *Get out of my head!* She closed her eyes and slowed her breathing. It was working. The voices were fading, except for one. Harry's.

"Cristal, is everything okay?"

She opened her eyes. Harry was staring at her intensely. A wave of relief swept through her body. She opened her mouth to speak but noticed Joanna beside him. She frowned. Joanna was clutching onto Harry's arm as if she were holding onto him for dear life.

Harry must have noticed Cristal's anxiety. He glanced down and pulled his arm from Joanna's grip. She glared at him, crossing her arms and pouting.

"They're doing a head count," he said, staring back at Cristal.

She nodded her head.

"Can you take me home?" Joanna asked, pulling Harry's arm. He shook it away from her. "Are you listening to me?"

He spoke but did not stop staring at Cristal. "Joanna, calm down. After they give us the all clear, we have to go back in."

"You're the manager! You can let us go home, if you wanted to," she said in a whiny voice.

Cristal could feel herself losing her patience.

"Get a hold of yourself," she snapped. "At least you're okay, so stop acting like such a brat."

"Okay? I'm NOT okay," Joanna blurted out. She waved her arms as if to emphasize her point. "None of this is okay!"

"Do you realize what happened today?" Cristal asked.

"No, duh. We had an earthquake," Joanna replied, rolling her eyes. "Why don't we ask Harry?" She turned to him putting her hands on her hips. "Tell us. Was that an earthquake?"

Harry gave her a dirty look.

"This is not the time or the place," he started to say.

"Why isn't it the right time or place, Harry?" Cristal heard Kerim's voice. She turned to her right with her mouth half open.
How did he get here?

"On my motorcycle," Kerim said looking at her with a grin. "Alleys, side streets and sidewalks." *How did he know what I was thinking?*

The sound of a horn came from the building. It was safe to go back in.

"This is not the time nor the place," Harry repeated, narrowing his eyes.

Harry motioned to Cristal to walk with him by nodding his head towards the building.

"See you at six tonight, Kerim," he said.

Cristal didn't move. She found herself with a dilemma. *Do I go with Harry and spend the next hours as if nothing had happened or...*

She tucked her arm in Kerim's and pulled herself closer to him. He looked down at her, placing his hand on hers. If anyone else were watching, they would have thought they were a couple.

"See you tonight," she said to Harry. "Kerim, let's go."

Harry raised his eyebrows; his mouth fell open. She could see Joanna smirk.

"Your ride awaits you, my lady," Kerim said, giving Harry a wink.

She smiled to herself, letting him guide her away. She glanced back to see Harry watching them. His mouth was still open.

She pulled Kerim's arm, urging him to walk faster.

"What's the hurry?" he asked.

"No hurry," she said. "I want to get away from this crowd."

He squeezed her hand. They walked together until they reached the intersection. She turned back to see GN staff walking into the building.

"My bike is over there." Kerim nodded towards the other side of the street in front of the coffee shop.

"Let's go to the coffee shop. I think it's open," she said.

"Sounds good. A good espresso might help my caffeine headache."

She glanced up at him. "You still have a headache?"

He nodded his head. They crossed the street in silence and stopped in front of the shop.

"Harry can't see us anymore," he said quietly. He gently let go of her hand.

"Yes, sorry for that," she said. She unhooked her arm from his.

He looked at her for a moment. "No worries. I know how it is."

She gave him a small smile. When they reached the shop, he stopped and let her enter first. She looked around and saw that there were no customers. The owner of the shop was sweeping behind the counter. He looked up when he noticed them in the entrance.

"Sorry, we're closed."

She started to turn around but Kerim's hand touched her arm.

"We were hoping we could stay here for a bit. We really have nowhere to go right now." He nodded towards her. "She's not feeling well. Something fell on her head during the earthquake. We just need a few moments."

She touched her head, wincing slightly hoping that it looked convincing.

The shop owner leaned the broom on the back wall and walked towards them, wiping his hands on his apron.

"It's been a hell of a day," he said. "Please come and sit at this table." He pulled back a chair, motioning for Cristal to sit. "Do you want anything? Tea, coffee? An icepack?"

She smiled and said, "I'm fine, thanks." She sat down.

"An espresso would be good for me," Kerim added, winking at her as he sat down across the small table. "And how about an iced café for the lady?"

She kicked his foot.

"What?" he said, frowning at her.

"Of course, no problem," the owner said.

"We intend to pay for them," she said.

He nodded, as he walked back to the counter.

Cristal leaned towards Kerim. "You like starting trouble, don't you?" she whispered.

He shrugged. "I need my caffeine fix." He leaned forward. "Now I've revealed to you my weakness."

She smiled, putting her hands on the table. "My dad always said, *'Never reveal your weaknesses'*."

"You have a very wise father," he said. His steel grey eyes searched hers. The sadness that she buried deep down inside suddenly welled up in her throat.

"Yes, he is..." she half whispered, "or was..." She looked down at the table.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..." Kerim reached for her hand.

She shook her head and blinked away the tears. Tears that betrayed the cold loneliness she felt every day. Loneliness that was a part of her since her father disappeared.

"No, it's okay. He went missing when I was a kid." She looked at him, trying to seem calm. "But I know he'll be back." *Why did I tell him this? Only Harry knows about my dad.*

"I understand. My older brother went MIA when I was in the army," he said. Cristal noticed his other hand clenched into a fist.

"Missing in action?"

He nodded, and glanced out the window. She put her hand on top of his. She knew how it felt to have someone she loved go missing.

He cleared his throat. "Okay, let's talk about what happened today." He pulled his hand off the table.

"Yes, let's do that." She leaned back and folded her hands on her lap.

"I don't think that there was an earthquake," he said quietly. "I know you feel the same way."

She took a deep breath. She opened her mouth to say something when the shop owner came by with their drinks.

"Thank you very much," she said, relieved to have a moment to think of an answer.

"Do you mind turning on the television?" Kerim asked him.

"Sure, I didn't even bother checking if the cable was working." He went to the counter and grabbed the remote. He pointed it towards the large flat screen TV hanging on the wall, pressing the button and turning it on. The local news station came up on the screen. The anchorwoman was speaking but there was no sound. He pressed the button to turn up the volume.

"...reports from Manila, Rome, Gaza, Haifa, and Vancouver confirm that earthquakes occurred at the precise time as the one that hit Manhattan at 1:25 pm Eastern Standard time today..."

Chapter 11

Want some answers

IT WAS SEVEN HOURS AFTER the earthquake. Dr. Saeed, dressed in his white lab coat, over black casual slacks and a Ford dress shirt, his Boss glasses on top of his head, was standing at the front of the classroom beside Harry. His hair was combed back and his face clean-shaven. Out of all the professors, Cristal always thought Dr. Saeed was the most stylish prof at the university. Three video chat windows were opened on the projection screen. Cristal was sitting on a stool in the first row of lab tables at the front. Gabriel sat beside her with Kerim on the other side. Joanna sat front and centre of the tables, positioned in clear view of Harry; purposely blocking Cristal's view.

Cristal entertained the thought of reaching over and smacking the back of her head. Kerim's knee hit hers. She turned to him and mouthed the words "*What?*" He shook his head with a half grin. *Is he reading my mind?* She shivered at the thought. She shook her head and focused on the screen.

Serena (aka Lioness) was speaking. Her dirty blond hair was swept up with a clip. She was in what looked like her bedroom.

"I was at the location as requested for my mission. The news reports have confirmed that it was the precise epicentre of the earthquake. I also confirmed that there were no early warnings as reported on the HEWS Seismic webpage. For those of you who are not familiar, HEWS is the Humanitarian Early Warning System." She looked down at her notes. "I have further confirmation from seismologists around the world that no one expected these earthquakes."

In the other video chat window, the Martinelli twins Rinaldo (aka Red Fox) and Angelica (aka Venus) were nodding their heads.

Cristal was eager to hear what Rinaldo had to say. It was hard to resist liking him. His wavy brown hair, hazel brown eyes and Hollywood smile not to mention his quaint Italian accent made the other Truth Seekers, mainly those of the female persuasion, rush to his assistance when he needed help in the game. In real life, at only 5 foot 9 inches, he had no trouble attracting high fashion models that towered over him.

"Yeah, it was a pretty crazy here in Roma," he said, "Angelica and me were freakin' out over here when the earth-a-quake hit us. You can imagine that. I'm-a-sure that the Pope fell off his throne and I'm not-a talkin' about the one in the Vatican." He flashed his

contagiously charming smile. Angelica gave him a look and shook her head. Cristal had to hold back a giggle.

"Yes, I have to agree," Angelica said. "It was a freaky experience. I cannot wait to-a-hear what Zero has to say about this. Please explain why and how you knew where we were supposed to be when it happened." She frowned, flipping her long wavy brown hair away from her dark mocha eyes. Cristal envied how she could look upset and sexy at the same time. Her naturally thick pouty lips were what women would pay thousands for in Botox treatments. She looked over at Kerim, trying to read his body language as he listened.

Kerim's face was expressionless. He was listening but not reacting the way men usually do when they see Angelica for the first time. On the other side of her, Gabriel was gazing at the screen. She could have sworn he was drooling as he smiled, drinking in Angelica's every word. She looked up to the screen and caught Harry's gaze. He was watching her closely.

She took a deep breath and focused on what Angelica was saying.

"The room we were in was shaking so much. The floor beneath us, I swear became like a jelly. Rinaldo and me were so frightened. He was holding on to me and crying like a bambina."

Everyone in the room laughed. Rinaldo raised his hand and smacked her on the shoulder.

"Ayyyy... what's a matter with you?" Angelica cried out, turning to him. "It's the truth. You were crying like a little baby girl." She playfully hit him on the back of his head.

"Let's-a-be serious," Rinaldo said, turning back towards them. "Zero, we want to know what the hell is going on?" He pointed his finger towards the camera.

Harry smiled and said, "Let's let our rep from Haifa report first. Adel, please tell us what happened at the two locations where I asked you and your team to meet."

In the third window on the screen, a man that Cristal did not recognize began to speak. He had dark black hair, cut short on the sides, longer and wavy at the top. His eyebrows were thick over the top of large eyes set deeply in his face. He had a wide bridge over a broad nose and his skin was a cinnamon colour.

"Hi everyone. Nice to meet you. At the Gaza location, our team member Sami, experienced the ground shaking. He was outside and he saw in the sky, the light streaks which he first reported as lightning. Then the sky turned blood red. He saw an image forming in the sky like an oil painting. He sent us this picture."

A photo appeared on the screen. Harry moved the mouse and maximized the image. In the picture, the sky was as Adel had described. The sky appeared to be a burgundy red. Cristal squinted and could see an image where the lightening streaks were crossing each other.

Gabriel was shifting his weight on the stool beside her. He whispered, "It looks like a man."

Cristal focused her eyes at the image again. It did look like a man. As Harry zoomed into the area, the shape was becoming clearer. It seemed as if the man was pointing into the direction to the east of him. As the picture sharpened, Cristal was able to make out the man's facial features.

She gasped.

"Cristal, are you okay?" Kerim whispered in her ear.

She could feel herself fading out. The room seemed to be spinning around her. This is how Dorothy must have felt when her house was being swept away by the tornado, she thought to herself.

She felt Kerim's arms around her as she slipped off her stool.

"Someone get her a glass of water! Cristal, are you okay?"

She felt herself being lowered to the floor. She closed her eyes, as the thoughts in her head bounced back and forth like a

shuffleboard disc she had seen her stepfather play years ago on the deck of a Disney Cruise ship. He had proposed to her mother that same night, much to her disgust.

"Cristal, this is Dr. Saeed." She felt something cold pressed onto her forehead. "We are just going to move you over to the couch, okay?"

She felt her body being lifted. *So this is what floating feels like.* Her body was lowered onto the couch, her head gently placed onto something soft.

"Cristal, is it something you saw?" Harry asked.

"Leave her alone," she could hear Kerim snap. "Can't you see she needs to rest?"

"Is she okay?" Gabriel asked.

"She's just faking it," Joanna said.

If she could have lifted herself up, Cristal would have gone over and slapped the witch in the face. But her arms felt like lead; her legs were frozen.

"Can you try to take a sip of water?" Dr. Saeed asked softly in her ear.

She felt someone lift her upright. Her body leaned back against him. *Kerim?* His cologne enveloped her nostrils. She started gasping and her eyes flashed open.

"She's awake!" Gabriel cried out.

She looked up and saw Kerim on his knees. He was holding a small vial under her nose. The fumes overwhelmed her senses.

She raised her arm and pushed it away from her face.

"What is that?" she managed to say.

"Mr. Biker over here thought he could wake you up with his emergency backup bottle of cologne," Joanna answered.

Gabriel knelt down beside Kerim. He looked up towards Joanna who was standing behind them.

"It worked, didn't it?" Gabriel said. He turned to Cristal.
"Kerim said that back in Istanbul, they always use cologne to revive people who faint."

She took a deep breath. Her head was becoming clear again. She struggled to sit up. She noticed that it was Harry that she had been leaning against. He was staring at her, his eyes deep with concern.

"Are you okay now?" he asked.

She nodded her head. The room was still slightly spinning. She put her arm out and grabbed Kerim's shoulder to steady herself. He reached out and held her.

"I'm okay." She pushed Kerim and Harry away and stood up. She felt lightheaded. She swooned; her legs were weak. Harry, Kerim and Gabriel jumped up; each holding onto her to keep her from falling forward. Harry eased her back onto the couch.

"You need to rest." Dr. Saeed kneeled down. He flashed a light into her eyes. "Your eyes are dilated. You need to lie down and put your feet up." He helped her lie down. Kerim put a pillow under her feet.

"Everyone, give her some space. She needs air," Kerim said. Her eyelids felt like weights were forcing them shut.

"Come on everyone. The meeting is over," he added. She could hear people moving away.

"Dr. Saeed, I need to talk to her." She could hear Harry whispering a few feet away from her.

"Kerim is right. She needs to rest. We can talk to her when she is better," she heard Dr. Saeed reply.

"I'll stay with her. When she is better, I'll take her home."
Kerim's voice was closer. *Was he beside her?*

"I think I should stay with her and you should go," Harry responded. She heard shuffling and more whispering. Using what little energy she had left, she managed to speak.

"Kerim, don't go."

"She's delusional," she could hear Harry say.

"You heard her," Kerim said. "I'll take her home. No need for you both to stay here."

"Harry, why don't we move the meeting to my office. We can check on her in an hour or so," Dr. Saeed said.

She heard more shuffling, and then there was silence.

She was in a white room. Around her there were walls made out of clouds. She noticed that in her hand was a paintbrush covered in red paint. She turned around and one wall was covered in red with streaks of white cloud in between each stroke. The clouds started to move, bending the lines, forming a picture. She put the paintbrush down and moved towards it. Each step she made was as if she were floating. Weightless. Free.

"Cristal." Her eyes widened. The picture was coming to life.

"Don't be afraid." It was changing shape and moving towards her.

"Dad?"

Chapter 12

What is this all about?

CRISTAL OPENED HER EYES to find herself in darkness. The dream was still clear in her mind. *But was it a dream?* She sat up and looked around and found herself alone. *How long have I been sleeping? Where is everyone?* She stood up, adjusting her eyes to the darkness and walked towards the doorway, bumping into a stool. She picked up her backpack, which was still sitting on the table. She walked out of the classroom into the dark hallway. The earthquake had meant that the building was running on power from the generator. It was creepy being alone in the dark.

She could see light coming from Dr. Saeed's office across from the classroom. As she walked closer to the doorway, there were voices in an intense conversation. Slowly she approached the door. Kerim was standing in front of Harry and Dr. Saeed who were seated at the meeting table. There was no one else in the room.

"...do you really think that's what happened? Time travel? C'mon Harry, I know there are strange things happening but that?"

Harry was smiling; his hands were animated as he spoke.

"Like I said earlier, it is all in my father's notes. Dr. Saeed was helping my father prove their theory that there are portals or black holes in locations around the world. My dad worked with Dr. Saeed to gather data from multiple sources; satellite imagery, a geographic information system." He turned to Dr. Saeed. "Tell him about the experiments with the kids."

Dr. Saeed crossed his arms. "Aaron Doub theorized that gifted children's extra sensory skills could help connect or bridge the present to the future."

Harry nodded his head—his grin growing wider. He said, "Child prodigies have natural abilities which are remarkable for children their age. My father believed that the reason for this is because their brains are able to process data and information like computers. His tests proved that they use fifty times more brain cells than average children; or adults, for that matter. They theorized that if we placed a gifted person at a location where there is a black hole or portal, it would be the key to unleash the energy to open up the portals."

Kerim was frowning. He sat down on the edge of the desk.

"So is that how the earthquakes happened? Gabriel's apartment is one of the locations of a black hole," Kerim leaned towards Harry; pointing his finger at him. "That's why you wanted Cristal to

go there. And you needed me to keep her safe. Is that it?" He paused. "When the earthquake happened, I saw a white light coming out of Cristal's chest to the ceiling and right through to the ground."

Cristal's heart started beating faster. *I can't believe Harry set me up.* She clenched her fists and felt her face turn red. She stepped closer to the door but stopped.

Kerim now had Harry and Dr. Saeed's full attention.

"What do you mean a white light?" Dr. Saeed asked, crossing his arms and tilting his head.

"Can you describe what it looked like?" Harry interrupted.

Kerim took a deep breath. "The light came from the ceiling down into her chest into the ground. I saw images above her head like a movie playing on a screen." He paused, as if trying to recollect what he saw.

"Go on," Harry said.

"Well, I saw you, Cristal, Dr. Saeed, Gabriel, Rinaldo, and Adel. I was there too. There was another guy, dark skinned, brown hair. Never saw him before."

Dr. Saeed glanced at Harry and then looked back at Kerim. "Could be Sami?"

Kerim continued. "We were standing outside somewhere it was hot. The sun was hitting the grey wall behind us. Cristal moved to the centre and all of a sudden there was a white light coming out from her chest. It was weird because it looked almost like a mirror of what was happening in front of me." He sat on the edge of the table. He fell silent.

"Don't stop now," Harry said.

Kerim looked at Harry. His eyes narrowed as he spoke.

"Harry, it was all about you, all this time? Right?"

Harry arched his eyebrow and stole a glance at Dr. Saeed who was intently listening to Kerim.

"I don't know what you are talking about," Harry said. Cristal heard the sincerity in his voice.

"You and Dr. Saeed over here are in on this. Right?" Kerim pounded his fist onto the table.

Dr. Saeed shook his head. "Kerim, tell us what you saw," he said calmly.

Kerim stood up; turning towards Harry, his grey eyes piercing into his.

"You walked into the light," he said in a low voice. Cristal had to step closer to hear him. "Then the light disappeared."

Harry frowned. "And that's it?" he asked.

Kerim shook his head slowly. "No, that isn't it."

Harry stood up, staring straight back at Kerim. "Okay, so tell us."

"It wasn't just the light that disappeared. *You* disappeared with it."

Harry's mouth fell open, his eyebrows arching higher. Dr. Saeed's eyes widened slightly. He leaned over and whispered something into Harry's ear. Harry nodded his head.

Kerim had turned around, seemingly oblivious to what was around him. He ran his hands through his hair in exasperation.

"And that's when the earthquake stopped. The light and the images vanished," he said.

A smile crept onto Harry's face. "In your vision, I must have traveled to the future!"

Cristal could feel her face burn red. She could not contain her fury any longer. She marched into the room. Everyone turned to look at her with stunned looks on their faces.

"That explains a lot, Harry," she said, her voice shaking with anger. Cristal looked straight into his eyes. "But guess what, this prodigy wants nothing to do with your time traveling theory."

She whirled around, poking her finger onto Kerim's shoulder. "And you," she said, her voice rising higher. Her hands started to shake. "I thought I could trust you. Now I know better."

She turned around with full intention to run out the door. She stopped. On the shelf, among stacks of books was an 8x10 photo in a silver frame. In the photo, Dr. Saeed was standing on the far right. She recognized the man in the middle was Harry's father. She had seen his YouTube videos on the Truth Seekers' discussion forums. But it wasn't Aaron Doub that caught her eye. It was the woman on the other side of him.

She stepped closer, wondering where she had seen this person before. Harry and Kerim walked up and stood beside her.

"That's her," she whispered, pointing to the picture.

"Who?" Kerim asked.

"After the earthquake, I looked up into the sky and saw a face. It was her." She could feel her heart pounding.

"Are you sure?" Dr. Saeed asked.

She nodded her head. "Positive," she answered. Her words seemed to stick in her throat like chalk dust.

Harry grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her towards him. His blue eyes were wide with excitement. "That's Bina Schwartz. My mother."

"Are you serious?" Kerim asked.

Harry nodded his head. "She went missing last year."

Chapter 13

Kismet

SHE COULDN'T STOP RUNNING. Minutes earlier, she had exited the Physics building, stumbling down the stairs. She could hear Kerim and Harry calling her name as she ran out into the street. The air was heavy and humid and clung to her like a wet bathrobe. It was late in the evening and the sky was an angry purple. The moon was low in the sky, a crescent shape with a burnt orange color.

"Cristal, wait!" Kerim cried out.

Something in his voice made her stop and turn to face him.

"Leave me alone."

"We need to talk." He stopped in front of her.

She looked past him to see if Harry was there. He wasn't. She shifted her eyes back onto Kerim, crossing her arms.

"Okay, explain to me how come when I'm near you, I feel like you are inside my head. And it seems you know what I'm feeling or thinking."

He took a deep breath as if to speak but then looked away.

"So are you going to tell me?" She stepped closer to him. "Or are you just going to stand there?"

He nodded his head and pointed to a bench a few feet away.

"Okay, let's sit," he said. His voice was distant and soft. Not the usual confidence in his tone.

He walked over, sat down, and placed one arm on the back of the bench. She followed him and sat on the far end of the bench. Maybe he wouldn't be able to read her mind, the bigger the space between them. She raised her chin slightly and focused her energy on watching his steel grey eyes.

"So, go ahead."

His lips started to move but the words that were coming out were so soft she couldn't understand him. She inched closer and closer, straining to hear him. She realized at that moment that if she could move any closer to him, she might end up in his lap. He gave her a wicked grin but then tried to cover it up with his hand. *Oh, this guy is driving me nuts!*

"Like I said before... I was in the army serving as underground intelligence. I was trained to do a lot of things, one being, understanding and reading body language."

She tried to focus on his words.

"I can tell when someone is lying or if they are nervous," he continued. "I needed this for gathering intelligence for my covert missions. But when I left the army, the skill was really useful with the ladies, if you know what I mean." He stated this as if it were a fact and nothing more.

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Oh, please," she said, standing up.

Kerim reached out and grabbed her hand.

"Let me finish," he said and pleaded with his eyes. She sank back down onto the bench.

"I don't know what it is but when I'm with you, I feel something more." He held her hand tight. "I can sense what you are feeling, especially when you are under stress."

She didn't know why she was still holding his hand. He looked down at her hand and released it from his grip.

"You mean like this?" she asked. *So you **can** read my thoughts.*

He nodded his head slowly. "I sense what you feel. It's like you are sending me messages with your mind. Never in my life, did I experience something like this with anyone."

He spoke so differently from people she usually hung out with. He spoke in plain English—straight to the point and blunt. Not like the vague way Harry spoke to her. Her eyes closed as she tried to absorb what he was saying.

"Are you okay?"

She opened her eyes. "Yes, I'm fine. Just trying to process the info."

He patted her hand and gave her a small smile.

"Do you believe in fate?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Not really. I hope you're not going to tell me you believe in destiny and all that fluff."

Kerim frowned. "Well, not really. But I was told that kismet or destiny would bring me to someone who would change my life." He paused for a second as he searched for the words. "When I first met you, the word 'kismet' entered my head. Honestly, I don't know why." He looked into his hands.

Kismet? I don't know what to say. Before she could open her mouth, a dark blue four-door sedan drove up, slowing down and

then stopping in front of them. They both glanced up to see Harry sticking his head out from the passenger window. He had a crazed look on his face. "Cristal, get in the car."

Who does he think he is? She could see Dr. Saeed was in the driver's seat. She stood up, clenching her fists.

"Like I said, I'm not going to be part of your experiment any more, Harry." She looked over at Kerim. "Come on, Kerim, I want you to take me home."

Harry flung open the car door. He stepped onto the street, his eyes never moving from Cristal's. He walked up to her with long strides, stopping only when his face was inches away from hers.

"Get away from me, Harry," she said in a low whisper.

"You have to let me explain," he said.

"Explain what? Explain that you planned all of this because you want to find your mother? You never told me she was missing. I thought we were friends." She blinked her eyes hard, trying to stop the tears from coming.

Harry started slowly pacing left and right in front of her—like a black panther ready to pounce on his prey.

Kerim stood up from the bench. With Harry walking around her as if claiming her as his property, Kerim seemed unsure of

himself. She hoped he wouldn't leave her there. *Kerim, please stay.* He nodded —affirming that he wasn't going anywhere without her.

Harry stopped and turned towards her. "There were times when I thought about telling you about my mother. About everything but..."

"But what?" She could feel the anger wrap its fingers around her heart.

"But nothing. I'm not very good at sharing. You know that about me." His voice sounded tired.

"Is that it? Are you serious? You used me for your experiment like one of Dr. Saeed's lab rats. I trusted you, Harry. How could you do this to me?" The tears she didn't want to cry started burning her cheeks.

Harry didn't let down his guard. He was never good with expressing his feelings and she knew that. But knowing that wasn't enough. She had shared with him everything about herself—all of her deepest, darkest secrets and fears.

She waved to Kerim to come over. "Take me home."

He nodded his head and walked up to both of them. Harry stepped in front of her, giving Kerim a dirty look.

"Sorry, Harry," Kerim said, "But you got yourself into this on your own."

Cristal reached out for his hand. "Let's go. Where'd you park?"

Harry grabbed her arm. "No, you're not going anywhere."

She froze, unsure of what to do and looked down at Harry's hand on her arm. This was the first time he ever touched her. She never imagined him grabbing her before.

"You can't stop her from going, Harry," Kerim said. His words were respectful but firm.

Harry did not move; except for his hand which squeezed her arm tighter.

"When I asked you to be a Truth Seeker, I never promised to tell you everything. You knew that and you accepted. I don't apologize for not telling you about my mother. I didn't tell anyone about her." His jawline was tense and she felt like his words were coming at her like sharp knives.

She pulled her arm away from his grip. "I don't want to play your game anymore, Mr. Doubt," she said. Her own words were covered in bitterness.

Harry stepped closer to her. His gaze was magnetic; his eyes a deeper blue than she ever recalled seeing before.

"It's not about me or you or any of us. And you know it. Your dad still communicates with you. You told me that yourself."

Her eyes widened. She glanced over to see Kerim's frown. Turning back, she could feel her heart pounding.

"What does that have to do with anything?" she cried. The shrill in her voice could have broken glass.

She looked over her shoulder to see Dr. Saeed standing with them. "It has a lot to do with everything," Dr. Saeed said. "Your dad and all your friends' missing loved ones are trying to communicate. We need your help to find out what your dad and the others are trying to say."

Part Two

Nothing is what it seems

*A beacon bright in the blackness;
fragile sanity within all this madness,
They fill her dish with love and
broken promises*

AR Vasquez

Chapter 14

Land of milk and honey

THE SUN WAS POURING into the room. Cristal walked over and closed the shutters, which were made out of flimsy aluminum, the white paint peeling on the edges. They made little difference blocking out the blistering heat or the sounds of car horns blaring and the chatter from the street below. She had arrived in Tel Aviv ten days earlier but she still could not adjust to the climate or the culture.

The days were blurred with meetings at the GN office in Haifa in the day and mission meetings with Harry, Dr. Saeed, Gabriel, Kerim and Rinaldo at night. After the earthquake the week earlier, many GN computer networks had gone down. Harry managed to get a temporary transfer for Cristal and himself to the GN Haifa office. Dr. Saeed must have made arrangements too because he arrived a few days after they did.

SHE COULD HAVE PRETENDED she was vacationing, if she wasn't staying in a shabby two star hotel where the only good

feature was that it was close to the Bograshov Beach and restaurants. Global Nation was a non-profit organization, which was proud of the fact that they did not misuse their donors' funds for unnecessary travel expenses. Of course, that same rule didn't seem to apply with senior management. Beaver once bragged to her that when he went with Lionheart to a convention in Brazil, they had stayed at a '5 star all-inclusive' resort.

Her room was on the 4th floor and was modestly furnished: a queen-sized bed—the mattress caved into the middle with wired springs that jabbed into her back when she slept; two wooden chairs by the window which looked like they were held together with rubber bands; a wooden side table; and a small 24-inch old style Cathode ray tube television that sat on a metal bracket that hung from the ceiling in the corner of the room. Although this was a 'non-smoking' room, she spent the first morning 'airing out' the room to get the whiff of cigarette smoke smell out. And despite the fact there was an air conditioner, she preferred to keep it off since instead of cold air, the old box spat out smelly dank air. And to top it all off, the bathroom was so small that she could do her makeup, have a shower and sit on the toilet—all at the same time.

She spent the first day by herself, staring at the worn marble tiled floor and at the walls with their ugly strokes of lumpy plaster covered with salmon coloured paint.

Instead of staying at the hotel, Harry had decided to stay with his aunt who lived fifteen minutes away. He had told them that he needed to connect with his family in order to help them with their missions. Kerim had been busy arranging accommodations for Gabriel and himself. He found an ex-military friend who lived nearby the hotel, leaving Cristal by herself in her miserable room.

She was flipping through the photos on her cell phone, stopping at a picture of Kerim smiling at her with his fingers in a peace sign. The photo was taken onboard the flight to Israel.

IT HAD BEEN HER FIRST international flight on a Boeing 747 across the ocean. It started out horribly. The plane was full of screaming kids and crying babies. Thankfully Kerim and Gabriel were on the same flight albeit seated in different rows.

Her seat number had been F29, the middle row in front of a wall with a toddler on her left who spent most of the trip wailing at the top of her lungs. The child's mother who was seated on the other side of the girl had put earplugs on and covered her eyes with an eye mask. Cristal couldn't believe how they could ignore her own child who obviously was frightened and uncomfortable. She

tried to talk to the little girl in an effort to comfort her. The girl reacted by screaming louder. *So much for trying to be a Good Samaritan.*

On her right side sat an unsociable woman, probably in her early forties with dark hair, cut short. Sitting like a queen on her throne, her elbow hung over the arm rest between them, digging into Cristal's side. She was what Kerim described later as a "full bodied woman" referring to her wide hips and generous-sized bosom. The woman had eyed Cristal carefully, her lips pursed together as if she had just eaten a bucket of lemons. *Get a life*, she remembered thinking to herself.

When she gave up all hope of having any rest on the flight, Kerim had suddenly appeared in the aisle. He looked over at her and gave her a wink. *What is he doing? Harry had told all of us to be inconspicuous.*

The woman who had been flipping through a beauty magazine glanced up to look at him. Cristal noticed that her grim face melted and her pursed lips turned into a warm glowing smile. *Kerim, you have the power to melt glaciers.*

Kerim began speaking in a language which Cristal guessed was Hebrew, given that the flight was a direct flight to Tel Aviv and over sixty percent of the passengers were Israelis returning home from holidaying in New York. The other twenty percent were New Yorkers who had dual Israeli citizenship. This is what Kerim had

mentioned to her while waiting at the airport before boarding the plane.

Although, Cristal couldn't understand what they were saying, she knew Kerim was doing what he was good at, charming the lady and making her giggle like a school girl. Kerim pointed towards Cristal and said something that caused the lady to burst out into peals of laughter. *What the hell?* His hands then waved towards his seat at the back of the plane.

Still giggling, the lady nodded her head, grabbed her things and stood up, her fat bottom brushing against Cristal's arm. She glanced down and offered Cristal an apologetic smile before turning back to Kerim. He offered his hand to help as she squeezed herself out of the row into the aisle.

"Shalom, handsome. I will see you in the land of milk and honey," the woman said, purring like a cat, in an attempt to sound sultry but instead it reminded Cristal of a squawking seagull. Cristal rolled her eyes, trying her best to contain her laughter. The woman waddled away, swaying her hips. She glanced back at Kerim, blowing him a kiss. *Oh, how sweet.*

When the woman was far from sight, Kerim eased himself into the recently vacated seat, slipping his messenger bag under the seat in front.

“What was that all about?” Cristal asked, nodding her head towards the direction the lady had waddled off to.

He shrugged. “My skills can be quite handy in these types of situations.” Before she could respond, he reclined his seat and closed his eyes. She shook her head and sighed. *You are a funny character, Kerim Ilgaz.*

Taking his lead, she reclined her chair and closed her eyes. Maybe a snooze would help her relax. *Nine hours left and counting*, she thought to herself.

SHE OPENED HER EYES less than an hour later. Sleep had not come despite all her efforts. The little girl beside her had thankfully cried herself to sleep. Her parents now were chattering to each other loudly across the other aisle in their language while shoving nuts into their faces. Cristal's ears were picking up many conversations in multiple languages around her. The sounds around her seemed to be increasing in volume, hurting her ears. For some reason, words spoken in other languages always seemed to magnify in her ears, reverberating in her skull. The worst part was that no matter how hard she tried to understand the meaning of the words, her brain seemed to draw up a blank slate causing her to be even more frustrated.

"Hey, what's the matter? Can't sleep?" Kerim asked.

She grumbled. "I have a headache." She turned her head away from him. How could she tell him about her bizarre problem?

Chapter 15

In my head

DURING HER FIRST YEAR AS AN UNDERGRAD at GN University, Cristal had decided to take a class in introductory Spanish hoping to help improve her communication skills with gamers in Spanish-speaking countries like Mexico and Spain. Truth be told, she was envious with the fact that Harry had taught himself five different languages. He told her that it helped give him the advantage when playing with Truth Seekers from around the world. She was confident that she could master the language in a few weeks; given the fact she was able to read at super speeds.

Two months later, no matter how fast she was able to read through the textbooks, the words never stuck in her head. When she tried to form the words in her mouth, she couldn't remember what the words were. It was one of her greatest weaknesses, which she never could overcome.

“Do you need help?” Ms. Cruz, her Spanish professor asked her. She must have been surprised to see Cristal struggling. How

could Honours student, Cristal Hernandez, have problems in *Introducción al Español 100*?

“Come to my class after school every day. I can help.”

Cristal was grateful and accepted her offer willingly.

Unfortunately after three lessons, even Ms. Cruz had to admit that there was no hope for Cristal. She dropped out of the class soon after.

Cristal never mentioned this to anyone. Not to her mother. Not to Harry. When other students asked her why she dropped the class, she simply said, "Spanish sucks."

Soon afterwards something strange began happening to her. She found that when she was in a crowd of people who were speaking in another language, the sound would increase like a muddle of voices in her head—all shouting to be heard. She used to clap her hands over her ears and run away to get the voices out of her head. Over time, she learned to cope with this phenomenon by putting on her headset and drowning out the sound with music. Not just any music. Her carefully selected assortment of songs stored on her cell phone was the only way she could block out the noise.

ON THE PLANE RIDE to Tel Aviv, the voices of the passengers were getting louder and louder in her head. She glanced over at Kerim who was busy watching a movie on the screen in front of him. She reached over to her bag on the ground, rummaging for her phone. *Where in the world did I put it?*

"Looking for this?"

Dangling in front of her was her cellphone. Kerim had a mischievous grin as he handed it to her.

"Very funny," she said, grabbing the phone from his hand.

"So what kind of music do you listen to?" he whispered in her ear.

She flashed him a disarming smile. "Sir, like I said earlier, I'm not interested in small talk." His eyebrows shot up and he shook his head as he chuckled into his hand. She smiled to herself as she shoved the ear buds into her ears and then hit the play button on her phone's music player.

She could see Kerim was still talking but she let the beat of the music from one of her favourite alternative bands, *Bittersweetness*, drown out his voice and all the other voices in her head.

*Kill this desire to fly
close to the sun, burning wing tips,
sing away the feathers
Can this hollowness be filled
Forgiveness: another feather to fall from wing...*

"I like that song too," Kerim's voice entered her head. She opened her eyes. Kerim's eyes were closed but he had a smile on his face.

Frowning, she shook her head and shut her eyes. Her mind was playing tricks on her.

"No, it's not."

Her eyes sprung open and she sat up, turning her body to Kerim.

"Did you say something?"

He opened one eye, pointed to himself and said, "Who me?"

She lowered the volume on her phone. "You know what I'm talking about."

Kerim sat up and turned to face her.

"Cristal, are you okay?" he asked.

She took a deep breath, holding back the desire to scream at him. "I'm not going to say it again. What are you doing to me?"

He stared at her blankly and for a moment she doubted herself.

Shaking her head, she said, "Never mind. I'm just tired. Sorry to bug you." Closing her eyes, she reached for her phone and turned up the volume.

"I can help you," Kerim's voice said in her head.

She opened one eye and saw Kerim was leaning back with his eyes closed. There was a smile on his face and she swore she could see it getting wider.

"Help me what?" she said out loud.

"Get over the problem you have with learning another language," he said, still in her head.

What? Now how did he know that? She knew he was able to sense things about her but how in the world would he be able to sense she had a problem with languages? And how come she could hear him in her mind?

"It just started when you had your eyes closed earlier, Cristal," his voice in her head said. *"I could hear your thoughts. They weren't clear but the more upset you became, the clearer they were."*

"Okay, that only half answers my questions. How in the world are you talking to me in my head?"

"Not sure but I think when you started listening to your music, I could hear it too," his voice said. "And for some reason, through the music, I felt I could reach you. The feeling was so strong that I sang the message to you in my head."

He sat up turning to her, his mesmerizing eyes gazing deep into hers.

"And you heard me... didn't you?" he asked her.

Her heart started beating harder, her breathing faster, everything around her started spinning. Kerim grabbed her hand.

"Breathe, Cristal, breathe."

She felt her hands shaking. *Oh no...* The plane started rocking violently. Screams from the passengers filled the cabin. *No, please don't let this happen again.* Tears streaked down her cheeks as she imagined the worst to come next.

Kerim held her hand tight and pulled her towards him. She glanced up to see his lips so close to her face.

"Everything is going to be fine, Cristal," he whispered, stroking her hair. She could smell his scent in her nostrils. Her body felt magnetic energy move from inside her towards him.

Kerim pulled her tighter into his embrace. Before she could push him away or say anything, his head bent down and his mouth

pressed down on hers. She felt her body flush with excitement as she melted into his kiss. Her hand was on his chest and she could feel his heart beating hard. Her other hand found its way to his wavy hair. Pulling a handful gently into her hands, she marveled at how soft it felt in her fingers. Suspended in the first kiss, tongues searching each other; their hands exploring the other's body. While enjoying the moment, a part of her suddenly realized that the plane had stopped shaking. She opened her eyes and looked to see the flight attendants were running around.

“The plane just passed through a small batch of turbulence. Everything is fine,” the Asian flight attendant said to them as she rushed by.

She looked over at Kerim. His eyes were warm and dreamy; his smile was relaxed and his face seemed to have an afterglow. It was then that she picked up her cellphone, pointing the camera lens at him.

"I want to keep the way you're looking at me now in my memory forever," she whispered.

He nodded his head and raised his fingers in the ‘peace’ sign, the pointer and middle fingers up.

"Actually, it means *Victory*," he said as she snapped the photo. She liked that it could mean both ‘peace’ and ‘victory’.

She cuddled up close to him and slept for the rest of the flight, listening to the songs on her phone with Kerim's voice singing along in her head.

Chapter 16

Calm before the storm

KERIM WAS MEETING HER in the hotel lobby soon. It was their first full day off since they arrived and he had promised to show her around.

The first few days going to the Global Nation office in Haifa was awkward, to say the least. Every morning at 7 am, Harry waited in a small silver Subaru hatchback, outside the hotel—never a minute late, like an alarm clock. Although it was annoying, she was comforted knowing he would be there. Life was different here. Not that it was a bad thing. It was difficult for her not being able to speak or understand the language. Hotel workers were generally polite. ‘How are you, Miss? Do you need anything, Miss?’—always with their well-rehearsed smiles. But if she wanted something, an extra towel or bar of soap, suddenly no one could understand English.

EVERY NIGHT, KERIM PATIENTLY tried to teach her conversational Hebrew and Arabic. His creative teaching style using music was experimental but she had to admit that it was working, albeit, the only phrase she was able to say in both languages was ‘Ayph hshyrvty?’ and ‘Wayne hamam?’ which meant ‘Where is the washroom?’

“Well, at least I will never worry about you finding a bathroom,” he teased her. She smacked his shoulder playfully.

During the day, she and Harry were supposedly restoring the server networks at GN but in reality they were downloading data for Cristal to decode. If it were all about work, she wouldn’t have minded so much. The problem was that Harry was always trying to corner her.

“There are things I wish I could share with you,” he said, searching her eyes, hoping to see the old Cristal, the one who used to be willing to listen. *That wasn’t going to happen.*

“Let’s keep things professional, Harry,” she said, refusing to let him get an inch closer to her. “We’re here to do a job, so let me do my work.”

He grabbed her elbow, pulling her to him.

“You know I care about you,” he whispered into her hair.

Her mind was telling her to push him away, but her body froze.

“I always have,” he said, releasing his grip. He turned away and left her feeling confused and empty.

If that weren’t enough, Dr. Saeed was beginning to give her the creeps. Questions he would sneak into their conversations—“Have you been sleeping well? Have you had any other fainting spells? Do you want to talk about the visions you’ve had?”

How she wanted to tell him—*Leave me alone! I’m not your lab rat.* But she bit her tongue, trying to keep things polite.

She wished she could be with Kerim and Gabriel instead of being stuck at the GN office. Harry had sent them on missions in Haifa and Gaza meeting other Truth Seekers.

“I want to go with them to meet the others,” she told Harry.

“No, we need you here at GN. We can’t let the New York office suspect what we are doing,” he said. His tone was sharp and authoritative.

“You’re the boss,” she mumbled under her breath.

In the evenings, Harry asked all of them to meet to discuss the missions. Cristal made sure to sit beside Kerim. He could speak to her inside her head while she had one ear bud in her ear, listening to her music.

“I’ll take you back to your hotel after work,” Kerim’s voice told her.

“You promise to tell me everything you uncovered today in Gaza?” she responded.

“After I teach you a few more phrases in Hebrew and Arabic.” He turned to her and winked. *“Like, I love you, my sweetheart.”*

Her cheeks turned several shades of red. *Did he say that out loud?* She looked around to see that everyone was focused on Harry at the front of the room. Harry’s eyes seemed to bore into hers. He was talking to everyone but he seemed to only be looking at her.

“I wish we could sneak out of here,” she said in her thoughts.

“Patience, my dear Cristal. Let’s save the world first and then we can go play.” She glanced over at Kerim who reached over and squeezed her knee.

Silent conversations—it was weird but romantic and most importantly... their little secret.

The hotel phone rang, startling her from her thoughts. She glanced at her watch as she picked up the phone. Kerim must be in the lobby now.

"Kerim, I'm on my way down."

A deep voice answered but it wasn't Kerim's. "Ms. Hernandez, this is the hotel concierge. There is an I.S. agent here who wants to speak with you."

Why would a security agent want to speak with her?

"Madame, are you still there?"

She shook her head to clear her thoughts.

"Yes, I am coming down."

Chapter 17

Joanna makes plans

Zero: The data you sent this morning should have been encrypted.

Onyx: It's been crazy here. Elf man is riding my back and now I have to do the reports for our whole team. Thanks a lot for leaving me behind.

Zero: We need you over there. You're one of the best programmers on our team. We're counting on you to get the data we need.

Joanna was about to type something sarcastic, but paused.

Zero: I am personally counting on you.

Oh really? You think I'm that stupid to believe that crap?

Zero: I'll contact you again in 10 hours. SYL

OMG. Seriously??? She wasn't going to let Harry get away with this.

She finished typing an email and sent it to her friend Jenna Adams, a journalist for the New York Times. *You wait and see who should have gone to Tel Aviv with you, Harry*, she thought to herself.

“Joanna, are you on planet Earth?” Beaver, the Elf man, was standing at her cubicle. Just the sight of him made her want to barf. Everyone in the IT team knew he was a useless dweeb. He wore his senior manager title as if it were his shield that would protect him from the truth.

She rolled her eyes. “What do you want, Beaver?” She turned back to her screen.

“Shelley wants to see you,” he said with a sly smile.

Freak... what does the boss want to see me about? Why did Harry leave me here to hold the fort all by myself?

“Did you hear me? She’s waiting for you.” He turned away, waving his hand as if he was summoning his pet Schnauzer. Her hand tightened around her mouse as she imagined hurling it right between Beaver’s beady brown eyes.

He turned his head around and mouthed to her, “*Well, are you coming?*”

She nodded her head, stood up and walked towards him—trying hard not to make a face. He shook his head and let out a sigh, which sounded like air coming out of his rear. *Ugh...* She let

him walk ahead of her. His royal “highneyness” was enjoying having his minion follow three steps behind.

Her cell phone vibrated inside her pocket—text message from Jenna.

Jenna: Hey Joanna, got your email. What’s up?

Joanna: You asked me about Harry Doubt. Have a story about his close friends.

Jenna: Finally came to your senses, girl? Come over after work. You still like sushi?

Joanna: See you @ 6. Will bring drinks.

A smile crept up on her face. She shoved her phone back in her pocket.

THEY WERE POLISHING OFF the bento boxes sitting around the coffee table, cross-legged on the floor—like the good old days. She watched Jenna clearing up the empty food containers and bringing them to the kitchen. She would have offered to help but why bother.

She smirked to herself observing how Jenna’s apartment was small and cramped compared to hers. It made her remember how she had negotiated with Harry to get her a two bedroom fully

furnished apartment with minimum 900 square footage and the lease paid in full for a year. It was her way to test him to see how much of a valuable asset he thought she was to the team. When she had arrived in New York, not only did he hold up his end of the bargain, he managed to get her a luxury suite on Crosby Street in Soho. She knew that compared to the other Truth Seekers in NYC, her place was in the best location, had the best layout, and had the coolest furniture.

Jenna returned with two wine glasses and the bottle of red wine that Joanna had brought earlier.

“Sushi was just what I was craving. Thanks again, Jenna.”

“My pleasure. It wasn’t much. Just spent all afternoon, making them for you. Not!” she laughed, tossing her bleach blonde hair to the side. “Let’s get to work.” She flipped open her laptop.

Joanna smiled to herself. Jenna was never one to mince words. She always had been driven—even when they were college roommates. Jenna was a California babe; blonde, blue eyes, and hot ‘bod’ with brains to top it off. Add to the mix were the cold tactics she used to get her way, even if it meant sleeping with whomever she needed to get the story. Together, Joanna and Jenna, were a formidable pair.

“So give me the goods, Joanna,” she said with her usual ‘I’m losing my patience’ tone.

“Shut up and start typing,” Joanna replied. Jenna never intimidated her, New York Times journalist or not.

Jenna smiled, flashing her perfect white teeth. “Webcam will get everything, I need. Now take a sip and start talking.” Jenna saluted her with her wine glass, kicked off her heels and curled up on the couch.”

“Cristal Hernandez and Kerim Ilgaz. They’re Harry’s prized Truth Seekers. But that’s not the story.” She paused.

“Come on, what is it?” Jenna moved forward on the edge of the couch.

“I think that Cristal was responsible for starting the earthquake that happened in different countries all over the world. And I think Kerim had something to do with it too.”

Jenna rolled her eyes and closed her laptop. “You’ve really lost it, Joanna. I can’t believe I wasted my evening waiting for this earth shattering information.” She stood up and started putting away her things. “I’m a serious journalist. I don’t do gossip or ET stories.”

“Fine. Don’t believe me,” Joanna grabbed her purse from the coffee table. “But I saw it myself with my own eyes.”

“Wait,” Jenna turned to look at her. “What do you mean?”

“Aren’t you going to record what I tell you?” Joanna asked.

“No, not until I’m sure it’s worth it.” Jenna leaned back waiting. “And the only reason I’m willing to hear any of this psycho-babble is the fact it’s coming from you. So thrill me.”

“Harry and I were meeting with Cristal, Kerim and Gabriel on video chat the day of the earthquake,” Joanna began. “At the precise time it happened, I saw Cristal freeze, almost like a zombie. Her eyes were blank, while the whole room was shaking like crazy. Kerim was in the doorway, holding onto the doorframe and Gabriel was holding onto him with his eyes closed.” She closed her eyes trying to remember what she had seen.

“The weird thing was Cristal and Kerim were staring at each other. They both were real calm, during the whole thing. Then the screen went black.” She opened her eyes to see Jenna’s *whatever* expression on her face.

“Great, Joanna,” Jenna said rolling her eyes again. “Now, I am really convinced.”

Joanna could not ignore the thick layer of sarcasm in her voice. She sat back down and took out her smart phone. She opened up a video and maximized it on the screen.

“Here... Watch this,” she said, handing her phone to her.

Jenna sighed and took it from her hand. “This better be good,” she said.

The video started playing. The screen filled with the larger than life image of Shelly Lionheart, dressed in a neon white dress suit, seated at her glass desk in her white high back leather office chair in her 15-foot windowed penthouse office. The picture jittered slightly—Joanna had done her best to keep her phone steady.

“You’ve doing an exceptional job filling in for Harry and Cristal,” Shelley was saying.

“Thanks, I’m just doing my job,” she heard herself say.

Shelley leaned forward, crossing her hands on the desk. Her two-inch nails were painted the shade of blood red. It took a lot for Joanna to be intimidated but she had to admit that being in the presence of Shelley Lionheart made her a bit squeamish.

“This information must stay in this room,” Lionheart said, lowering her voice. “Can I trust you to keep confidential information?”

“Umm, yes, of course. I’m a professional,” Joanna replied, a little too fast.

“We both know that George Beaver is an incompetent programmer and senior manager,” Shelley continued. “I need someone like you at my side to keep me abreast of what is happening in our IT systems; from current software installations, to

development roadmaps and security concerns.” Shelley smiled, if you could call it a smile—it seemed more like a sneer.

Joanna remembered how excited she should have felt. Finally someone from the top was recognizing her potential. But part of her felt weird—like she was just about to sell her soul to the devil. She shivered at the thought. *Now where did that crazy idea come from?*

The picture shifted slightly as Shelley rose from her chair. The word ‘rose’ was the best way to describe it. Her body seemed to glide upwards as she stood. It could have been the resolution of the video but Shelley seemed to become transparent just for a second before she walked (glided) around the desk to stand in front of her.

The picture shifted abruptly and the screen was filled with a blurred image.

The sound was clearer now with Shelley’s voice closer to the phone.

“We have some information about illicit activity from one of our professors at the GN University. His name is Dr. Nariman but students refer to him as Dr. Saeed. It seems he accessed encrypted files in our restricted server with the help of some of your colleagues. I want you to find any trace of suspicious activity in the logs and see if you can track its sources to identify the hackers. This will be done under the guise of a ‘scheduled overhaul’ of our

developer systems to update our server software and rebuild our databases. You will be in charge. This is high-level priority and I'll make sure Beaver stays out of your way. We'll call this project 'System overhaul'. I don't want you to let anyone know what the real purpose of this project is. Do you understand, Chan?"

The video shook slightly as Joanna shifted her weight. "Yes, I understand."

"Good. If I am pleased with your report, we'll see about giving you a promotion. Maybe you can take Beaver's job."

The video shook again as she stood up.

"Thank you, Shelley. I really appreciate it," she heard herself saying. Ugh, it almost sounded like she was gushing all over her.

The video ended abruptly.

Jenna looked up from the phone and stared at her, a smile stretching across her face.

"Okay, Joanna, I'm down with corporate espionage. You may have something. Not sure what it is yet but I am going to start digging."

Joanna nodded her head slowly. "Do you need anything from me?"

“Oh yeah,” she said, almost gleefully. “You’re going to give me everything you know about Harry, Cristal and Kerim. Every time Shelley talks to you, you’re going to let me know a.s.a.p.”

“Sounds fine,” Joanna replied. She should have been happy but something was nagging at her—telling her to stop.

“And before I forget, I need two things from you. One, before you tell me about Cristal causing an earthquake and shining lights, you need to show me some proof. And two, I want you to get me into the Truth Seekers.”

“What? You a Truth Seeker?” She burst out laughing. *Did she think it was going to be that easy?*

“Yeah,” Jenna said, as she started typing, searching online. She had already started mining the Internet for the data. She knew this would be one of her best NY Times article ever. “And I want to know where Harry is. I’m going to get to the source as soon as possible.”

“You can’t join the Truth Seekers. You don’t even play video games. And it’s all by invitation only. Harry invites only the top players. Do you really need to be a Truth Seeker to get what you need?” Joanna’s stomach started turning, the sushi playing havoc with her intestines.

“Do you really need me to answer that question?” Jenna looked out into the distance, analyzing the situation, and looking at all her options.

Joanna sat back, trying to think as well. But her thoughts were wandering away. She knew she had just betrayed the Truth Seekers. More importantly, she understood now she had just started something. What exactly, she didn't know.

Chapter 18

Agent is watching

CRISTAL COULD SEE A COUPLE OF tourists at the hotel counter arguing with the concierge. She scanned the lobby to see a couple of local boys hanging around the American girls who were staying at the hotel. A stout man dressed in a black suit with sunglasses seated on a chair in the lobby was watching her carefully. *That must be the agent.*

She took her time walking over to the counter, grateful that the concierge was busy with the tourists. It would give Harry enough time to get there.

She had texted him earlier, ‘Urgent. Get here ASAP. Agent in lobby wants to question me.’

His response was, ‘Stall until I get there.’

From the corner of her eye, she could see that the agent had stood up. He was walking towards her.

“Ms. Hernandez,” a woman’s voice called her from behind.

“Yes?” Cristal turned, expecting to see one of the hotel staff.

Standing in front of her was the ‘full-bodied’ woman who had sat beside her on the airplane. *What was she doing here?*

The woman was holding up her identification, which said “Yaffa Bauer, National Security Agent”. The photo on the ID displayed an expressionless version of the woman.

“My name is Yaffa,” she said, putting her ID into her pocket. “You remember me?”

Cristal nodded her head slowly. “Sorry, but what do you want from me?”

Yaffa Bauer motioned for her to follow her to a room off the side of the hotel counter. Cristal glanced over to the hotel entrance relieved to see Harry walking in. She noticed that since he came to Tel Aviv, his looks had changed somewhat. Perhaps it was the Middle Eastern sun that painted his hair with gold highlights and warmed his skin colour from a pale white to a copper bronze. Was it the same sun that made his blue eyes appear bluer and deeper than the ocean?

“Just a minute. My boss is here. Can he join us?” she asked.

Yaffa turned to her and stopped when Harry stood beside them. Cristal noticed that Harry was much taller than the agent.

Yaffa had to stretch her neck to look up at him, putting her pudgy arms on her wide hips.

“Shalom,” Harry said, stretching his hand out to shake her hand.

The agent frowned and nodded her head in acknowledgement. She eyed Harry suspiciously and then shifted her attention to Cristal.

“It would be better if you and I speak alone,” she said with a firm voice.

Cristal crossed her arms. “Have I done anything wrong?”

Yaffa’s nostrils flared slightly before she responded, glancing briefly at Harry. “No, I just have some questions to ask you.”

Harry said, “Do you have a warrant?” He stepped closer to Yaffa.

“No, no warrant,” she sneered. “This is Israel, not an episode of ‘Law & Order’.”

Harry chuckled. He responded to her switching from English to Hebrew. His voice had softened as he reached into his back pocket to take out his wallet. He showed her his Israeli ID. Yaffa took a look and nodded her head, her body relaxing as she listened. They spoke with each other for a few minutes while Cristal stood and watched.

Yaffa started to smile as she turned to her. “Okay, let’s keep this informal.” She motioned to the people sitting on the lobby chairs to get up, flashing her ID at them. The man and woman looked at each other obviously frightened that an agent was in their presence. They quickly gathered their things, got up and left.

“Sit,” she said as she sank down onto the couch. She flashed a dirty look at another couple that was about to sit beside her. When they ignored her, she waved her ID at them. They apologized and walked away.

Cristal glanced at Harry, unsure of what to do next. Harry nodded, giving her a small and comforting smile.

Yaffa opened her purse, rummaging until she pulled out her smart phone. She swiped the screen and tapped icons before turning the phone towards them.

On the screen was a photo of the inside of a plane. The people visible in the photo were screaming, fearing for their lives. She felt Harry’s hand cover hers. Her stomach was twisting into knots.

Yaffa swiped the screen to display another photo. In this one, Kerim was reclined in his seat, Cristal’s head on his shoulder. She bit her bottom lip, wondering what Harry was thinking.

“Take a look closer,” Yaffa said as she pinched the screen, zooming into Kerim’s head.

As the photo sharpened, she saw something odd. Around Kerim’s head was a soft white glow—almost like an aura. Were her eyes playing tricks on her?

“Who is this man?” Yaffa asked.

Cristal cleared her throat before answering. “That’s Kerim Ilgaz.”

“How do you know him?”

She paused. Her insides were shaking. Part of her was afraid to lose control and cause another ‘event’. She managed to say, “Kerim is a sub-contractor that Harry hired. Maybe you should ask Harry.”

“Ah, yes, that was what Harry was telling me minutes ago. Excuse my English is not so good. I want to know who is Kerim to you? Lover?”

“What?” she asked, trying her best to not sound insulted.

Yaffa pursed her lips, nose flaring even more. “As you know, I was on the same flight. There are always two of us on flights from New York to Tel Aviv. After the plane was shaking, I made my rounds to make sure the safety of the people. When I was coming back, I saw both of you and took the photo. I didn’t check the photo till before I submitted my report.”

Cristal frowned, “I still don’t know what the issue is.” *She is driving me nuts.*

“You can see the halo around him, can’t you?” Yaffa said gruffly.

Harry took the phone from her hand and examined the picture more carefully.

“Very good Photoshop job, Yaffa,” he said with a grin.

“Hmph!” Yaffa grabbed the phone back. “This is the way I took the photo. No Photoshop.” She swiped the screen quickly and more photos of Kerim and Cristal flashed before them. The same weird light was around Kerim’s head in each photo. The last one was a video; Yaffa hit the play button.

In the video, the glow around his head was more obvious. Harry’s eyes met Cristal’s briefly. Yaffa snorted, pleased that she finally had their attention.

“So, can you please answer my questions?” she asked, facing Cristal. Her other hand waved to Harry to keep quiet.

“Kerim is a friend... a good friend. It was my first time flying on an international flight. He was helping me relax and keep calm.” *It was true.*

Yaffa was scribbling notes in her notepad. She mumbled to herself, “Hmph... friend...”

Cristal shook her head, “Why do you say ‘friend’ that way? You don’t believe me?”

Yaffa’s pea green eyes met hers; her smile widened pushing her chipmunk cheeks aside. “When Ilgaz asked me to switch seats, he told me that you were his half-sister and that you were afraid of flying.”

Cristal choked back her laughter. “I think he pulled a fast one on you. Maybe he thought you would give up your seat if you thought we were brother/sister.”

Yaffa’s eyebrows met together in a frown. Her lips pressed together as she spoke. “Ah... is that so?” She scribbled again in her notepad. Putting down her pen, she looked up at her. “Okay, I want to know more about Kerim. Who he is, his past, who his friends are and why he is in Israel... From our investigation, we could not find much information on Kerim Ilgaz prior to 2009. No family, no friends, no lovers, no work history, *shvum dbr*—nothing.”

Harry said, “I told you everything about Kerim. He is here as a subcontractor for Global Nation. He is providing security for Cristal and myself and the staff at the GN office in Haifa. You can check this with head office. Cristal does not know much about him as I was the one who hired him.”

Yaffa sighed, nodding her head. She gave him a polite smile before standing up. “Yes, yes, you did tell me this. I think it is time now for me to go. I thank you both for your time. Here is my contact info if you remember something else. Like I tell Harry before, Kerim Ilgaz may be a national security threat and here in Israel, we say ‘guilty until proven innocent’.”

She nodded her head again. Harry nodded back, tapping Cristal on the foot to signal for her to do the same. Cristal put on a plastic smile and nodded. Yaffa returned the fake smile, turned and walked towards the hotel entrance. She glanced over her head briefly.

“Shalom,” she said before walking out the door.

Chapter 19

What next?

HARRY PACED BACK AND FORTH in front of her. He glanced at his watch while mumbling under his breath.

“Sit down,” Cristal said, pointing to the chair beside her. “You’re making me nervous.”

“I’m trying to figure out what to do next,” he said quietly.

“Kerim is going to be here soon. Are you going to tell him what happened?”

He whirled around, pointing his finger at her. “Don’t say a word. Okay, Cristal? Until we find out more about him, consider him a hostile.”

Cristal couldn’t believe her ears. She leaped out of the chair, standing eye to eye with him.

“Hostile? This isn’t a game, Harry. You said you checked him out before inviting him to the Truth Seekers. Just because some crazy agent shows us some weird photos, now Kerim is a hostile?!” Her voice echoed in the lobby.

She followed Harry’s eyes, which flickered towards the hotel entrance and sucked in her breath when she saw Kerim standing between the opened glass doors. She gasped. His olive coloured skin contrasted his white unbuttoned long sleeve shirt and black jeans. But what made her hold her breath was the bright blinding light that blazed around him like angry flames.

He moved away from the door, the light behind him flooding into the lobby. She realized that the setting sun had played optical tricks on her.

He stood motionless.

“Kerim,” she said, walking over to him.

He looked past her; his grey eyes fixed on Harry.

“What’s this all about?” he asked.

Harry came over to where they were standing but he didn’t volunteer a response. She rolled her eyes and sighed.

“An agent was here asking questions about you,” Cristal said. The heat from Harry’s glare could have disintegrated steel.

“Agent?” Kerim frowned.

“Let’s go somewhere else to talk,” Harry said, glancing at the group of hotel guests that were entering the lobby.

“Sorry, I’m not going anywhere with anyone who thinks I’m the enemy.” His jawline was tense, his voice quiet. He gave Cristal a look.

She reached out for his arm. He pulled it away from her, turned and walked back towards the hotel entrance. The doors opened and he marched outside onto the street towards his motorbike.

“Kerim, please,” she called out, running after him.

“Cristal, let him go,” she heard Harry say as he followed behind her.

“Leave me alone, Harry,” she snapped.

Kerim was already on the bike with the engine roaring.

“Wait for me, please!” *You can’t leave me here.*

His eyes met hers. *Please, don’t leave me here.* He paused for a moment and then nodded his head for her to climb on. Without hesitation, she grabbed his shoulder and jumped onto the back of the bike. This bike wasn’t as flashy as the Ducati—a matte black

colour, shorter in length and not as shiny. Kerim looked hot on any motorcycle as far as Cristal was concerned.

Kerim revved the engine and glanced over his left shoulder to check the traffic.

Cristal could see Harry standing on the sidewalk, his shiny blue eyes stabbing her a hundred times with his stare. He shook his head, as Kerim pulled out into the street.

ALTHOUGH THERE WAS A BREEZE, the evening air was heavy and her sweat clung to her like a heavy coat. Kerim weaved in and out of the chaotic traffic like a seasoned local. Plumes of black smoke from the tail pipes of cars and trucks as they rode past filled her lungs. She could taste the diesel fuel in her throat. When he turned off onto a side street, she marveled at how many homes can be squeezed onto one street. She watched rows and rows of short three story buildings—all with the same crumbling, alabaster sand-coloured stucco, with splashes of spray painted graffiti angrily emblazoned here and there—whip by as he sped down the street. Air conditioning boxes and grey satellite dishes stuck out from windows, which created odd tic-tac-toe patterns. Kerim adeptly

swerved around the narrow streets with motorbikes, scooters, and cars half-parked on the sidewalks and on the road.

Teenagers and twenty-something adults hung out in and around shops and small grocery stores. She could see soldiers walking by, a sight she was growing accustomed to seeing. What were less visible were the older people and families. *Where were they all?* Presumably stuck inside their homes, trying to cool off with what little relief their air conditioning boxes could squeeze out for them.

As Kerim leaned into a corner, wafts of hashish hit her nose. A loud group of young men were horsing around in an alley lane. From a boom box, a rap-style song played loudly—“Shalom Shady”, a wildly popular rap star whose Hebrew/English rap songs played day and night on the TV music video channel and on the radio stations. The boys jumped around, dancing and mimicking the rapper’s moves.

Kerim decelerated and turned into a driveway in front of metal grey gates. He stopped the bike for a moment, letting the engine idle. Cristal could hear the sound of people scrambling and voices calling out, “Kerim is back.” The gates creaked open. Kerim rode inside the cemented lot. Gabriel greeted him and when he saw her, he began grinning from ear to ear.

“Hey, Cristal, glad you finally decided to visit the bachelor pad.” He helped her off the bike, rambling on about what he and Rinaldo had done earlier in the day.

She watched Kerim disappear into the house. He didn’t even bother to wait for her.

“Rinaldo and Raffé are inside. Come in. We just picked up pizza. I’m sure you’re starving.”

“Yeah, I am hungry, come to think of it,” she managed to say. She followed Gabriel inside a narrow hallway and up the stairs. Her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting. She entered what she guessed was the living room. The place was cluttered with shoes piled up on the side of the doorway, photos of family on the walls, books and papers on the coffee table. The only thing modern in the room was a 52-inch flat screen TV against one wall.

“Come into the kitchen. That’s where everyone is,” Gabriel said, pulling her hand.

They walked through another dark hallway into the kitchen, which was double the size of her hotel room. In one corner, she could see Rinaldo chatting with a girl and smoking a water pipe, popularly known in the Middle East as *sheesha*. She could see Kerim, his back turned to her, deep in the conversation. No one noticed her enter the room.

“Come, the pizza is on the counter. Help yourself, don’t be shy,” Gabriel said, waving to the open pizza boxes. She walked over, her mouth ready to bite into a juicy slice. Her eyes widened when she saw that the pizza was covered with yellow corn niblets.

“Corn?” she asked.

“It’s an Israeli specialty.” She turned to see Kerim standing behind her. He was half-smiling, not as pissed off as he was earlier, much to her relief.

“I guess, it would be impolite to refuse to eat it?” She smiled, hoping his mood would continue to improve.

Kerim looked over his shoulder. “This is Raffe.”

Raffe was short, coming only up to Kerim’s shoulder. His skin was honey brown coloured and his hair was a pile of black curls crowning the top of his head. He was muscular, dressed in a black t-shirt and ripped blue jeans. He stared at her with eyes so black, they looked like they were filled with liquid ink.

“Ma nishma,” he said in a deep guttural voice, putting his fist up. Cristal remembered that this meant ‘*what’s up*’ but forgot how to respond.

She looked over at Kerim who motioned with his hand for her to raise her fist up. *Oh yes*, she thought. Kerim had taught her how to greet people with a ‘fist bump’.

Raffe smirked as he touched his fist with hers. She felt an electrical shock run through her body. Suddenly she felt very uneasy. He nodded at Kerim, grabbed a bottle of beer from the counter, bumping into her slightly as he walked by her out of the room. She thought she heard him say something but wasn't sure.

“Don't worry, he's harmless,” Kerim said as he put his arm around her.

“He creeps me out,” she said. “Who is he?”

Kerim gave her a kiss on her forehead. *Is that his way to shut me up?*

Rinaldo came up to both of them.

“So Kerim, were you serious when you said that we're all going to the wall tonight?” He had an anxious look on his face.

Kerim nodded his head.

“Without Harry's approval?” Rinaldo asked.

“We don't need his permission,” Kerim said. She could sense that he was trying to control his temper.

Gabriel joined the circle. “It doesn't feel right, Kerim. I mean, Harry is our leader and he told us that we couldn't go there without him giving us the green light.”

Cristal's head started to spin. *What wall? Why did Kerim want to go there? And what was so special about this place?*

“You don't have to come. None of you have to come. But if you want to know the truth, you don't need to wait for Harry to tell us when.”

Kerim put his arm around Cristal's shoulder. “Come on, let's go.”

She swallowed hard and nodded her head. Her heart started beating faster. Taking deep breaths, she tried to control her heart rate. *Calm down.*

“I'm coming with you,” Gabriel said. “I always wanted to find out what the big deal was about that place.”

Rinaldo shook his head. “No way, guys. I 'a' stay here and wait for Harry's call. He has his reasons for saying not to 'a' go with out him. I have a big trust for him.” He turned around and went back to the corner where he had left the girl pouting.

“Let's go,” Kerim said.

She wanted to say something but decided not to. Sometimes keeping quiet is better than asking too many questions.

THEY RODE FOR OVER an hour on the motorcycle with Cristal's arms tightly wound around Kerim's waist. Gabriel had caught a ride with Kerim's friends in their mini-bus. Cristal would have preferred that she and Kerim ride with the others in the mini-bus, but realized that Kerim liked to do things his way.

She closed her eyes for most of the trip, feeling drained of all her energy. She glanced up once to see a highway sign that said Route 60. *How far is this wall?*

"Don't fall asleep... Don't want you to fall off," Kerim called back to her.

She nodded her head and mumbled, "I feel awful."

He squeezed her arm. "We should be there soon."

She pressed her head onto his back, hoping he was right.

"Trust no one," her dad's voice said in her head. *"Today will be the beginning of The End. Stay strong and have faith."*

"No! Stop!" She shook her head, not wanting to hear anymore.

Kerim turned his head towards her. "Are you all right? Do you want me to stop?"

"I wasn't talking to you," she said and paused. She realized that what she said sounded crazy. "I mean, I thought I was going to be sick. But I think I'm okay. We're not that far. Are we?"

She felt his hand on her arm.

“We’re almost there. You must be really tired. I can’t hear any of your thoughts,” he said with a soft chuckle.

Well, that’s good to know, she thought to herself.

Chapter 20

Safe zone

Zero: video chat in 15 mins

Onyx: see you then

Joanna looked over at Jenna who was sitting on the couch, busy typing on her laptop. Although, she had agreed for her to move in temporarily, living with Jenna was driving her crazy.

The sound of the chat tool notification alert interrupted her thoughts. She quickly read the message.

“Was it Harry? What did he say?” Jenna asked raising one eyebrow.

She nodded her head and sighed. “Yeah, he wants to video chat soon.”

“Awesome. Okay, I’m going to set up beside you so he can’t see me,” she said. She stood up, grabbed her laptop, walked over and sat down on the chair beside her.

“Great,” Joanna mumbled to herself. *What did I get myself into? Not only do I have the boss interrogating me at work, I’ve got Jenna bossing me around at home.*

Every day at GN, senior management was breathing down her neck. Joanna knew that if she revealed Harry’s breach in security, she would only be revealing her own role. She wasn’t ready to be hauled into prison over this.

Jenna turned to her. “Joanna, why don’t you introduce me to Harry?”

“What?” Joanna couldn’t believe her ears. “Are you crazy? If he even suspects that I am talking to a non-Truth Seeker, he’s going to cut me loose. And where would that get you?”

Jenna bit her lip and frowned, a sign that she was thinking up one of her crazy plans.

“No way, Jenna. You just sit quietly right where you are. Or else, I’m going to call this whole thing off,” she snapped.

Jenna sighed, shaking her head. “Okay, okay. Take a pill. I’ll sit over here and behave.”

Joanna threw her a dirty look but knew that it was pointless. Jenna was so thick-skinned that nothing ever fazed her. She only worried about getting what she was after—no matter what it took.

“You know, I don’t know if Kerim Ilgaz changed his name because I can’t find much on him,” Jenna said, reaching for her coffee mug and taking a sip.

“Oh?” Joanna frowned.

“He has absolutely no digital tattoo on the internet. No website, no social network. Not even an email account. I asked my contacts in Istanbul to find out more about him. All I could get was that he was in the military for four years. He has no family, no friends, nothing. As far as the database records show, before 2009, he was a ghost.”

Joanna shook her head. “Well, maybe he did change his name. If he was in the military, maybe he was a secret agent or something? That would explain why he doesn’t have a footprint online. For all we know, he’s still undercover.”

“You know what, Joanna, I think you are onto something,” Jenna grinned, like a kid who was handed an ice cream cone. “I’m going to see if my CIA contacts will be able to find something on him.”

“Seriously? You’ve got CIA contacts?” She gave her a wry smile.

Jenna shrugged. “CIA agents are a dime a dozen these days with all the national security measures that President Roshenbaum brought in.”

“Funny, I voted for Roshenbaum, thinking he’d protect our rights but it looks like he’s worse than Sanders.”

“Yeah, who would guess that General Sanders would be more liberal than Roshenbaum,” Jenna replied. “But hey, as long as you instill enough fear in people, they’ll all line up and give away their rights like candy.”

The sound of the video chat alert interrupted their conversation. Joanna raised her finger to her lips, motioning to Jenna to keep quiet.

She clicked on Zero’s avatar and the video chat window opened, filling her screen. He was dressed in an ocean blue short-sleeved button shirt, which was opened at the neckline showing off his golden skin.

Harry looks real good with a tan, she thought to herself. She also noticed that his eyes seemed to reflect the blue from his shirt.

“Onyx, I don’t have much time. Do you have the data I asked you for yesterday?”

“Hello to you too, Zero,” she replied.

“Onyx, I need that data now.”

She took a deep breath, trying hard not to glance over at Jenna who was drinking in Harry’s every word.

“Sending it now,” she said in the most professional tone she could muster.

Harry’s eyes looked down until the file was received on his end. He looked up and nodded his head.

“File received. Good job, Onyx,” he said.

She smiled despite herself, her cheeks probably turning all shades of pink. Jenna was going to harass her later, she was sure of it.

“Lionheart knows about the data that we retrieved from the restricted server. She tasked me to find proof that you and Dr. S breached security.”

He frowned, absorbing the news.

“Stick with protocol. Divert *the Lion* away from us by using this data I’m sending now.”

She waited until the file downloaded on her computer.

“Confirming receipt.”

“Also, if Shadow contacts you, flag it with me. Don’t reveal any intel to him. Until I have cleared him, consider him a hostile.”

She could hear Jenna gasp. Joanna kicked her foot under the table. She hoped Harry hadn’t heard anything.

“Roger that.” She knew not to ask questions but she could feel Jenna growing anxious.

“Zero, anything I need to know about Shadow?” she asked.

Harry shook his head, but his face look pained.

“Your next mission: find out the correlation between these numbers...” he said while typing in the text window.

Zero: 11132013, 56609, 14350109, 57740910, 17300304

“Where did you get these numbers from?” She bit her tongue, realizing after she shouldn’t have asked.

Harry frowned. Preparing herself for the lecture, she was surprised when he nodded his head.

“Yes, it would help put things in context if you knew what the source was. We have been gathering reports of people having dreams or visions since the earthquake. These are the numbers that many have reported seeing in their visions,” he said quietly.

She smiled to herself. This was the first time Harry shared crucial intel with her.

“We will get onto this a.s.a.p.” Jenna kicked her under the table. She looked over at her and realized her mistake before whipping her eyes back to the screen.

Luckily, Harry’s eyes were looking down at his keyboard as he was typing.

Zero: Evacuate to safe zone ASAP.

It was her turn to frown. Safe zone? In the Truth Seekers’ game, this meant that danger was afoot either from incoming fire or WMDs (weapons of mass destruction). Harry had shown the team the Safe Zone during orientation training. It was located in a hidden underground bunker, a few blocks from the GN office. Gabriel had made a sarcastic comment saying ‘Harry’s really taking the online game beyond Virtual Reality’.

Onyx: What’s going on?

Zero: Follow protocol. Will contact you in 10 hours.

Harry logged off the video chat. She closed the lid of her laptop slowly.

“So, what did he text you?” Jenna asked.

Joanna heard what she said but couldn’t move a muscle.

“Joanna, are you going to tell me or what?”

When reality finally sunk in, she turned to her and said, “Pack your stuff. We have to get out of here.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jenna laughed.

Joanna grabbed both her shoulders and shook her hard.

“Did you hear what I said? Get your crap now!”

Jenna’s eyes widened, her tanned skin turning visibly pale.

“What’s going on, Joanna? You’re scaring me.” The confident Jenna Adams looked like she was going to wet her pants.

Joanna said in a low voice, “If you want to live, we have to leave now.”

Chapter 21

This is not right

THE TIMING WAS ALL WRONG. He couldn't believe Cristal would run off with Kerim, someone she barely knew. He wished he could have told her the truth. The truth about the tests that Dr. Saeed had been secretly performing on her while she was 'working' at GN. She didn't realize that the computer monitor she was using had a special sensor connected to the camera, which monitored her brain activity and breathing. Nor did she know that the mouse had tiny needles that pricked her finger and collected micro-samples of her blood.

Harry hit his fist on the table. "I told those guys not to go to the black hole locations with Cristal."

Not one of them understood how dangerous this would be. The rules were clear, just like in the Truth Seekers' game; no one was allowed to question him about the missions.

But this wasn't the game anymore, and Harry didn't know what to do. He had to figure out which location they were heading to. There were three black hole locations—one was in Eilat, the most southern part of Israel; one was in the West Bank near Bethlehem in the central part; and one closest to the GN office in Akko in the northern part.

If only he could pick up the GPS tracking signal from Cristal's cell phone. He had spent the last five minutes trying to search for it on the computer terminal in the GN's IT office, with no luck. *And where in the hell was Dr. Saeed?* He walked out of the room, down the hallway to the medical lab. It was late in the evening and only staff with security clearance could work after hours. Fortunately, Harry happened to be one of them.

Two Israeli security guards armed with rifles walked by him. He looked them straight in the eye and nodded his head. They looked down at his GN staff ID around his neck before walking past him.

Harry began analyzing the most likely out of the three black hole locations Kerim would be headed to, hoping that it was the one in Akko, the closest to the GN office. It made the most sense for them to go there, given that he had told Kerim and Rinaldo to stay away from that specific location. But if he were wrong, he would be going the completely opposite direction of the other black

hole locations, which meant losing precious time. Time he needed to stop Cristal from reaching the black hole.

He turned down the hallway to the medical labs until he reached the one that GN had assigned to Dr. Saeed. The room looked empty through the glass window in the door. He decided to go inside and check.

He swiped his keycard and opened the door. It was dark inside the room, his eyes taking a few minutes to adjust to the darkness. No sign of Dr. Saeed. He was about to turn around and leave. He would have to go find Cristal and Kerim without him.

He paused. He swore he could hear muffled voices. He looked across the room and noticed light streaming from under the closet door on the far wall. Cautiously, he walked towards the light. The sound of two male voices in a deep conversation was becoming louder.

When he reached the door, he noticed it was slightly ajar. He peeked into the crack and saw inside the back of the closet was a fake wall with a door half hidden by boxes. He remembered going into the closet many times to get supplies but never noticed the door before. Now it seemed that the hidden door was open, and the light was coming from behind it—*a secret room?*

He pushed the door open enough so that he could slide into the closet. The voices were audible now. He recognized one as being Dr. Saeed's.

“You're going to jeopardize everything. Don't do this,” Dr. Saeed was saying.

“All the experiments have proven our theories are correct. It is the girl who is the key to unlocking the power that I need.”

That voice sounds familiar. Harry's heart started pounding; his hands feeling suddenly clammy. He took a step closer to see inside. He was surprised that behind the hidden door was a high tech medical laboratory with expensive medical equipment, machines and computers. His eyes panned to where Dr. Saeed was standing, close to an examining table, his back facing him.

Harry could see the shape of the man Dr. Saeed was talking to. The colour of his pants was tan, the sleeve of his shirt beige. Dr. Saeed moved slightly to the left, giving him a full view of the man he was speaking to. Harry sucked in his breath.

“I don't know what to say. You show up here and want everyone to believe that you just arrived today?” Dr. Saeed shook his head. “We buried you for crying out loud.”

Part Three

If you only knew

The dawn has come

And the morning sun's rays

Streak the painted sky, warm crimson shades of orchard rose

While the ocean tide caresses the damp dark beach

And a silent tear slides down her cheek.

AR Vasquez

Chapter 22

In the flesh

“SAEED, I’M TELLING YOU it worked! I’m living proof.”

Harry watched in shock as Aaron Doub danced around in a circle, shaking his arms like a mad man. *This man is not my father. My father is dead. This stranger has my father’s voice, his face, even his ridiculous comb over his bald spot.* Aaron Doub looked exactly the same way he did the last time Harry saw him alive.

Dr. Saeed shook his head. “But you were declared dead at the hospital.”

The hair on Harry’s arms stood on end. What is going on here?

“Don’t say that word. You know I don’t like that word.”

That was the kind of eccentric talk Harry knew and had grown up with—the paranoid scientist. *My father is alive.* Somehow the shock didn’t register as it should have. Aaron’s presence made a strange kind of sense in Harry’s mind.

“Sorry, Aaron. I forgot,” Dr. Saeed said quietly. “My only guess is that something must have happened at the hospital. If someone took you from the hospital and then cremated another

body, then that could explain how we were made to believe that you died.”

“Saeed! Didn’t I tell you NOT to use that word!” He jumped up and down like an infuriated gorilla.

“Would you like me to give you a sedative? It looks like the trip has made you quite anxious,” Dr. Saeed said, crossing his arms.

“No! No sedative,” Aaron said, his anger suddenly dissipating. He slumped down on the examination bed. “I don’t feel well.”

“You’ve just travelled through time at superluminal speeds. The human body travelling at warp drive, theoretically speaking, could affect the atomic molecular structure of the person, agitating the body at a cellular level. You need to hydrate and rest. When you are rested, I will do some testing.” Dr. Saeed helped Aaron down on the bed. He reached for a folded sheet and covered him.

“Here, drink this.” He gave Aaron a plastic cup of water.

“Straw, please?” Aaron asked, his eyes looking up at Dr. Saeed. He grasped the sheet to his neck and waited while Dr. Saeed put a straw into the cup.

“Thank you, Saeed. I don’t know what I’d do without you,” he said, grinning sheepishly.

“Now, now, Aaron. Just relax. I need you to tell me everything you can remember before you arrived here,” Dr. Saeed said in a soothing tone.

Harry barely contained his desire to burst into the room and demand answers from Dr. Saeed and his father. Fortunately, the Truth Seeker in him knew to stay still. He had to watch and listen. *What other information did Dr. Saeed withhold from me?* Tasting the same bitter betrayal Cristal must have felt towards him, he knew this was karma—*what goes around does come around*.

Dr. Saeed turned away for a moment, his back to Harry. When he turned around, he was holding a needle syringe. He gently pulled up Aaron’s sleeve, wiped his arm with a cotton swab, and injected what Harry assumed was a mild sedative.

Aaron smiled as his body relaxed. “Ah, you always knew how to make me feel better, Saeed.”

Dr. Saeed pulled a chair beside the bed and sat down. “Okay, are you ready to tell me everything?”

Aaron closed his eyes and nodded. Harry was baffled. He never remembered seeing his dad like this before—vulnerable and almost childlike.

Harry looked at his watch. Time was ticking by. If he didn’t leave soon, Cristal would reach the black hole and—the thought of

what could happen made his gut wrench. Torn and emotionally sucker punched, Harry was reluctant to leave. The truth he sought might have all been a complete lie. Dr. Saeed and Aaron were both in on something and now Harry's world was turned completely upside down. He knew that whatever secrets these two shared affected all the Truth Seekers, not just himself.

“Do you remember the dinner party at your house?” Dr. Saeed asked in a monotone voice, hypnotically soothing.

Aaron nodded, his eyes still closed. “Ah, yes. I was telling everyone about our latest findings. About time travel.” He chuckled quietly, grasping the top of the sheet tightly.

“Go on...”

“I don't remember the rest of the dinner. I must have fallen asleep. I woke up and found myself in a lab just like this. Yes, yes... I remember now. There were people around me wearing hospital masks. I tried to say something but I couldn't.”

“Do you remember what they were saying?” Dr. Saeed asked.

“Nothing. No one was talking. I thought that was strange. I tried to get up but I couldn't move a muscle. Then they all left the room, leaving me alone on the gurney. That's when I felt the room shaking. My body started convulsing violently. I felt the air being

squeezed from my lungs. I wasn't scared though," he said, half whispering.

"Why weren't you scared?"

"It was almost like the first time when we nearly succeeded. I felt myself slipping out of reality. The atoms in my body were pulling apart; the room was spinning around me. And then there was a flash of white light. Then blackness, like I was falling into a deep endless pit."

Dr. Saeed frowned, nodding his head as if he was picturing what Aaron was saying in his mind.

"It seemed like I would fall forever, horrified and worried that it would never stop. After what seemed an eternity, I felt all my atoms rush together like a magnetic wave pulling all my cells towards the core of my body."

Harry was puzzled by Aaron's words. *What was he talking about?*

"And then I felt as if a bus hit me. I thought I was going to die. Then I was stumbling in here," Aaron said, his eyes opening. He looked around. "Looks like you have upgraded a lot of things since I've been here."

He's been here before? What the --?

“Like I said, it has been five years. Harry and I were trying to continue the work that you started. But this lab I’ve kept secret. I don’t want GN sticking their noses into our work. I also wanted to protect Harry.”

“Ahhh, Harry. How is my boy?” Aaron smiled.

“He’s not a boy anymore. He’s a man now with a doctorate. A true genius. Just like you said he’d be,” Dr. Saeed replied.

“Yes, we succeeded in proving my theory. Inducing the chemical changes in the cells of a genius—one whose soul is pure of mortal sin. That was the secret to it all.”

I can't believe you both used me.

Dr. Saeed stood up and leaned over the bed. “But that doesn’t explain how you time-travelled here.”

Aaron opened his mouth to say something, frowned and shook his head. “You’re right. We did try altering the general chemical composition of my nucleic acids. Nothing seemed to come of it, except for my sudden hair loss.”

Dr. Saeed chuckled. “That wasn’t sudden Aaron. It’s just you never saw the top of your head in a long time.”

Aaron scowled and turned away.

Dr. Saeed seemed to ignore him. “Time travel requires that you be near the vicinity of a black hole, and near enough energy to transport to here—the future.”

Aaron rolled his eyes, saying, “I told you, the energy was coming from inside that room. It seemed that those masked persons turned on the energy when they left the room.”

“Similar to an X-ray technician going into a booth before powering up the machine on a patient.” Dr. Saeed nodded.

Despite marveling at the idea that such a machine capable of time travel existed, he was seething with anger. He and his mother had trusted Dr. Saeed. But he was just using them both like lab rats—he could hear in his head, Cristal’s voice saying those same words to him not too long ago.

His mother’s journal had mentioned how much she trusted Dr. Saeed and helped prescribe the medication she needed to cope with the loss of her husband. He had driven her to the GN psychiatric visits but now Harry doubted his intentions. Harry didn’t know what his mother, Bina, had said to her psychiatrist but he was certain that she never told anyone about her secret journal.

“And Bina? Is she safe? Did you manage to test our theory on her?”

“Bina is fine. She finally got over your dea-,” he started, pausing to correct himself. “Um, her loss. The tests I conducted on her were a success, just as we hoped for.”

Tests? On my mother? Did he kidnap her?

The phone in his pocket began ringing. *Crap.* He fumbled to turn it off.

He glanced up to see Dr. Saeed frown and tilt his head. He stood up and started walking towards the closet. His face had a deathly calm expression, as if he was about to capture his prey. *I've never seen him look like this before.* What was more odd was the fact that his eyes seemed to be glowing a fluorescent shade of yellow. Harry wasn't sure if the shadows in the closet were playing tricks with his mind but he wasn't going to wait to find out.

“Harry? Is that you?” Harry shook his head in confusion. The voice was Dr. Saeed's and yet it wasn't. The tone was much deeper with a reverberation that sounded like nails scratching across a blackboard. *Now, I know I'm not imagining things.*

He stumbled backwards, bumping into the boxes of supplies behind him. Quickly regaining his balance, he turned and ran out of the closet and back into the lab. He had to get the hell out of here. He ran to the doors, flinging them open. Behind him, he swore he could hear a weird ‘wooshing’ sound. *Holy crap. Don't look back.*

He sprinted down the hallway, rushing past the security guards. They both called out for him to stop. *No f-~~ng~~ way!*

He made it into the stairwell, picking up the pace as he continued down the staircase down two flights of stairs to the bottom floor until he reached the emergency exit doors. There was a sign written in Hebrew pasted on one door which read ‘Alarmed. In case of fire, push to open’. He slammed his body against the handles, shoving the doors open. The clanging of the alarms rang into the air.

He bolted towards the parking lot. *What the hell am I running from?* The rational part of him was telling him that he was being paranoid. But his natural instincts were telling his body to run even faster.

He reached the parking lot and saw that his car was one of only three left in the lot. He ran towards it, ripped open the driver-side door, and jumped in, slamming the door behind him. He jabbed the button to lock the doors while he shoved his foot on the brakes and pushed the button to start the engine.

Why I am so frigging terrified? It's just Dr. Saeed, for crying out loud.

Out of desperation he called out, “Mom, if you can hear me, please help.”

He couldn't believe that he would resort to calling out for his missing mother. He must be losing it.

Check your phone. The answer is there.

“Mom?” He whipped his head around. He was certain that the sound of her voice was coming from the back seat of the car. But his anticipation was replaced with a sad disappointment. No one was there. “Freak, I must be hallucinating.”

Hurry, Harry, there isn't much time.

He spun around again. No one else was in the car. *I must be going nuts.* Why was his mind playing tricks on him?

Something inside him made him pause and reach for his phone. When he swiped the screen to unlock his phone, he saw that he had a text message in his inbox. *Is my mother trying to communicate with me?*

Text message received – Rinaldo

Red Fox: Update: We have picked up Lioness from airport. Mist and Shadow are in Akko. We are en route. Awaiting your orders.

There was no time to psychoanalyze the situation. He shoved the gear stick to the drive position and pressed the gas pedal to the floor. In the distance, the sound of the sirens from the fire trucks

was approaching fast. He breathed a sigh of relief. *Whatever was after him (if there was anything) was gone.*

Hearing a ‘wooshing’ noise behind his head, he glanced up at his rear view mirror to see what it was. His heart started pounding, fear surging through his veins.

There was something staring back at him in the mirror—it resembled Dr. Saeed’s face but from the yellow glow in its eyes, Harry was definitely sure it (whatever ‘it’ was) was not human.

Chapter 23

Akko

THE SALTY KISS OF THE balmy sea breeze caressed Cristal's cheeks while the evening sun was setting, a fiery orange emblem against an angry red sky.

Will we ever see blue skies again? She wondered to herself. Since the earthquake, the sky remained a shade of red. Some countries reported a 'blood-red' colour, while others described the colour as being red with pockets of blue peeking through the orange and white clouds. Experts claimed it was simply due to the refraction of light related to the sun's position and the scattering of electromagnetic radiation through the atmosphere, bouncing particles in the air—basically it was mankind's fault for using the Earth as its toilet. Global Nation, founders for the group 'A Sustainable Planet', blamed the red colour on global warming caused by environmental pollution destroying the Earth's ozone layer. Scientists countered this theory proving global warming could not be the cause due to the fact that the planet was becoming colder, not warmer. If the scientists were correct, then what was really causing the sky to be red? Deep down inside, she feared that she was the cause of it.

Kerim and Cristal sat on a four-foot high wall of sandstone blocks, which stretched for miles along the shoreline. Over the wall was a steep drop to the crashing waves of the Mediterranean Sea below.

Her senses were captivated by everything around her: the breeze from the water tickled her skin while the vibrant smells filled her nose with a combination of scents—salt from the sea, seaweed and kelp entwining their leaves across the seabed, and families of fish inhabiting the warm water.

When they had first arrived in Akko, Kerim had seemed edgier than usual.

“Can’t believe I forgot my smokes,” he had mumbled over and over as they walked down the streets of the ancient town looking for a shop that sold Lucky Strike, the only brand of cigarettes he smoked. Despite being an anti-smoker herself, the fact that Kerim was a smoker never bothered her. It seemed to be a natural part of his makeup.

She glanced over to see Kerim deep in his thoughts, reminding her of Apollo, the Greek god—handsome, confident, and strong.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked quietly, taking one last drag from his cigarette before tossing it on the ground.

“What’s taking Gabriel so long?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Probably stopped to get something to eat. I heard Rinaldo say he wanted to grab a baguette.”

“I see...” She paused. *How do I tell him about what happened at the hotel?*

“I know what you’re thinking,” Kerim said softly.

“You do?” *Are you reading my thoughts again?*

He gave her a smug grin. “Yeah, actually, I could hear you the whole time. I didn’t realize that I resembled a Greek god.”

Cristal felt her cheeks grow hot with embarrassment. She took a breath to regain her composure and said, “The lady from the plane, the one you switched seats with, she’s a National Security Agent.”

Kerim’s eyebrow rose up slightly. “You mean Ms. Full Bodied Mama? You’re joking.”

She shook her head. “No, she’s for real. And she showed us some photos she took while you were sleeping on the plane.”

Kerim frowned. “And?”

“There was this weird glow around your head in all the photos,” she said quietly. “And she also had a video clip to prove to Harry that it wasn’t a Photoshop job.”

“Wow, and you both believed that crap?” he asked.

“I don’t know but it looked very real.”

Kerim reached out, his arms wrapping around her and pulling her towards him. She enjoyed the embrace. *Why did she feel so safe in his arms?*

“Let’s say that this is true,” he began. “What do you think this light around my head could be?”

Her eyes looked up into his. “Yaffa called it a halo.”

“Ah, Yaffa,” he mumbled. “She called it a halo.” He repeated the words as if trying to understand the full meaning behind them.

“It did look like a halo, Kerim. But I also took a photo of you. Remember? You were doing the ‘peace’ sign and there was no halo around you.”

“Victory sign,” he interrupted.

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, victory sign. My point is, when I took the photo of you, there was no light around your head. I don’t know how to explain why there was a light in Yaffa’s photos.”

“It’s the music,” he murmured to himself.

“What did you say?” Cristal frowned.

“When you and I were listening to the music, we were connected to each other in our minds. I could read your thoughts and you could read mine. It is possible maybe that with the human eye, the light is not visible. But on digital photos, this light is visible.”

Cristal shook her head, trying to process what Kerim said. “I don’t know. That sounds pretty far-fetched.”

Kerim looked at her then, his eyes probing into hers. “Isn’t everything that happened after the earthquake, as you say, ‘far-fetched’? Like the fact we can communicate without words? And how about you seeing Harry’s mother’s image in the sky on the day of the earthquake? Isn’t that far-fetched? Something is happening with us. With the world.”

Her mouth dropped open, ready to argue his points but instead she fell silent. He was right. Right about everything.

He continued while his fingers gently stroked her arms, waking the hidden passion inside of her. “I have been having strange dreams and visions lately. And my headaches seem to be getting worse. I feel like my brain is trying to tell me that there is something I’m supposed to do. But I can’t remember what it is.”

She still didn’t know what to think or what to say.

“You know that being here could be dangerous,” he said quietly. His expression of concern was unnerving but his caresses were numbing the anxiety in her mind.

“Because of what happened in New York?” she asked.

“We’re going to one of the black holes.” He nodded, looking at her straight in the eyes. “We don’t know what will happen. You know that Harry didn’t want us to bring you.”

“If that’s the case, why did you?”

Kerim reached into his leather jacket and took out his smart phone. “I want you to see something.” He swiped the phone, tapped a few buttons and handed it to her.

On the screen, there was a photo of what looked like an open journal with hand written notes.

She glanced over at him. “What is this?”

He tipped his chin up slightly. It was his way to say, ‘go ahead and check it out’. She had hung around him enough by now to understand the subtle meaning behind his mannerisms and gestures.

She swiped the screen to zoom in on the photo until the words were legible.

The dreams are coming all the time now. They used to scare me but now I welcome them. I am able to remember in detail the last one. The numbers keep

repeating in my brain. 11132013, 56609, 14350109, 57740910, 17300304.

I'm writing this before sleep steals me back into the darkness of my nightmares.

The darkness enclosed around me, like it always did in my dreams. I was wandering the streets of an old city surrounded by walls that towered high above. Everything seemed familiar to me. The sights, the sounds, the smells. The air was filled with a salty mugginess. Behind the walls, must be the sea, I thought as I stumbled down the street. I wanted to go towards the water but I could hear voices ahead of me. For some unexplainable reason, I felt drawn towards the sound.

By the wall, there was a young couple. The woman was remarkably pretty; the man, dark and mysterious. Their voices sounded concerned but I couldn't make out the words. I inched closer, wondering why I was here and why I was seeing this.

Suddenly, someone grabbed me. I turned to see who it was but saw nothing. I tried to break free, to scream for help but I was paralyzed. I watched as a dark cloud descended onto the woman. It had tentacle-like arms wrapping around her, strangling and choking her. The man was trying to pull her free but he was no match for this thing. I could see the woman's eyes wide with fright. The tentacles were literally squeezing the life out of her right before my eyes. It was then that the man lifted his arms and looked up to the heavens crying out in a language that sounded like Latin. A brilliant white light exploded across the sky. The earth began upheaving beneath my feet. I

struggled to move and realized that I had been freed. I turned to run, to save my cowardly self.

But I could see the woman was also freed from the arms of the dark cloud. She was screaming, or seemed to be. I could not hear over the thunderous roar. I could see why she was overwrought. The man was being torn apart by the rays of the white light that had snaked its way down from the sky. I saw him explode into a white light, a transparent being. It was then that he rose up, as if a force were pulling him. He reached out to the woman, she reaching out to him. But their hands never touched. He was pulled away, almost violently, like a rag doll, up into the sky.

And then I awoke.

Bina Schwartz

Chapter 24

‘48

CRISTAL LOOKED UP FROM the phone, meeting Kerim’s gaze.

“Where did you get hold of the journal?” she managed to say. Her mind was reeling, her brain still trying to process the information.

“I broke into Harry’s office this morning and found it in a hidden safe under his desk,” he said.

She handed the phone back to him. “Was this all that was in it?”

“No, there’s a lot more.”

“I noticed the numbers. I thought they looked familiar. They are the same ones Harry asked us to find out what the correlation between them were.”

“And?” He raised one eyebrow.

“He never told us what the numbers were or where they came from. So we thought they were secret codes and we tried to break

them. But now, it is so obvious.” She couldn’t believe how simple it was.

Kerim was watching, waiting for her to continue.

“11132013, 56609, 14350109, 57740910, 17300304. It’s a date, not a code. It’s today’s date formatted by the different calendars—Gregorian, Julian, Islamic, Hebrew, Coptic.”

His eyes widened. “Today’s date? November 13, 2013. Did Harry know?”

She shook her head, giving him a wry smile. “I don’t think so. One weakness about Harry, once he’s got his mind focused on something, he gets stuck on that theory for a long time until he figures out that there are other options. He makes the simplest things so complicated sometimes.”

They fell into an awkward silence—both of them avoiding the real discussion they should be having. The fact that what Bina had written could have been a premonition about what was about to happen. She trembled at the thought.

Kerim reached out and pulled her towards him. “Cristal, I don’t want to lose you,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “But it seems that time is running out.”

“No,” she said, pulling away. “Don’t say that. Nothing’s going to happen. We’re all going to be okay. I don’t want to think too far

ahead. Let's just enjoy the moment we have right now." Hot tears burned her cheeks but she refused to brush them away.

Kerim reached up and held her face, kissing her cheeks. He gently wiped the tears from her eyes. "Okay, okay. Let's stop talking about this."

She nodded her head, relieved that he had closed the topic.

"Come on, smile for me. You know I hate to see you cry," he whispered.

She gave him a small smile—happy to be in his arms, to be in love, and to be loved back.

THE SOUND OF A CAR HORN blaring interrupted her thoughts. Cristal glanced up to the street to see a silver-grey minivan parking in the empty space behind Kerim's motorcycle.

"Kerim, Cristal, let's go!" Gabriel's head stuck out of the passenger window, his arm waving for them to come.

Kerim nodded his head, waving his hand back to him. "Come on," he said to her, placing his arm around her shoulder. She nodded, lacing hers around his waist. A part of her worried that Kerim was right about the fact that time was running out. Stubbornly, she pushed the thought far back in her mind.

Everything is going to be okay. Dear God, help us.

A group of young men who had been sitting on a bench nearby was now standing around the van. There were four of them—one large guy in a blue t-shirt and black jeans, two of medium build in polo shirts and blue jeans, and the last one was the smallest in a white shirt and black pants. They seemed to be eyeing Kerim warily.

Cristal felt Kerim’s hand tighten around her shoulder. “Don’t worry,” he said in a hushed tone.

He let go of her shoulder and walked cautiously towards the men.

“Marhaba,” he said. She knew this meant ‘hello’ in Arabic.

“Ah-layne,” the large one responded, which was a way to say ‘hello’ or ‘welcome’ back.

Kerim continued talking in Arabic with them. She could see Gabriel getting out of the van to join them. The conversation sounded tense, their body language strained.

Although she hated politics, Cristal had been tracking the news about President Roshenbaum’s involvement with the Israeli and Palestinian peace talks. The State of Palestine would finally become a reality at the end of the month when the peace agreement was signed. Good news for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza; not so good news for the Israeli-Arab population, sometimes

referred to as ‘the Arabs of `48’. These were the Palestinians who, as Wikipedia described, were the Palestinians ‘standing fast, not fleeing during the War of 1948, unlike those who left and became refugees in neighbouring countries’. Now generations later, the ‘Arabs of ‘48’ and their children had become Israeli citizens. Facing racism as a minority population within Israel while at the same time considered traitors by Arab countries and other Palestinians outside of Israel, ‘the Arabs of ‘48’ could not embrace their own identity as Palestinians or as Israelis. To the outside world, they were neither Palestinian nor Jew.

Now with the peace talks, rumours that right wing government parties were going to pass a law to force Israeli-Arabs to transfer to the State of Palestine, thereby losing their Israeli citizenship brought uneasiness between Israeli-Arabs and Israeli-Jews. Although Cristal hated the politics of it all, she understood their uneasiness. As an American-Mexican, the idea of being forced to transfer to Mexico and then stripping her American citizenship was incomprehensible.

The van’s passenger back door opened. Rinaldo stepped out onto the street followed by a smaller person. When she squinted her eyes, she recognized who it was. Serena. *Why was she here?* Rinaldo walked towards the larger man, nodding to Gabriel who moved behind the other three.

The larger man looked over his shoulder at Rinaldo before saying something to Kerim.

From the driver side of the van, the door opened and Raffe came out. The frown on his face was intimidating; revealing a fury she sensed was larger than the situation at hand.

He advanced towards them, in confident strides causing the young men to step back.

Raffe spoke to them—his Arabic sounding rougher than Kerim’s and the young men probably due to his Hebrew accent. They spoke back and forth for a few minutes.

Cristal held her breath, wondering what the conversation was about. Kerim came up beside Raffe and they both continued speaking to the four of them.

The large man suddenly cracked a smile. He turned to the others whose frowns melted into smiles.

Kerim looked over his shoulder at her and nodded his head for her to come to him. He gave her the thumbs up, letting her know that everything was fine.

She walked over and stood beside him.

“Hello, nice lady,” the larger one said with a grin.

“Hello,” she said. Kerim reached over and squeezed her hand reassuringly.

“I study Engleesh in Canada. My name is Walid,” he said, his smile growing wider. “You like Akko? It is very, very, old city.”

“I’m Cristal. Yes, it is very beautiful.”

From the corner of her eye, she noticed that Rinaldo and Gabriel were having a side conversation of their own, whispering to each other. *What was going on?* She shifted her focus back.

Walid nodded his head. “I see you before.”

Cristal’s eyes widened. “Me? No, I don’t think so.” She frowned.

Walid took a step closer, still nodding his head. “Yes, yes... it is you. The day the big earthquake, it happen in Megiddo. My town. I see you in my dream.”

Kerim’s hand tightened over hers. “It’s okay, Cristal. Remember. Nothing is far-fetched.”

She gulped. Walid was waving his arm like an excited fan asking a famous celebrity for an autograph.

“I do not forget you. You very pretty. I not forget.” He nodded again and translated what he said to his friends.

Kerim said, “It’s time to go.” He turned to Walid and said something in Arabic.

Walid said, “Tammam. Y’alla!” She knew this meant, *Okay, let’s go*. He waved to the others to follow him as he walked towards the red VW Golf hatchback that was parked in the space in front of Kerim’s motorcycle.

Kerim glanced over. “We’re going to the wall.”

“We?” she asked.

He grabbed her hand and led her to the motorcycle. “Yeah, Walid and his friends are coming with us.”

Chapter 25

Mind games

HARRY WAS DRIVING FAST. Way too fast.

“Slow down,” said the voice that could pass as Dr. Saeed’s.

Harry’s eyes darted up to the rear view mirror. Dr. Saeed lounged in the backseat, on the passenger side. No crazy eyes, no spinning head. He was just ‘normal’.

Considering the circumstances, Harry should have been somewhat relieved. Earlier, he had imagined vampire teeth sinking into the back of his neck. Thank God, that didn’t happen.

He heard his mother’s voice say:

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha'olam, ha'motzi lehem min ha-aretz. Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.

It was the only prayer his mother taught him in Hebrew. She made him say it before every meal despite Aaron’s forbidding any forms of religious expression in their home.

Saying the prayer was meaningless to Harry. Just some words he would mumble before taking a mouthful of his dinner. If it made his mother happy, he wasn't going to argue with her. Why he could hear his mother saying the prayer now was just another mystery to him. *Focus on finding out more about the monster in the back of my car.*

“Dr. Saeed... Or is that your real name? Are you going to tell me what you are?” he asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

“You're talking very strangely, Harry,” Dr. Saeed replied. “Are you okay?” Again in that soothing voice of his.

His hands gripped the wheel. *Okay, play the game. Buy some time.*

“I don't know, Dr. Saeed. I guess I'm not quite myself,” he said.

“Ah, yes. You must have fallen asleep when you were waiting for me in the car.”

Fallen asleep? “I don't know what you're talking about,” he said. “As far as I recall, I was in my car by myself, ready to drive away from GN. And then you showed up from nowhere in the back seat.”

“Harry, now it's my turn to say ‘I don't know what you're talking about’. Don't you remember calling me? You said to meet you at your car and that it was urgent. That we had to go find Cristal before she ended up at one of the black hole locations.”

Flashes of memory exploded into Harry's head. *He could see himself leaning his head back on the headrest, the seat slightly reclined. There was a knock on the glass. He opened his eye to see Dr. Saeed. He unlocked the door to let Dr. Saeed in.*

Harry swerved the car, almost clipping a truck beside him.

The driver waved his hand out the window and yelled, “*Mb ath bvsbb shath 'ensbb?*” What do you think you're doing?!

“Get a hold of yourself,” Dr. Saeed said. “Do you want me to drive?”

Harry felt disoriented, unsure of himself. Did he in fact, dream up the whole thing? The secret lab? Seeing his dad? Dr. Saeed's yellow eyes? He did recall having trouble sleeping the last few nights. Was he suffering from sleep deprivation?

“I said do you want me to drive?”

Harry glanced over his shoulder. Dr. Saeed was looking at him with concern. He had to admit that he did not look like a crazy monster. If it was all a dream, then he didn't have to be afraid of him.

“Why?” Harry asked, hoping to sound light-hearted. “You don't like my Israeli style of driving?”

Dr. Saeed chuckled softly. “Glad to see you are feeling better. Your choice of words always amuse me.”

Wait a minute, Harry thought. Why was Dr. Saeed in the back seat? He never rides in the back seat.

Harry took a deep breath. “You comfortable back there, Dr. Saeed?” He looked up in the mirror to see a smile curl up on the Doc’s face.

“Yes, Harry. Thanks for forcing me to sit back here. You know I prefer to ride shot gun.”

*Okay, good answer. Maybe I **am** losing my mind. Play it cool.*

“You know I had a vision today,” Harry said quietly.

“Oh? We have some time before we get there. Care to tell me what it was?”

Harry saw the exit sign to Akko coming up on the right. They were about twenty minutes away from the black hole.

“I saw Aaron. He time travelled here to GN,” Harry said quietly. He looked over his right shoulder to check the blind spot before changing lanes. He caught Dr. Saeed’s eye in the mirror. *It twitched, I’m sure of it.* Harry’s mind was reeling as he tried to contemplate why Dr. Saeed, or more like Mr. Hyde, was playing

ignorant. A thought crossed his mind. *Maybe he didn't know that his cover was blown.*

“And what if that were true?” Dr. Saeed asked, as if luring him in, in his usual reserved way. “How would you feel about that?”

“Ah, come on. Don't talk to me like you're my shrink.”

“You do realize we both don't know what will happen when we arrive at the black hole. It could be the end of us all.” Dr. Saeed paused. “So humour an old friend, Harry.”

As Harry drove into the city of Akko, he had to slow down as he approached a roundabout. The Israeli Transportation Department installed the roundabouts to control the speed of drivers. However, it only encouraged the locals to speed around them like Indy racecar drivers on crack cocaine. His mother always told him to ‘do as the locals do’ so he slammed his foot on the gas and whipped around the roundabout, hurtling Dr. Saeed against the side door, and then toppling him over to the opposite door as Harry gunned the car a sharp right. Dr. Saeed never wore a seatbelt stating that, ‘If it is my time to leave this timeline, then so be it. I want to enjoy the ride; not feel strapped in like a prisoner.’

“Dr. Saeed, you okay back there?” Harry asked, chuckling to himself.

Dr. Saeed grabbed the back of his chair in an attempt to balance himself. “Harry, that isn’t funny,” he snapped.

In the rear view mirror, Harry could see that he had pulled himself up. He began fixing his shirt, and patting the sides of his hair flat. *What a self-centered prick.*

They sat in an uncomfortable silence while he drove them through the old city. Harry noticed that there were a lot of cars on the road with mostly guys not much younger than him, out for a joy ride, heading towards the beach—to hang out or kill time.

Speaking of time, Harry realized that he should use this opportunity to squeeze more intel out of Dr. Saeed. He cleared his throat before saying, “Aaron is here. I can feel it. Call me crazy but in my vision Aaron told me that he travelled through time to get here.”

“He told you this?” Dr. Saeed leaned his head forward between the front seats, causing Harry to almost jump out of his skin.

“Freak! Do you want to get us killed?” he cried out, as he swerved inches away from sideswiping a parked car.

“Oh, sorry,” Dr. Saeed said as he leaned back. “It’s just that your vision was not a dream, Harry.”

Harry could hear the excitement in his voice. Is he for real? So Dr. Saeed really didn’t have a clue that Harry knew his secrets. If

the good doctor was attempting to make him doubt himself, it wasn't working. Deep down in his gut, Harry knew he saw something not from this world.

He realized that he must be developing a sixth sense, like Cristal. And why would he be surprised? Aaron and Dr. Saeed admitted they had been experimenting on him too. Deception had a bitter taste. Aaron admitted having tested on himself too. And who was to say that Dr. Saeed wasn't one of Aaron's volunteer test subjects?

“Harry, are you listening? Your father is alive.”

“Yes, I know,” Harry replied calmly. “You and I both know that he time travelled here.” He looked up at the mirror to see his reaction.

Dr. Saeed shook his head. “No, he didn't. Although he would want to believe that.”

Harry swerved the car over to the side of the road, putting the stick shift into park. He turned around. *Screw logic. He wanted answers.*

“What the hell are you talking about? Stop talking in circles!”

Dr. Saeed stared at him, looking almost contrite. He said, “He didn't die five years ago.”

Harry shook his head, completely baffled at what he was hearing. He had expected Dr. Saeed to explain how his father went FTL (faster than light) speed on warp drive while time travelling here from the past to the present.

“Sorry, I don’t get it. What are you trying to say?”

Dr. Saeed took a deep breath, getting ready to tell him in his ‘once upon a time’ way.

Harry sighed, rolling his eyes. “Skip the long explanations and just tell me the ‘Cliff’s notes’.”

Dr. Saeed nodded his head. “Yes, of course. The data that the Truth Seekers team have been decoding uncovered something that GN has been hiding.”

Harry sighed and shook his head. “Cut to the chase, Dr. Saeed. You’re killing me over here.”

Dr. Saeed cleared his throat and wiped the sweat from his brow. *Man, he’s either a great actor or he’s got something really good to tell me.*

“Okay, in short. GN faked your father’s death. That was the big secret that GN had encrypted on their secure servers.”

WTF? “Are you talking about the data Cristal and Joanna were decoding? We knew that it was a huge secret they were hiding.

But you're telling me the secret was that they had faked Aaron's death?"

Dr. Saeed shook his head. "No, no. It's more than that. But I'm still trying to figure it out. And could you please refer to him as your father? He is your father, after all."

"Okay, so you're saying Aaron was in on it?" Harry said, stressing on 'Aaron' as he spat out the words.

"No, definitely not. They kept your father in a drug-induced coma. For what reason, I'm not sure." He took a deep breath. "The decrypted data Joanna provided had been running through your software program before you left to see Cristal. The data revealed that there was a secret room at GN. I went in search for this room and found that it was guarded. Fortunately, I was able to convince the guards that I had clearance. I found your father in the secret lab."

Harry pounced on this bit of information. "Secret lab?"

"Yes, yes... GN has a secret lab."

"Where was it?" he asked with a sneer in his voice. Dr. Saeed wasn't admitting he had a secret lab behind the hidden door in the closet of his lab.

"In the South wing basement," Dr. Saeed continued. "When I found him in a comatose state, I administered Zolpidem into his IV

drip. He woke up an hour later, although he was quite incoherent at first. I managed to get him dressed and walk him out of the secret lab back to my lab.”

*What a backstabbing, lying sack of sh*t! He played me all along for an idiot, a dumb kid moron. And to think I believed him and put Cristal and all the Truth Seekers in freaking danger.*

Son of a b*tch. He'd be damned if Dr. Saeed used him and Cristal as pawns ever again. Harry was about to say something when the car started to shake slightly. His head felt woozy as he turned to face forward—trying to steady himself. Seconds later, a thunderous sound roared in the sky above them.

“Dear God,” Harry muttered.

Dr. Saeed grabbed his shoulder. “Drive, Harry. We must get to the black hole before anything happens!”

The earth shook subtly beneath the car in waves. Harry shifted gears and pressed his foot down on the gas.

Chapter 26

The Wall

WHEN THE FIRST tremors on the ground started, Kerim and Cristal were standing in front of the walls of the old fortress of Akko, which loomed sixty feet high above them. Seconds later, Raffé appeared out of nowhere. Something about this guy unhinged her nerves. However, now was not the time to pinpoint exactly what it was.

Cristal clung to Kerim as the ground gently swayed back and forth—the swaying reminded her of when she was standing in her stepfather’s boat while it was docked in the marina. Not that he knew how to drive the thing. He only used it to throw cocktail parties for his wealthy dental clients and show off his ‘perfect’ family.

As suddenly as the shaking began, it stopped. Kerim looked down at her, almost the way he looked at Gabriel right after the earthquake in New York, with his ‘Are you serious?’ face. She released her arms around him and mumbled, “Sorry, not sure what got into me.”

Walid and two of his friends were standing off to the side, a few feet from her. Where were the rest of the Truth Seekers?

“Mizz Cristal,” Walid called out as he ran up to her. “Did you feel the shake of the ground?”

Cristal glanced over at Kerim who had moved over to the van. He was quietly talking with Raffe, a grim expression on his face. She noticed that he was shaking his head, several times in fact. Cristal didn’t want to even surmise what they were saying to each other.

She turned back to Walid who was wide-eyed and nervous, obviously aware of the imminent danger despite appearing to be calm. He smiled at her in a reassuring way.

“Do not be scared,” he said. “Allah is here and if it is His will, then we must trust Him.”

She knew ‘Allah’ meant ‘God’ and she didn’t think this was the time or place to suddenly become religious.

“You believe in God, yes?” he asked.

She nodded her head. “Of course, I do,” she said. “I’m just not religious. What I mean is, I don’t go to church or anything like that.”

He nodded his head and said, “You need not go to a place to talk to God. He is here. Everywhere.” He raised his hands up to the sky to emphasize his point.

“Yes, you’re right,” she said, happy to hear he wasn’t going to try to preach to her. That was one of her biggest pet peeves. Born into a Roman Catholic family, she’d always felt that her mother had tried to shove her own beliefs down her throat. The more she did this, the more she wanted to run away from her.

Her senses picked up something in the air. The ground under her right foot shifted ever so slightly while her ears were picking up a high-pitched sound, similar to what she heard before the earthquake in New York. *Oh no, not again.* Her heart began beating faster, her lungs starting to burn.

Calm down. You can control this, her father’s voice whispered in her ear. She frantically looked over at Kerim but he was still in a deep discussion with Raffe.

“Mizz Cristal?”

She turned back to Walid whose eyes were deep with concern.

“I’m sorry, Walid,” she finally managed to say. “I’m not feeling very well.”

He turned and said something to his friend who nodded his head and ran to the car. Shortly after, he ran back with a bottle of water in his hand, stopping, and holding it out to her.

“For me?” she asked. He smiled shyly, nodding his head with his eyes looking down at his feet.

Cristal was overwhelmed with Walid and the boy’s sweet kindness, her heart filling with warmth and gratitude. She took the water bottle gratefully, and smiled back.

“Thank you very much. It is very kind of you,” she said.

The young man looked up at her briefly, his face turning red. Walid patted him on the back, signaling for him to step back.

“Drink. It is good to drink,” Walid said to her, motioning with his hands.

She smiled, removed the cap from the bottle, and tilted it to her lips. The cold water spilled into her mouth, quenching her thirst, relaxing her breathing and decreasing her pulse rate.

When she looked up, she gave Walid a warm smile. “You were right. The water has made me feel ten times better already.”

Now it was his turn to blush. “Very happy to help you, Mizz Cristal.”

She was about to respond when his smile quickly left his face, his eyebrows furrowed into a knot; his eyes staring down at the bottle in her hand.

She looked down too, wondering what he was looking at. The water was bubbling out of the bottle, like someone opening a bottle of pop after shaking it.

“Cristal?” She glanced up to see Gabriel standing in front of her, a worried look crossing his face. Rinaldo and Serena were behind him, with similar stunned expressions on their faces.

“Drop the bottle, Cristal! It might have been poisoned!” Serena cried out. She ran up to Walid and twisted his arm behind his back.

Cristal dropped the bottle to the ground, spilling the water, or whatever it was, onto the street.

“That is a lie!” She heard Walid yell. “Let me go!”

She was certain Walid was not trying to kill her. Although she had no way to prove this, her ‘sixth sense’ assured her that he had nothing but respect for her.

Her confidence in herself began to waver, when suddenly everything around her started fading in and out. *Was it really poison that was in the bottle?* She could see Kerim running towards her with Raffé grabbing his arm to hold him back.

Several flashes of bright white light streaked across the sky, followed by cracks of thunder. The thunder clapped in back-to-back succession as if someone up there was massively pissed off and lighting gargantuan firecrackers. *To celebrate the impending storm?* Did she really think that? She shook her head wondering why her mind wasn't making much sense. Another boom from the sky. And another, and another. The sound was so deafening, it triggered car alarms in the street.

“Kerim!” she cried out, or tried to. She couldn't hear herself above the thunderous roar.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a small silver car drive up onto the sidewalk. It was gunning towards Kerim before skidding to a stop beside him. A young man jumped out of the car and was running towards her. *Harry?*

“Cristal!” Harry screamed but his voice was covered by the roaring thunder. When he opened his mouth, she could only hear the thunder as if it were rumbling out from his lips.

She felt the ground swaying beneath her feet. *Oh God, I think I'm going to be sick,* she thought to herself. She could not stop herself from falling over. *Help me...* she tried to form the words to speak but was unable to.

A strong arm grabbed her by the waist, keeping her steady. Then she felt someone else hold onto her other arm. Cristal

glanced down to see Kerim holding onto her waist, Dr. Saeed on the other side, holding her arm. *How did Dr. Saeed get here? Did he ride here with Harry?*

Harry was running towards her, his eyes wide with fright, his mouth open, screaming words that she could not understand over the thunderous booming sound above them.

“Just relax, Cristal,” Dr. Saeed said in his usual reassuring tone, his voice cutting through the noise like a sharp knife slicing a stick of butter. “Let me take you to the car.”

No, no, no... She pushed Dr. Saeed away from her, leaning her full weight on Kerim. The ground shook violently beneath her feet.

“I’m here Cristal. Don’t be scared,” Kerim said into her ear. He lifted her into his arms, carrying her away. She knew he would do whatever it took to get her to a safe place. A flash of light and then more claps of thunder. She noticed the ground was rippling in small waves. Another lurch of the ground sent Kerim forward releasing her from his arms.

In her delirium, Cristal felt herself flying into the air, in slow motion, in a free-fall upward. *Free-fall upward?* It sounded ridiculous but it was true. Higher and higher she felt herself ascending. Over her shoulder, the fortress wall behind her was whipping down the higher she rose. She glanced down to see Harry, frantic, screaming, his hands waving above his head. Gabriel and Rinaldo seemed to

be holding onto Kerim for dear life. And little Serena, she seemed so lost standing there by herself, staring up at her. Cristal blinked her eyes still not fully comprehending what was happening. She realized she was floating ten feet, now twenty feet above all of them.

How is this happening?

Glancing down, she watched a grey cloud-like shape rise from the ground, almost like a mini tornado, twisting and growing. It was rising off the ground and forming into a shape. Before she could blink her eyes, the grey cloud transformed into an eagle, its wings spanning out the length of the van. The ‘eagle’ flapped its glorious wings and flew up into the sky, circling and soaring between the lightening strikes and swirling black clouds, gracefully ascending higher until it hovered in front of her. She stared in amazement when the eagle transformed once again. Everything, except for the wings, metamorphosed into the shape of a man—his body a translucent silvery glow. She squinted at his face, which was taking shape now with a nose, eyes, and mouth. *I recognize this face*, she thought to herself.

Gasping, she realized that this *being* levitating in front of her, seemingly oblivious to the demented storm around them, was none other than Kerim’s strange friend, Raffe.

Raffe nodded his head, his lips twitching into a smile, as if acknowledging her findings.

“Who are you?” she tried to ask but the wind swallowed her words.

No time for that! Take my hand! His voice bellowed out in her head, the pain cutting through her like sharp knives. Her body began convulsing; her head felt like it was going to explode.

Raffe reached his hand out and touched her forehead. As soon as she felt his hand on her, the pain was replaced with a sweet relief.

His voice entered her mind again. *Sorry, I haven't taken this form for many years. I have forgotten how sensitive you humans are. I will decrease the volume of my thoughts so as not to damage your brains.*

“Are you serious?” she asked, half hoping that she had passed out and this was just some preposterous hallucination. A thought came to her mind. How come when she first met him, he didn't speak any English?

He opened his mouth to speak. “The English language is so rudimentary. I prefer not to speak it unless necessary. I shall speak to you with my mouth instead of my thoughts, as this requires less energy. Best to conserve my energy for later.” He sounded like a foreign exchange student learning English, his words coming out in a staccato-like fashion, speaking with proper grammar, lacking the idioms or slang terms which most native speakers use.

He continued. “As I said earlier, there is no time. Reach out your hand to me now. You must do this willingly.”

She frowned. Despite the terrifying situation she was in, the fact that she was suspended fifty feet up in the air did not prevent her natural stubbornness to surface.

“Or what?” she asked.

His nostrils flared slightly before saying, “Or the demon that is pinning you to the wall will drop you to your death below. But the frightening part will not be the fall. That part is fairly quick and simple. Really, the ghastly part would be the way ‘it’ would manipulate you to release your soul willingly before you crash to the ground.”

Oh my God. The fear that used to wake her in her sleep, the dreams, visions, voices in her head, all started flooding back to her.

“Ah, yes. Calling out to our Lord our God, Father to all, is a good start,” Raffe said in his monotone voice. He reached out his hand.

“Do you believe in God?” he asked bluntly.

She nodded her head. “Yes, of course I do. I have always had a strong faith in God. But I do not believe in religion.” *Now why did she have to admit that?*

Raffe shrugged. “Religion is a man-made institution. Not made by the Almighty One. So, no worries, you have passed the test.” He motioned to her with his hand to go towards him.

“That’s it?” she asked. Suddenly, she felt as if something released her, causing her to free-fall again, but this time it was downward and much, much faster—dizzily faster. She reached out her hand, or tried to.

“Dear God, help me! I don’t want to die!” she screamed in her head.

When she realized that her body was about to splat onto the ground below, she felt arms underneath her swooping her up, holding her tight. Her body felt like it was drifting down like a feather falling from the sky. She realized Raffe had caught her and was flying her down into the arms of Kerim. The bile rising in her throat; the disorientation in her head and general chaos around her; the many faces looking down at her, their mouths moving but their words unintelligible; and the storm still blustering above, all made her want to retreat into a fetal position.

Instead she watched Raffe transform from a winged angel back into his human form. She noticed that the storm seemed to have lost its anger, the thunder now a dull roar.

“Cristal, are you okay?” She turned to see Kerim’s face looking down on her. His look of sincere concern comforted her. But

before she could enjoy the moment, another voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Cristal, oh my God!” She turned to see Harry, his eyes wide as saucers, terror written all over his face.

“Please be okay. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”
Tears were streaking down his cheeks. *Harry Doubt, crying for her? I must be tripping out.*

Kerim pulled her closer away from Harry. She let her head lean against his chest, listening to his heartbeat. “Let’s lay you down in the van,” he said, as he carried her away from the gawkers.

A loud sound like a firecracker blasting in her ear made him freeze in his tracks. She could see Kerim staring at something in front of him. With the little bit of energy she had left, she turned to see what it was.

Oh freak. This really can’t be happening.

Chapter 27

Not so lucky

STANDING A FEW FEET AWAY, Yaffa Bauer had her 9mm semiautomatic pistol pointed at Kerim’s chest. Cristal could see several other agents in black suits around her, their weapons drawn.

“Kerim Ilgaz,” she said, “I am Yaffa Bauer, National Security Agent, informing you that you are suspected of terrorist activity against the State of Israel and the world. You do not have to say anything; whatever you say might be used as evidence against you; refraining from answering questions might strengthen the evidence against you. Place the woman down and come with us without resistance.”

Kerim did not move.

Yaffa said something to the other agents and they came swarming around them. She saw Raffe, in human form, walking up to Yaffa who waved her gun at him, yelling and screaming that she was about to shoot. He spoke to her in Hebrew, saying something that caused her to stop. She motioned to the other agents to stand down.

Turning to Kerim, she said, “Okay, your friend here is going to prove that you are not behind these terrorist activities. I’ve asked my men to stand down. I will be going with you. But if you try anything, I will have my men shoot you on the spot.”

Kerim was staring at Raffe, unsure of his plans.

Kerim, did you know that Raffe was this weird bird man? She asked Kerim in her thoughts.

He frowned, his jawline tensing. That meant no.

Yaffa turned, faced them and asked, “Who wants to join us to find out the truth?”

Walid looked over his shoulder at his friends who seemed to be shrinking in their shoes. He shrugged as he stepped forward. “I will join.”

Harry stepped forward.

“Count me in,” Serena said.

Rinaldo nodded his head. “If they go, I go.”

Harry said, “Leave Cristal here. She needs to rest.”

Yaffa shook her head firmly. “No, she is necessary.” She pointed at Gabriel. “He must come too.”

Gabriel looked around and pointed at himself. “Who, me?”
He turned to Kerim, his eyebrows arched.

Yaffa nodded. “We watch you every day. You and Kerim are conspirators.”

Gabriel shook his head. “No, not me. I’m just a gamer. I’m not a terrorist.”

Kerim shot him a glare, his nostrils flaring. He whispered in Cristal’s ear, “Can you stand?”

She nodded. “Yes, I am feeling better now.”

He gently lowered Cristal to the ground, and then reached out his hand for her to grab, helping her stand.

He reached up and held her face in his hands, searching deep into her eyes. “Cristal, do you believe in kismet? A predestined moment, where fate steers your life. In a direction you never meant to go. Where reality takes a backseat to what only your heart appears to know.”

Her heart filled with a warmth she always yearned to feel. She never heard such beautiful words before. “Kerim, that sounds like a poem. It’s so beautiful.”

He smiled, his grey eyes softening. She could see tiny tears sparkling in the corners. “It’s a song I wrote for you. When we get out of here, I promise I’ll sing it to you.”

She nodded, tears welling in her eyes. “Why does it sound like you’re saying good-bye?” There was an ache in her heart, twisting like a dagger.

He kissed the tip of his finger and then placed it on her lips. “Believe in me and never doubt. Promise me?”

She gulped unable to say anything, hot tears streaking down her face. *Why does this sound like you’re leaving? I can’t live without you.*

“Promise me,” he whispered, his eyes probing hers while his fingers stroked the tears away.

Finally she nodded her head. “I promise,” she managed to say.

“Very touching. For an innocent man, you bleat like a martyr. Let’s get moving,” Yaffa called out.

Kerim gave Yaffa a dirty look. With his fists clenched, he took a step forward. Cristal could feel her heart racing. *Don’t do anything crazy, Kerim!*

Yaffa raised her gun and pointed it at him. “Don’t move or I’ll shoot.” The other agents followed suit and leveled their weapons.

“Cristal is staying here,” Kerim said in a low voice. He reached out his hand and guided Cristal towards Raffe.

The agents raised their guns.

“Kerim!” Cristal cried out as she stumbled into Raffe’s arms. She frantically looked over at Serena and Rinaldo, praying that they could do something, anything to stop this. Counting the number of agents there were, their positioning, and weapons, even she realized that they were outnumbered.

Not surprisingly, it was Harry who stepped forward. “Kerim, let’s just all go together,” he said. He placed his hand on Kerim’s shoulder. “We will prove that you and Gabriel are innocent. And we can deal with Yaffa later.”

Kerim gave him a blank stare, his body tensing. He shoved Harry’s arm off his shoulder. “Leave me alone,” he said. He reached for his Lucky Strikes. “I need a smoke,” he mumbled.

Yaffa’s face tensed and squared off.

Cristal’s mouth dropped open *.Ob sb*t! She thinks it’s a gun!* “Yaffa! Stop! It’s just a pack of cigarettes!” Cristal cried out. She tried to run but Raffe wouldn’t let her go.

Gabriel must have seen Yaffa too because he rushed towards Kerim, shoving him out of the way.

Shots rang out. Bap! Bap! Bap!

In horror, Cristal watched Gabriel crumple to the ground as the bullets pierced his body. Kerim and Harry grabbed him before his head hit the pavement. “Gabriel!!!” Their screams echoed in the air.

“Raffe, I demand you to let me go!!!” Cristal cried out. Raffe blinked and released her arm, stepping back to let her pass. With a burst of adrenalin, she sprinted towards Gabriel’s motionless body. Serena, and Harry were kneeling down beside him trying to revive him. She flung herself down on the ground, kneeling into the pool of blood that was pouring out from under his back. She scanned his body to see where the exit wounds were; three bullet holes to his chest. The voice of her CPR coach rang in her head.

Focus, Cristal. Remember the ABC’s of CPR. Check Airways, Breathing, and Circulation.

Her training in cardiopulmonary resuscitation was keeping her calm. No air, no breath, but there was a shallow pulse. *Good, he’s still alive. Hang in there, Gabriel.*

She blew into his mouth and pumped his chest. *Breathe, dammit, breathe.* After thirty compressions, he still was not breathing. The weak beat of his pulse earlier had kept her hopes up but to her shock, there was no more pulse. She began pounding on his ribs in

desperation. *Beat! Come on, beat for me!* But after repeatedly slamming her fist into his chest, there was still no pulse.

“Gabriel! Don’t! Don’t die on me...” she managed to choke out, realizing that it was too late. Her body was shaking, her energy spent.

“Cristal, he’s gone,” she heard Serena say quietly.

“Nooooo!!!” she screamed, her eyes looking up into the dark purple sky. “How could You take him?!” Like a mad woman she waved her hands soaked with Gabriel’s blood up to the heavens as if demanding an answer from a silent God.

“Cristal, please don’t,” Harry said. His voice sounded broken. He wrapped his arms around her as she moaned into his shoulder. Suddenly, her body shivered, sobering her from her delirium. She opened her eyes and saw Walid and the others standing around, watching.

Cristal pushed Harry’s arms away and stood up, numb with grief. *Where was Kerim?*

She looked over and saw a group of agents by their vehicles. The sight of those bottom-feeding sharks made her heart pound so hard in her chest it felt like her ribs were going to crack.

“Cristal!” Kerim called out. She turned and saw him being held by two agents while waiting for another agent to open the door to the vehicle.

“Kerim!” She called running to him. Yaffa stepped into her path with her hand extended out signaling for her to stop.

“Stay back, girl. You don’t want to be arrested too,” Yaffa said with a sneer.

“Murderer!!!” Cristal screamed, every cell in her body wanting to snap Yaffa’s neck. She imagined all the ways she could destroy her when to her surprise, a bolt of energy from inside her body blasted out from her hands toppling Yaffa’s lard ass over onto another agent. Cristal looked down at her hands in amazement. *Holy crap, did I do that?*

Cristal bolted over to Kerim, throwing her arms around him. The two agents, who had been holding him, must have been freaked out with what they just witnessed, because they released his arms and stepped back without question.

“You can’t leave. You can’t,” she said, sobbing into his shoulder.

Kerim kissed her on the cheek, saying, “Cristal, please stop crying. It tears me up to see you like this.”

Her chest was burning as if flames were torching her body from the inside. *Keep calm*, she told herself.

All of a sudden, a high-pitched sound blasted through the air. The ground began shifting in violent waves, ripping cement and uprooting trees. Kerim reached down and grabbed her around her waist and started to run.

The fear she felt earlier was replaced with an incredible calm, as if she were only an observer watching the chaos around her. Everyone was scattering, looking for cover. Serena and Rinaldo were running to the van; the agents were scrambling to a building across the street; and Walid's friends were crouching beside the wall.

Harry, on the other hand, was standing motionless, staring at her with a sad look on his face. He couldn't be her protector anymore.

“Stop this at once!”

Now what?

Cristal turned and found herself looking into the barrel of Yaffa's gun.

Chapter 28

Beginning of the end

THE GROUND BENEATH THE agent's feet rose and fell but Yaffa looked determined to ride the waves like a skilled surfer.

"You are no longer grounded. Gabriel is gone. You've unleashed the power," her father's voice said in her head.

"I said stop this or I will shoot!" Yaffa's words came out like a shrill cry. Was she threatening her or begging for her life?

A gunshot filled the air. She heard the bullet whip past her ear.

An incredible force shoved her, throwing her body twenty feet into the wall. She landed onto the ground, her shoulder bruised but the rest of her relatively unharmed. When she stood up, she was shocked to see Dr. Saeed standing in front of her.

"Dr. Saeed?" she asked. She heard a crash as giant chunks of the wall came down around her.

“Cristal!” Kerim and Harry were running towards her, dodging pieces of the falling wall and jumping over the ground-swelling waves.

She glanced up to see Raffé beside her, facing Dr. Saeed.

“Leave her alone,” Raffé growled.

“Come with me, Cristal,” Dr. Saeed said, motioning to her.

“No, Cristal! Don’t listen to him!” Harry screamed.

The ground shifted violently, causing Dr. Saeed to fall backwards.

“Dr. Saeed!” Cristal cried. She tried to run towards him but her legs couldn’t move. They were planted to the ground, the energy shooting through her body up into the sky.

Dr. Saeed stood up and was trying to steady himself when Harry tackled him, sending him back onto the ground. They wrestled as the ground rippled around them. Dr. Saeed flung Harry, thrusting him up in the air like a sack of potatoes before slamming him into the wall. In a blink of an eye, Dr. Saeed bounced up from the ground effortlessly. He turned in a fluid-like motion and began running, although it seemed more like flying, towards Cristal.

But it wasn’t Dr. Saeed, although it resembled him in appearance. This thing’s eyes were glowing an odd neon yellow

colour; its body was transparent, and its mouth opened revealing a row of two-inch long fangs. *What in the hell?*

She tried to lift her legs to run but the magnetic energy from the earth held her down. *Dear God!* As if to answer her prayer, a gust of wind brushed past her. Raffe had transformed back into the winged being and was flying towards Dr. Saeed at a speed faster than a shuttle preparing for liftoff.

“I command you to stop,” Raffe’s voice bellowed. The vibrations from his words caused more tremors in the ground.

“You can’t use that cheap parlor trick on me,” the dark spirit said in a voice that sounded almost robotic, deep and guttural with a hollow screeching echo in the tone.

All of a sudden, the dark demon spirit whipped out a black tail six feet in length and lashed at Raffe’s head. Raffe reeled backwards, obviously hurt by the blow. *So he isn’t invincible after all,* she thought to herself. Raffe quickly regained his balance, stretched out his wings, his arm reaching for something behind him. To her amazement, he drew out a sword—a sword she would have never imagined existed. The shaft had ornate symbols emblazoned on it; the blade forged out of pure white energy was the length of Raffe’s wing with rays of light gleaming from the edges. Holding the sword forward, Raffe hurtled towards the demon, plunging the blade deep into its chest.

A howl came out of the demon's mouth, a horrific sound not from this world—a terrifying shriek that made the hairs on Cristal's arm stand on end.

The demon spirit morphed back into Dr. Saeed's human physical body and plummeted to the ground. As the human body of Dr. Saeed lay motionless on the ground, she watched a dark shadow rise from it, twisting and writhing in agony. Raffe waved his sword up in the air, not showing any mercy. The dark shadow demon shrunk back in fear, before turning and slithering down into a large jagged crack on the sidewalk.

The ground expanded and upheaved, before sending fierce tremors in all directions, north-south, east-west. The great wall behind her was now a mountain of dust.

Harry appeared in front of her, his face pale as a white sheet.

“Cristal,” he said. “Kerim isn't who you think he is. You have to believe me. You can't trust him.”

“Stop it, Harry,” she said, overwhelmed and exhausted with what she just witnessed.

Harry took a step closer to her, his blue eyes clouded with shadows. “Gabriel sent me a video he took with his camcorder when he was in the van. He filmed Raffe and Kerim discussing how they were going to eliminate you.”

Cristal shook her head. “I said, stop it! Nothing you’re going to say is going to change how I feel about Kerim.”

“Then, I won’t talk,” he said as he shoved his phone to her. “Here, watch for yourself.”

On the screen was a video of Raffe and Kerim. They were having a deep discussion outside the van. The video must have been taken before she had been lifted up to the tops of the fortress walls because she could see herself in the background talking with Walid.

Raffe was speaking but it was in Hebrew so she couldn’t understand a word.

“What does this prove? So they’re talking,” she snapped at him. “You know I can’t understand what they’re saying.” *This was unreal! Trapped in a pillar of uncontrollable energy and having this ridiculous conversation with Harry.*

“If you want to help, figure out how to make me stop this!” she yelled, pointing at the light blasting from her body. Didn’t he care that she was standing here emitting energy like a nuclear power station gone wild?

The force inside her was funneling up to the heavens from the top of her head and down to the bowels of the earth from the bottoms of her feet. *Where are you, Kerim?*

Harry stepped to the side and she could see Raffe (back in human form) and Kerim standing beside Dr. Saeed's body. Raffe was waving his arms and yelling in Hebrew while Kerim was shouting back at him. Suddenly Dr. Saeed's body sat upright. He was looking around as if he was in a daze. *Okay? Now, what's going on?*

Raffe raised his arm with a clenched fist, ready to pulverize Dr. Saeed until Kerim's hand caught his arm.

"The demon left the body. You can't hurt the human," she heard Kerim say.

Raffe sneered. "He signed his life away to the devil when he wanted to find the secrets of immortality. This pathetic piece of sh*t doesn't deserve to live."

Abruptly, Harry turned to her and asked, "Wait a minute, do you understand what they're saying?"

"Of course, I do," she said. After the words left her mouth, she realized that Kerim and Raffe were speaking in Hebrew.

"I don't get it. How come I can understand them?" she asked Harry.

Harry came closer, his body inches from hers. He grabbed her hand and held it tight. "I don't know either but I think maybe you

always were able to learn languages quickly. You just didn't know how to tap into that part of your brain."

She nodded her head. "Yes, that makes some sense." Harry swiped his phone and turned it back to her.

"Okay, watch the video. You'll understand what they're saying now," he said.

"Okay, I hope so," she replied.

The video started playing from the beginning. It sounded like Raffe was lecturing Kerim.

"Do you remember now? You were sent here to stop her. Not to fall in love with her. When you were changed into human form, we archived your memories and implanted fabricated memories into your human brain. This is the only way our kind can successfully infiltrate humans."

Holy crap! What is he saying? Cristal thought to herself.

Kerim started speaking. "I am remembering now. The Almighty sent me to stop the dark spirits from entering our spiritual realm," Kerim said, a frown darkening his face.

He speaks so strangely, she thought. *It doesn't sound at all like the way he talks to me. But maybe it's just how my mind is translating this. It's like*

I'm a Hebrew as a Second Language student and my brain is processing what they're saying too literally.

Raffe nodded, looking relieved to hear that Kerim was finally coming around. “Kerim, you are one of our greatest warriors. You took on this mission to protect the Kingdom of the Almighty.”

Kerim looked off into the distance and said, “And the black holes are the entrances to the secret portals from our world to this world. Only our kind is permitted to travel back and forth. Although, we are able to transport humans to Limbo, Purgatory or Paradise.” It was as if he was repeating something he learned during training.

Raffe smiled. “Very good, you are remembering now. Don't worry; it will all come back to you. Your human brain is much too small to fully grasp all of it. Today, you will be transformed back to your natural state but you must complete your mission. You must eliminate the girl. She is the key to opening the portals for the humans and the demons. Her natural power and abilities are threatening the security of all worlds.”

Kerim shook his head, raising his hand in defiance. “No! I cannot do this! She is an innocent. She has done nothing wrong.”

Raffe took a deep breath. “Not only must you do this. You will do this lest you face the wrath of the Almighty.”

*OMG. Is this 'angel-speak' or is this how they say things in Hebrew?
Do angels really speak like this?*

Kerim put his face in his hands. His body was visibly shaking. “I cannot complete this mission. I love her, with every part of my being.”

Cristal felt her heart swell despite learning about Kerim’s true identity. *Whoa, he was sent here to kill me.* She was beginning to fully comprehend the meaning of the phrase ‘Love is blind.’

Raffe put his arm around Kerim’s shoulders. He spoke in a softer tone. “When I first was sent down here, for my first mission, I too fell for the charms of the female human persuasion.”

Kerim glanced up. “You did?”

Raffe nodded. “In fact, that is why the Almighty sent me here to make sure you complete your mission. I was sent to destroy Liora Henandez, a Sephardi— a Jew of Spanish ancestry. The Henandez bloodline going back centuries is known to have special powers and abilities. He appointed guardian angels to watch over them. Since they were a good people, the guardians were instructed not to harm them but to report if the security of our worlds is breached. For centuries, the Henandez family kept their powers concealed from anyone outside the family. They followed the Almighty’s rules and never once did He have to send an archangel

for an extraction mission.” Kerim was nodding his head, listening intently.

“Unfortunately during the 1960s in this world, it was a time when the humans were rebelling against their parents’ beliefs and searching for spiritual independence. Liora was a good woman. Her brother was killed in a war that she believed was senseless. She wanted to fight against injustice so she joined a group of activists who at the time were uncovering secret experiments without knowing that the scientists were in fact demon possessed humans.”

Kerim nodded. “I remember this. These were the ‘Isolating the Soul’ experiments. It caused a stir with the Seven Senior Archangels. I didn’t understand the significance at the time and why we were put on high alert. Demons are always searching for more effective ways to relinquish humans from their souls with their permission. When I finished my intensive training to become an archangel, I realized how devious demons really were. Instead of threatening humans to give away their souls, they had found a much easier way. They simply asked humans to be test subjects and made them sign release forms thereby giving away their rights to their soul.”

Raffe interrupted him. “It was not just that. You may have not been briefed, as this is classified information. However, I share this with you as I have been given some leeway by the Almighty to provide you information on a ‘need to know’ basis. It seems to me

this is the time you ‘need to know.’ The leaders of the dark spirits have always wanted to enter Limbo and Purgatory to steal the souls of those who are waiting to enter the gates of Paradise. If they breach this world and enter ours, this act alone will cause an imbalance between all the worlds, which could lead to catastrophic destruction for the world here and the spirit world. This would thrust good and evil of man and spirit kind into a war that will end all wars.”

Kerim arched his eyebrow. “And what happened with Liora?”

Raffe shrugged as if trying to make the memory seem trivial. “Well, I fell in love with her. It was hard not to. She was beautiful, generous and had the purest heart I have ever seen in a human. Like you, my memory had been archived and implanted memories made me believe I was human. It was with Liora that I felt the emotion of love for the first time. Unless we are in pure human form, our kind does not have the capacity of feeling this emotion. When it came time to eliminate her, I was blinded by the love I felt for her. Love is an emotion that you will not forget but over time, the memories will fade.”

Kerim’s eyes widened. Cristal realized at the same moment that it was Raffe and Liora that Bina Schwartz saw in her dream.

Kerim asked quietly, “And the Almighty pulled you out of the mission and returned you to Him?”

Raffe nodded. “He removed me from the human world and stripped me of my rank. The Almighty demoted me from being a general to a lowly Purgatory Guide. The other archangels scoffed at me. But after getting to know the humans in Purgatory and understanding their suffering and pain, I realized why we have to protect them. Eventually, I was returned to my brigade and given the rank of Admiral.”

Kerim smiled wistfully. “I am a colonel in your brigade, Admiral Raphael,” he said with a deep respect in his voice. “You mentored me, I remember. But you still haven’t told me what happened to Liora.”

Raffe replied with a sigh, “The Almighty sent another angel to finish the mission. Once the angel took her from this world, her soul entered the Kingdom. She sits among those who are in the good graces of Him. Here in the human world, she left behind a daughter who was raised by Liora’s sister as her own child. She changed her name to Hernandez, to protect the child’s identity and emigrated from here to Mexico. When the child became an adult, she immigrated to the United States. Don’t you see? Cristal Hernandez is Liora’s great granddaughter.”

She shook her head. “Harry, this is too much. I’m part of a blood line that has special powers?” There was no time to think about this now.

She looked up to see Raffé and Kerim still arguing with each other, oblivious of anything else around them. Maybe that was a good thing. It gave her time to think of what to do next.

Buildings were collapsing; people were getting injured, maybe even dying. *I have to stop this.*

“Harry, I’m going to try to close the portal,” she said.

“Wait! I have to go through it.” Harry grabbed her shoulders. “I believe my mother and your father are there on the other side. In Limbo or whatever Raffé and Kerim were talking about.” He looked at her with determination in his eyes.

She held his arms and nodded. “Yes, they have been trying to communicate with us. I think they are alive. I **know** they are alive.”

“I will do my best to bring them back,” he said, touching her face.

“I know you will, Harry,” she said, as tears slid down her cheeks. She took a deep breath. Now was not the time to cry. “Hurry, before they see you,” she said. “I will close the portal after you enter. I will make sure Raffé and Kerim won’t follow you.”

He nodded his head. “Take care of yourself, okay?”

“Yeah, you know I always do.” She smirked and looked into his eyes. “Hurry up before I zap you with my super duper energy blast.”

He smiled. It was just like old times. “I’ll be back soon.” Then he stepped to the side of her, into the light and was gone. *Good luck, Harry.*

She closed her eyes, concentrating all her thoughts towards the waves of energy that were blasting out from inside of her. With all her mental power, she roared, “*I command you to stop!*”

Her eyes opened and the white light that had been rushing through her had stopped. She checked her feet by taking a step forward and realized she was free. No time to celebrate. She had to get out of there before Raffe ‘the birdman’ started coming after her.

She ran up to the edge of the sea wall and looked down at the crashing waves below. Glancing back, she saw that she had caught Raffe and Kerim’s attention. *Oh sh*t, I better do it before Raffe stabs me with his light sabre.*

Cristal faced the water, closed her eyes and leaped over the edge.

Her body plunged towards the water. She was falling fast, her mind wondering if this was the smartest thing she could have done. She pointed her feet down, anticipating impact. Although she was

relatively calm, a part of her was calculating what the chances were of smashing her body against a big rock. *This was a dumb move.*

Before she hit the water, she heard a ‘woosh’ and felt arms underneath her catching her from the fall. Her eyes opened to see it was Kerim holding her tight, his gaze fixed ahead of him as he carried her upwards. She turned her head and saw, to her amazement, behind his back were glorious silver feathered wings soaring in flight. She checked to see if Kerim’s body had become transparent. Thankfully, she could still see his t-shirt and leather jacket. He was in human form, except for the wings.

She wanted to say something but wasn’t sure exactly what. He glanced down briefly and said, “Do not be afraid, Cristal. You have no need to doubt me.”

Before she could react, a thunderous voice boomed across the sky making her cringe in fear. “Complete your mission!” the Voice commanded.

She could feel Kerim’s body shudder. *Is he going to drop me?*

He whispered to her, “I will put you down but you must hide. You have the power to do this. Just focus and concentrate. You don’t need a black hole to enter the other realm. You can transport back and forth like me.”

“I can?” Her eyes opened wide.

“You can. Just like you realized today that you have the power to understand many languages. You must believe in yourself.”

Kerim made a nosedive to the ground. She held on tightly to his arms.

Kerim landed on the ground, gently placing her down beside his motorcycle. It was keeled over against the sidewalk, the cement underneath it raised up from the quake.

He waved to someone off in the distance and soon Walid was running up to him.

“Walid, ride the bike and bring Cristal to your home. Take good care of her,” Kerim commanded.

Walid nodded his head, his eyes staring at the wings on Kerim’s back.

“Maffoom? Do you understand me, Walid?”

“Yes, yes. Maffoom. I will take care of Mizz Cristal, Kerim.” Walid nodded his head, turned and picked up the motorcycle.

Kerim pulled the keys from his pocket and tossed them at Walid who caught them in his hands. Kerim looked at Cristal, the expression on his face showing his steadfastness and conviction.

“Remember Cristal, you have untapped powers that not even Raffé knows about. Why would we be sent here to destroy you if this were not true?”

She frowned. “So Harry was right. You were sent to destroy me.”

He looked away briefly and then nodded. “Yes, that is true but I didn’t know that when I met you. My original memories were removed and implanted with temporary human ones. Now that I know you, I cannot and **will not** let anyone harm you. Never doubt that, no matter what,” he said, his voice breaking with emotion.

She nodded, knowing that what he was saying was true.

He looked at her. “Now go! There’s no time!” he cried out.

He was right. There was no time. She ran over to the motorcycle and jumped on. Walid started the engine. She turned to say goodbye but instead was met with giant silver wings soaring, carrying Kerim into the sky. She watched as he ascended into the dark clouds, disappearing into the heavens. Kerim Ilgaz, her Guardian with wings. *Gabriel, Harry and now Kerim... all gone in one day. No time to cry or say goodbye.*

She placed her arms around Walid’s waist, closed her eyes as he revved the engine and pulled the bike out onto the road. She didn’t

know what was in store or what the future held for her but one thing was for sure—she was determined to continue Harry’s mission to seek the truth.

“Hold on, Mizz Cristal,” Walid called back to her. “I am taking you to my home in Megiddo.”

“I am not familiar with that town,” Cristal replied. “Is it a small village?”

“Oh? But it is famous place,” he insisted. “You do not know it?”

Cristal shook her head. “Sorry, Megiddo doesn’t ring a bell.”

Walid said, “Ah, yes, yes. I forget. You may know it by the Eenglish name. Armageddon.”

Dear Reader,

Find out what happens to Harry, Cristal and Kerim in Book 2 of the Among Us Trilogy, by becoming a Truth Seeker and registering at the official Among Us Trilogy website at

<http://www.amongus.ca>.

If you enjoyed Doubt, Among Us Trilogy 1, please take a few minutes to submit a review on [GoodReads](#) and [Amazon](#). I really appreciate your support and it will inspire me to continue writing. As an independent author, it is you the reader who help me bring my characters to life. Without you, my work is meaningless.

For more information about my other books and film projects, visit my blog at <http://www.anne-raevasquez.com> or send me a tweet [@write2film](#) .

Till our paths cross again,

Anne-Rae Vasquez

Truth Seekers and Geeks unite!

About the Author

Anne-Rae Vasquez's latest work is Doubt, Book 1 of the Among Us Trilogy. Among Us is a book series about a group of outcasts (online gamers) who band together to investigate who or what is behind the catastrophic events happening around the world. Her previous novel, Almost a Turkish Soap Opera, was adapted into a screenplay and later produced into an award winning feature film and web series and was her directorial debut. Her other works include: Gathering Dust – a collection of poems, Salha's Secrets to Middle Eastern Cooking Cookbook published by AR Publishing Inc. and Teach Yourself Great Web Design in a Week, published by Sams.net (a division of Macmillan Publishing).

To find out more about Anne-Rae's work, visit her [GoodReads' profile page](#).