THEY STOLE OUR CRYSTALS. THEY ARE ON THE LOOSE... ... WE GET THEM BACK, OR WE LOSE TWO WORLDS. THE SEQUENCE A NOVEL BY NEF HIDALGO

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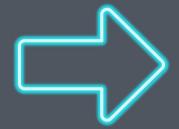
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ZARAPKRAT

PART I: THE SEQUENCE

They stole our crystals.
They are on the loose...
...We get them back, or we lose two worlds.

A novel by

Nef Hidalgo

To Ana Filipa Morais,

This book would not exist if it weren't for you, Ana.

Let the whole universe know that fact!

I will be forever grateful to you for your advice, for your patience, for your love, for your care, for your forgiveness, and for every time you pushed me to keep writing each next chapter of Zarapkrat.

May every reader who enjoys this book send you their good energy and love.

Thank you! Stay pure. Stay kind!

Nef Hidalgo

"Once you've moved - - the stars - - with someone, - - a small piece - - in the universe - - keeps you linked, - - intact, - - forever."

-Bagoo

This book was written at the po	oint where the two most powerful forces in the universe collide.

Peaceful chants echoed through the halls, rising in melody as more old male voices joined in.

Like billowing fringes of clouds, thin columns of smoke rose into the air from the altar.

The censers rattled their chains as they swung like giant pendulums in the priests' hands. Mist fumes with sandalwood scents erupted from them.

A smell of burning wax and incense filled the nave. Orange candlelight bounced off the walls, casting shadows.

High above the flock, the painted cherubs on the ceiling darkened as a veil of smoke covered them.

Massive footsteps echoed as the crowd rose to its feet. Like a moving wave, they crossed themselves as the Patriarch passed their pews.

With slow steps, the Patriarch walked the central hall,

trailing his long red cloak on the floor. White hair peeked out from under his golden crown. A long beard that reached down to his chest covered most of his face. Ahead of him, three bishops waved candles as they made their way.

As the Patriarch reached the altar, the choir faded into silence, ending their song in perfect sync.

Like a heavy holy relic, two bishops brought a giant silver book. One on the left and one on the right, the bishops held the book open in front of the Patriarch as he turned to face the mass.

"BADBÅDÏ ZARAPKRÂT! BADBÅDÏ ZARAPKRÂT!"

Everyone's hearts shuddered at the screeching screams, coming from somewhere in the flock.

The Patriarch froze, frowning in shock. Anger welled in his eyes as he craned his head, searching for the interloper.

"BADBÅDÏ ZARAPKRÂT!" That voice yelled again.

The crowd turned their faces full of fear and horror in search of the source of the screams.

"BADBÅDÏ ZARAPKRÂT!"

"Get that kid out of here!" A woman condemned speaking in Greek, and wagging a finger.

"AHHHHHH!" The girl kept screaming, eyes looking around as if seeing things that only she could see. "XÏDIGAHÅ GÜÛRAYAÂ," she squealed, kicking as her mother took her in her arms.

"MOM! AHHHHHH! BADBÅDÏ ZARAPKRÂT!"

A collective murmur spread along with gasps, prayers, and condemnations as the mother wrestled the girl out of the church.

"Helen! Helen!" Margie, the mother, implored once outside, shaking her daughter by her shoulders.

Helen's eyes went blank, lids fluttering.

"Someone please call a doctor!" Margie screamed as Helen fell to the floor, convulsing.

II

Many years later.

Sandra knew something was wrong the moment Mr. Mueller walked into the office. He always wore a confident look. Today, neither his expensive suit nor his elegant gray hair camouflaged his distress.

"Cancel all my appointments for today," he instructed. There was a stressful tone knotted under his tongue.

"Make sure these three have security clearance to arrive at two in the afternoon." He handed the copy of three IDs to Sandra. The two taut lines that appeared between his eyebrows told Sandra that this task was crucial.

In the more than thirteen years that she had worked for Mueller, Sandra had never heard the names of these guests. Though she almost asked a question, she bit her lip and hurried on. Following protocol, her ear turned red from every call she had to make. Feeling proud, her shoulders slumped as at one o'clock she received security passes for Mueller's guests. Having last minute visits to the White House was not a daily or easy task to accomplish.

As the appointment approached, none of Mueller's colleagues or advisers were there.

The guests arrived on time. The party of three men that appeared walking down the hall was unusual. A single glance was enough for Sandra to understand that neither of them seemed friendly. They walked as a coalition of lion brothers ready to seize new territory.

A middle-aged man led the way. He had a big round head with only two gray strands of hair on the sides. He didn't look like a politician at all. He looked more like a businessman, an important one. Important enough to bring his own bodyguard to one of the safest buildings in the world.

The second man followed the first closer than his own shadow. He was blond and big. The sleeves of his black suit stretched over the curves of his massive, muscular arms. He could have passed for one of the Secret Service agents.

Sandra recognised him from the ID photos. His name was Melvin.

The third man was Zack Keegan. Tall, slim and in his thirties, he was the youngest of them. He kept his long black hair tied in a ponytail. While the other two were wearing suits, zack dressed smart, as if he was visiting a nightclub.

"Please sit down," Sandra asked them before letting them into Mueller's office.

"Is your boss always so rude?" Said Fred Deramus, the businessman, in a nasty, grumpy tone.

"I beg your pardon?" Sandra looked at him with shocking wide eyes.

The grim man deepened his uneasy look as he sighed in discontent.

"He's not planning on making me wait, is he? I knew I should have emailed the protocol to follow in my presence. Call him and tell him I won't wait!" He ordered, pointing a finger at the phone on Sandra's desk, demanding her to do so immediately.

Sandra gulped, bluffing a smile to the side of her face. She thought that he must be an old acquaintance of Mueller's, perhaps a childhood friend. Why else would someone talk like that about the Vice President of the nation? Let alone in his own office?

"I am sure he will receive you immediately. He cleared his entire schedule so he could meet you," Sandra managed, hating the proud smile that appeared on Deramus's lips.

"I'll give him two minutes," Deramus answered, looking at her with the same hateful smile.

Sandra picked up the phone and whispered something after dialing, then hung up and straightened up.

"Your bodyguard can wait in the next room," she suggested through a shy pair of eyes. Her chin downcast, offering a smile that was more fake than her eyelashes.

Deramus did not reply. Instead, he shot Sandra a sharp look, like she had said the dumbest thing in the world.

The three men entered the Vice President's office with their heads held high. Neither Zack nor the bodyguard spoke a

word. They followed Deramus like two loyal, well-trained dogs.

Sandra stayed on her desk, a bitter fireball bouncing in her stomach.

"Mr. Deramus, thank you for coming," the Vice President welcomed them.

"Mr. Mueller," Deramus replied, choosing not to address the Vice President as such.

Deramus's eyes flickered a little the moment he felt Mueller's handshake. With a strong grip, Mueller had affirmed his authority and dominance.

Mueller knew about Deramus's boastful personality. For now, however, he had no choice but to endure it.

"Please sit down," Mueller said as he squeezed Deramus's hand once more and then that of his companions.

Only the bodyguard did not sit down; he stood silent behind Deramus.

"You are a very influential person," said the Vice President behind his large wooden desk. "Tell me something I don't know!" Deramus replied, with an unpleasant, arrogant smile.

"Frank Conrad convinced me to give you my full attention. He told me you have something that will change the world as we know it."

Hands pointing upward, Mueller leaned back and spread his arms, offering Deramus a chance to impress him.

The truth was, Deramus's presence worried Mueller. The call he'd received the night before had left his mind distressed. He'd learned that ignoring Deramus would be like causing a nuclear meltdown. 'Even if you had a date with God, you should cancel it and receive this man immediately! Nothing can beat this. Nothing!' Frank Conrad had warned him.

Grinning broadly, Deramus took out a brown folder from his briefcase. The title "LEVAD-2" written in large bold letters on its cover. With the face of someone about to show a winning poker hand, he handed it to Mueller.

Though Mueller did his best to hide his surprise, the contents of the file made his pulse race as he read it. His face gave him away; his lips went dry as he paled a bit.

"As you see, Mr. Vice President, I am more interested in the fact that you are the Food and Drug Commissioner," Deramus explained.

"These claims are very pretentious," Mueller interrupted.

"And yet they are real. That new drug you are reading about will be my gift to the human race. That is why you must approve it immediately. Don't put me in an embarrassing waiting queue," Deramus protested.

"If what you are saying is true..." Mueller let out an incredulous sigh. "...You've got here something priceless."

"And yet, it's nothing compared to what I'm here to offer you. If you think that the discovery you are reading about is the greatest of all time, you would be wrong!" Deramus said, pulling a small wooden box from his briefcase.

There was a soft thud as Deramus placed the small box near his end of the desk. Eyes looking deep into Mueller's, he pushed the box toward him.

Mueller's head tilted as he opened the box, frowning at its content. A chain necklace. A crystal that looked like an exotic mineral tied at one end as a pendant. The small rock

was oval in shape, the size of a thumb and turquoise blue.

Though Mueller could not identify the gemstone, he marvelled at the precision and detail of its cut.

Turning the crystal between his fingers, his eyes crinkled as he found two triangles etched into its surface. The first triangle was black and long. Its narrowest angle stretched far to the left. The second triangle was white, tiny in size, almost insignificant. Balancing one of its points at the right angle of the black triangle, the white triangle looked like a small fang pointing upwards.

"Why are you showing me this rock? Is it even a jewel? Is this a joke?" Mueller asked.

"Do you see me laughing?" Deramus grunted.

"Explain yourself," Mueller demanded.

"This is my second creation. The most advanced piece of technology you have ever seen."

An indignant look shot from Mueller's eyes, first to the necklace he was holding, then to Deramus.

"May I?" Deramus asked, holding out his hand.

Mueller gave the crystal to Deramus. Deramus gave it to Zack.

With the haste of a thirsty man chugging water, Zack placed it around his neck.

"Could you call your assistant?" Zack asked Mueller in a dark voice, caressing the stone against his chest as though he had been missing it.

"Sandra?"

"Yes."

"What a preposterous request. I'd rather not involve anyone else, much less my own assistant," Mueller snapped.

As Deramus and Zack shared a haunting look, Frank Conrad's warning echoed in Mueller's memory.

With a grimace Mueller picked up the phone.

"Sandra. Come here please," Mueller requested, shaking his head.

With a slight creak of hinges, the office door opened.

Mueller's eyes flinch as a beam of blue light flew from Zack's necklace and hit Sandra's forehead as she entered the room.

Two seconds later, Sandra was running toward Mueller, who backed away as her face stopped inches from his.

"What are you—" A burn on Mueller's left cheek and a stinging in his eye prevented him from speaking. Stunned, and between flashes of lights, he realized that Sandra had slapped him.

"What the-"

A second slap came. Mueller stood up, rubbing his cheek with one hand.

"This is the most sophisticated piece of technology out there," Sandra said, pointing to the blue crystal hanging from Zack's neck.

Mueller's mouth began to drop as he couldn't understand how Sandra could be saying that.

"And that is the most advanced discovery in medicine." Sandra gestured to the LEVAD-2 folder on Mueller's desk.

Shaking her hips as she walked, Sandra approached Zack. With a seductive look, she hugged Zack from behind and rubbed her face against his.

Mueller held his breath. Though he didn't show it, once he came to understand it, he got scared.

Without lifting a finger, Zack Keegan was controlling Sandra like a stringless marionette.

"We have a problem that you can help us solve," Sandra said, looking at Mueller with a pair of hussy eyes.

"And the problem, is this," Deramus spoke up, handing Mueller the portrait sketch of a young man. "This person has stolen samples of my two creations. His name is Soren. He is mentally unstable.

With these powerful instruments, he is a global threat. With your help, we still have time to stop him before he does anything harmful. My terms are simple. The FDA must approve this new drug for the global market. Meanwhile, you have to neutralise this man and his followers. Then, the technology embedded in this crystal will be all yours. I do not want it in my hands. It is too powerful. I can't control it. I don't want to go down in history as a man whose discoveries became weapons or sources of mass destruction."

Though in shock and fear, Mueller's mind took in the situation. As much as he wanted to confiscate Deramus's discoveries, he knew he couldn't. How to snatch something from someone who can control you at will?

"I guess this person won't be easy to eliminate?" Mueller asked, thinking that Deramus had to be desperate to correct his mistake to be willing to give away this technology. It was a bargain.

"That is correct. Besides, he is not alone."

"What is his location?"

"We lost track of him in Turin, Italy. I have a man looking for him, and Zack will join him soon. But still, we need more men!"

"I'm done here," Sandra interrupted, straightening up and blowing Mueller a kiss.

There was one more blue flash as a beam of light flew out of Sandra's head and into Zack's crystal.

The next second, Sandra found herself looking around, mouth ajar. The thought she tried to utter never finished forming.

"Thank you, Sandra," Mueller said, motioning for her to leave.

Sandra left the office confused. She did not remember what had happened, or what she had gone to do there, nor did she know why her hand hurt so much.

For the next hour, Mueller's thoughts and feelings collided as he listened to Deramus's scientific explanations.

Though Mueller concluded that Deramus must be a true genius, he felt that these new drugs and technology were too advanced for this world.

"I will see what I can do about your problem. In the meantime, I will send this file and an IND application to the director of our Center for Drug Evaluation. If it complies with what you say, the FDA will approve it," Mueller promised.

At the end of their meeting, Mueller weighed Frank Conrad's words. They couldn't have been more accurate. Nothing could beat this. Nothing.

III

Wednesday.

Walking on the shady side of the sidewalk, Helen shielded her silver gray eyes with a large pair of sunglasses. Little beads of sweat fell down her back, sticking her blouse to her skin.

Excited to break the news to her mom, Helen pulled her phone out of her bag. The dream of her life was about to come true. People would flock to one of the most prestigious theatres in Athens to see her perform.

As she walked, images from years ago flashed through Helen's mind... ...Her, in her room when she was just a child, standing on her bed, using it as a stage. Her little brother, Bailey, sitting on the floor, watching her act as she portrayed characters. Never complaining, Bailey had even put on ridiculous costumes countless times to play supporting roles alongside her.

That was about to change. If all went well, all of Greece would soon know her face. One more audition and she

would become a famous actress.

Tucking a lock of blonde hair behind her ear, Helen pressed her phone to her cheek.

"You won't believe who called me today."

"Who?"

"Dionisis Moraitis!"

"WHAT!"

"He thinks I'm perfect for the lead role in his next play and wants me to audition one more time on Monday."

"Oh, Helen! That's fantastic! I'm so proud of you," Margie said with a hand on her cheek and fighting back a tear.

A hundred thoughts went through Margie in that second. Memories of pain, horror, hope, and pride pierced her heart......How she had stopped acting after marrying George and having Helen. And the terrible years when Helen was a schizophrenic child and Margie thought all was lost. At the memory of Helen's screams, hysteric attacks, and mental hospitals, a chill ran down Margie's spine.

Trembling and shaking her head, Margie squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to remember anymore. With a sigh, she felt proud of all the sacrifices they went through. Helen having no recollection of those times and on her way to

"Well, he deserves it!"

"I'll tell Bailey you called. Make sure you get that part, young lady!"

"I will!"

Though walking in the Athenian summer heat had made her sweaty, Helen ended the call with a smile.

Two blocks later, the smell of fresh coffee greeted her as she walked through the door of the coffee-house. The cool breeze from the air conditioning welcomed her. The beads of sweat under her blouse dried in a second.

Taking off her sunglasses, she revealed her gray eyes. In the midst of the sweet features of her face, they were like two subtle full moons.

Letting out a disappointed breath, Helen looked overwhelmed at the long line of customers before her.

Then, she staggered forward as a man opened the door behind her and walked past her, bumping her shoulder.

Outraged, Helen glared at the intruder as he took her place in the line. The man was tall, with short dark hair and bronze skin. Judging by his linen clothing, Helen guessed he wasn't local.

She didn't think twice about fighting for the place. The heat, the long queue, and having to walk home under a scorching sun were not an incentive for Helen to show her nicer side.

Walking with an attitude as if she owned the place, she sneaked between the intruder and the next customer in line.

"This is my place," she said with a pompous attitude, lips curving into a proud smile. She had stood her ground, but her eyes quivered as she waited to see if the intruder would say anything. Her shoulders relaxed a few seconds later as no word followed.

Craning her neck and feeling lucky, she looked at the man serving coffee behind the counter.

"Come on Alex, look at me. Look at me," she whispered to herself, waving a hand to get her friend's attention to skip the line.

Alex was too busy making coffees. Even when Helen fanned both hands over her head, he didn't see her.

With a bitter grimace, Helen gave in to waiting.

When there was only one customer ahead, she felt someone tap her on the shoulder twice. Turning, she found the intruder standing behind her, gazing down at her through a pair of fiery amber eyes.

Helen's head dazzled with a buzz as their eyes met, feeling her thoughts caught between two realities, between two worlds.

"I can lend you ninety cents," the intruder said.

Too giddy to understand why he was offering ninety cents, Helen shrugged, grimaced, and turned away.

"Little girl!" The heavy young man with the bushy beard and messy black hair behind the counter greeted Helen. "Why didn't you skip the line?"

"I didn't want to claim any privileges. It's only fair that I'm treated like any other customer," Helen replied with a false modesty that made them both laugh.

"I'm on vacation starting tomorrow," Alex told Helen as he prepared her coffees.

"What are you going to do?"

"I have no plans."

"We should go somewhere and escape this heat."

"Little sugary Helen is melting in the sun because she doesn't dress fresh enough. Show a little more skin!" Alex laughed as he set the coffees on the counter.

"That will be five ninety," he said, typing numbers on the cash register.

Taking a stack of coins from her wallet, Helen counted them out loud as she scattered them over her hand.

"One, two, three, four, five." She gave Alex the five euros in a bunch of change.

Going through each of her wallet compartments, Helen pursed her lips as she realized she was missing cash.

"Ahem, I am afraid I didn't bring enough money. Can I give you the rest tomorrow?" She asked a bit embarrassed but

sure that Alex would be fine with that.

Then two taps on her shoulder forced Helen to turn around before Alex could answer.

"I told you I could lend you ninety cents," the intruder said, smiling as if he had said something very clever. "Here—"

Grasping Helen's hand and looking into her eyes, the intruder placed the ninety cents in her palm, then curled her fingers.

"Ttthhanks," Helen mumbled, puzzled as she turned around trying to understand what had happened.

Scowling, she handed the coins to Alex.

Unaware of Helen's previous interaction with the intruder, Alex took the coins and tossed them into the register.

"See you tomorrow," Helen said to Alex, grabbing the coffees and walking out.

An uneasy feeling grew inside Helen as she walked, wondering if that man had known beforehand that she'd be missing ninety cents. Thinking about it, her brain felt like an upside-down puzzle with a missing center piece.

"Hey!" Said a male voice behind her.

As she turned around, Helen found the stranger putting on a wide smile. The kind of smile someone makes when they meet a good friend they haven't seen in a long time.

With a small frown, Helen gave the stranger a good look. Tall, fit, and about the same age as her, it was the intense gaze of his bright orange-gold eyes that caught her. Though she couldn't tell how, they were familiar to her.

"Thank you again," Helen said shy and confused when the silence had grown for too long.

"Would you like to have your coffee with me?" The stranger asked, pointing to the chairs and tables outside, under the shade of a brown tent.

"I can't. I have to go; I have to bring my boyfriend his coffee," she lied, holding up both cups as evidence.

"You don't have to make up a boyfriend," the stranger said in an audacious tone Helen detested.

"Well, you know-it-all, I'm not making any excuses. I'm going to meet my boyfriend!" Helen said offended, raising her voice, heart pounding with indignation.

"I thought you would take it to Maria, your roommate and best friend," said the stranger, calm.

"Do you know Maria?" Helen gulped.

"I know that you two met when you were children. To this day you are inseparable. You moved together a few years ago here to Athens to study. But I can't say that I've met her," he admitted.

"So how do you know about her?" Helen asked feeling a chill in her heart.

The question hung in the air for a moment as the stranger didn't seem to know what to answer.

"Congratulations on the new role. You have a final audition on Monday, right?" He said instead, smiling, hesitating a bit before finishing the sentence.

"How do you know that? I haven't even told Maria yet." Helen's eyes narrowed, half suspicious, half alert.

"I have to admit that I've been following you," the stranger confessed, staring at Helen, and intensifying his tone.

Feeling threatened, Helen's heart quivered like a squeezed

sponge. Thinking that that man must have overheard her conversation with her mother and followed her since she left the house, she took a step back.

"I know a lot about you, Helen. I'd like to talk," said the stranger with scandalous peace.

As a hot torrent of fear surged through her veins, Helen's brain felt split as it hadn't in years. Half of her mind told her that she might know this man. The other half was screaming at her, saying that no stalker comes with good news.

"Who are you? Why are you following me?" Helen said in a shaky voice.

"Don't be afraid," the stranger asked in a tone that Helen judged as false and furtive.

As fear gripped her, Helen turned and walked away, leaving the mad stalker behind.

"Alright, I'll see you tomorrow. I know where you're going to be," the stalker said, loud enough to catch Helen's ears.

More frightened by the second, Helen walked away with a ragged breath. Afraid that the stalker would follow her, she kept turning her head over her shoulder every few steps.

Helen's heart pounded against her ribs as she wondered why anyone would stalk an ordinary girl like her.

She did not know that she was not an ordinary girl at all.

IV

Standing at the back of the cargo ship, there was a stifling pang in George's heart the moment his personal satellite phone rang. It hadn't rung in years.

Having sailed all the seas and now an almost retired captain, George was one of the bravest men there was. Even despite his age, the wildest sea storm couldn't disturb him one bit. But the ringing of his private satellite phone did. The memories brought back were of pure darkness. Every time that phone had rung, it had been to tell him that it had happened again... ...Helen had had another schizophrenic attack. She had panicked, and brought down her entire classroom. She had gone insane and uncontrollable. She was back in the mental hospital, and all kinds of bad news.

"WHAT HAPPENED?" George answered the phone, eyes swimming in fear, a hand covering his mouth.

"Helen is going to be in a play by Dionisis Moraitis!" Margie said excited.

"That is not an emergency, Margie! You know well that you should use the satellite line only for E-M-E-R-G-E-N-C-I-E-S!"

"But this is great news!"

"Still, it's not an emergency!"

"I thought for once you might want to call Helen and show her some support. She still remembers that you didn't want her to go to Athens to study drama, but rather keep her on this little island."

"First of all, Zakynthos is not that small. And it's not that I didn't want her to study Drama. I didn't want our baby to be away from us. I only let her go out of fear that she would regard me as the villain of the story. She would have ended up going anyway, with or without my consent," George chided.

"You have to stop overprotecting Helen too much. She is fine now!" Margie assured him.

"I hope you're right," George said, feeling guilty, remembering how Helen's psychotic episodes started all because of him.

"Well, she has been fine for years."

"What else did she say?" George asked, looking at the timer on his phone.

"She said she will have a front row seat for us and your son."

"Bailey is not my son! Helen is my only daughter!" George corrected.

"Oh George, why can't you love him?"

"Just because I don't consider him my son doesn't mean I don't... ...anyway, Margie, this call will use up all the satellite credits. I have to go."

"Will you call Helen to congratulate her?"

"I'll call her when I'm on dry land. See you Monday night, Margie."

V

The frantic sound of the bell woke Maria up in the most unpleasant way. Rubbing her eyes she glanced at the clock on her nightstand. At twenty past eleven it was still early for her to wake up.

"I'm coming!" She screamed in a hoarse morning voice.

She hadn't finished clearing her throat when the doorbell rang again.

"I SAID I'M COMING!" She yelled, though the person ringing would never hear her from the fifth floor.

Two, three, four more times the bell rang before Maria reached under the bed for her sandals.

"WHO IS IT?" She yelled into the intercom.

"Buzz me in!" Helen said in a nervous high tone.

"Helen? You forgot your keys?" Maria asked, feeling a bit disoriented. "Why are you ringing like that?"

"Buzz me in!" Helen urged. The last fifteen minutes she had been marching home in the blazing sun. She'd even taken a few detours out of paranoia, hoping to lose the stalker if he were following her.

The front door opened with a clang. After entering the building, Helen sneaked her head out the front door and took a double look up and down the street. Everything seemed clear, no trace of the stalker.

Closing the door Helen ran to the elevator. The mirrored walls inside revealed Helen's red, sweaty face as she pressed a button and caught her breath.

With a beep, the elevator opened as it reached the fifth floor. Helen stepped out, her footsteps echoing through the short hallway.

The next moment, the clang of the elevator going down gave Helen a pang in her chest. Still and holding her breath, she pondered if there was any way the stalker could get into the building. Her heart sped up as the numbers above the elevator lit up one by one, reaching the first floor, then picking someone up.

Helen turned to the apartment door and was about to slam it when Maria opened it.

In a hurry, Helen walked in and closed the door behind her. With an eye glued to the peephole, she glanced at the elevator. Her entire body relaxed as it stopped on the fourth floor and she heard the neighbors' voices.

When she turned around, Helen found Maria in her short pink pajamas giving her a narrow look.

"You forgot your keys again!" Maria complained, brushing aside the curls of her long tousled black hair. Her groggy eyelids yearned for the coffee Helen held.

"Sorry!" Helen said.

"Coffee. Give me!" Maria said with the funny robotic voice that she used to put on. "And why are you so flushed and sweaty and ringing the bell like crazy!" She added, taking a sip of coffee and feeling her eyes wake up.

Helen didn't know where to start.

"Someone is following me!" She managed, frowning and concerned.

"Uh?" Maria muttered, taking another sip of coffee.

"A stalker!"

"That doesn't compute!" Maria said in her robotic voice.

"Someone has been following me. Who knows for how long or what he wants!"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know!"

"THAT DOESN'T COMPUTE!"

"How much I hate it when you use that phrase on me, Maria. I'm not one of your programming codes."

"Well, if I threw what you're saying into a code editor, that's the answer I'll get. 'That does not compute', because what you're saying doesn't make any logic!"

With a grimace Helen raised her hands and headed into the living room. Shuffling lazy feet through the entryway, Maria followed her.

The apartment was light and airy, with more space than two students could need.

The sun's rays bounced off Helen's blond hair as she sat down on the wide white sofa. For a second, her eyes were lost looking through the large window. The two majestic peaks of Mount Lycabettus loomed in the center of view.

Sitting in a small chair across from Helen, Maria was ready to hear her story, but her eyes caught something... ...Droplets of condensation dripping from Helen's cold coffee onto the wooden table tickled Maria's fingers.

"Helen!" She groaned, getting to her feet and running into the kitchen unable to suppress her impulse.

Returning with a coaster in hand, she slid it under Helen's coffee with silky precision.

"It's just a few droplets," Helen argued.

"It starts with that and one day it ends in a total mess," Maria scolded.

"That's ridiculous!" Helen rolled her eyes.

Maria thought of bringing up Helen's messy habits, but looking around she realized that she had no proof. The house was in order. The white tiles and mirror in the bathroom gleamed clean. The kitchen and stove were spotless. All because Maria couldn't bear to see things out of place.

"We can go and take a look at your room," Maria suggested, and Helen pursed her lips.

"That's what I thought. So you were saying?" Maria said, with a shy smile of victory.

"Anyway! So there was a guy in the coffee-house today. He knew how much money I brought with me. He knew I was ninety cents short. He knew your name. He even knew things I have to do next week. But the most important thing is that he told me that he had been following me!"

Maria nodded, certain that bits of Helen's story must be exaggerations.

"Are you sure you didn't dream this?" She asked, knowing that this had happened before. Often Helen couldn't tell dreams from reality. Though that usually happened right after Helen woke up, it was worth asking.

"It was not a dream!" Helen responded, half disappointed and half embarrassed, knowing what Maria meant.

"You've said 'no' to me before!" Maria said in a patient tone.

"Look, I swear! This is real!"

"Did he do something to you? Did he threaten you?" Maria asked studying Helen's anguished expression.

Helen's lips twitched as she shook her head.

"Not really, but isn't it enough to have someone following me to set off a cautionary alarm? Answer me this, how did he know your name?" She said frustrated.

Maria thought about it. She was sure there was no way Helen had a stalker.

Then, in a moment of clarity, Maria raised the coffee cup to the side of her face. With a smile, she pointed to her name, handwritten in large letters. Then, arching an eyebrow, she pointed to Helen's cup on the table with *her* name written on it.

Helen's mouth dropped open. Her head felt as if a new piece of brain had just sprung up like popcorn.

"No way! Really? Is that all he did? Read our names off the cups and then repeat them?"

"I think so," Maria confirmed.

"What about those ninety cents?" Helen asked, feeling a bit dumb.

"He must have been trying to start a conversation with you. I guess he didn't say 'ninety cents', he could have said 'a few cents' or something like that. Come on! The guy was flirting with you and he came out too strong."

Thinking that that made sense, Helen sighed.

"So he said he was following me as a creepy way to hit on me?"

"I'm sure there is nothing to worry about," Maria advised.

"I guess you're right," Helen said, feeling foolish. Though she was thankful that no one was following her, she still thought that she had seen the stalker somewhere before.

"Don't let it bother you anymore." Maria smiled, certain that she preferred this paranoid version of Helen to the psychotic girl she was as a child.

"Thank you. You are right. By the way, Alex told me that from tomorrow he is free and if we wanted to make any pla

Helen's eyes narrowed, remembering that the foreigner had said something about meeting her tomorrow.

"Why don't we go to the beach?" Maria proposed.

Helen's tight lips turned into a smile at the sound of Maria's suggestion. Going to the beach seemed like the best way to relax on a hot summer day. It also meant going away where that madman couldn't find her, or so she thought.

VI

Thursday.

Even in the early hours of the morning, when the sunlight was dim, heat and humidity clawed at the air.

Helen walked looking around, half recognizing her surroundings. Following an invisible magnetic force, her legs moved forward.

The last thing she remembered was last night, when she had asked Maria to scan her hard drive for malware. Though Helen didn't confess it, she was afraid that the stalker was spying on her. After that Helen had gone to sleep. She had no idea how she got out of the house, or how she appeared walking down the street.

Feeling her heart divided, she somehow knew she was walking towards the stalker. While one step told her that finding him was a matter of life and death, the next urged her to go back.

Helen's steps stopped for a second when in the next block her eyes caught sight of him.

Leaning his shoulder against a street post, the stalker waited as if knowing for sure that she would show up. Aiming at Helen, there was a piercing look shining from his flaming eyes.

A burning knot tightened in Helen's chest as the stalker straightened and advanced on her.

"Don't be afraid," he said in the same calm voice he'd used the day before.

Hearing him talk to her as if she were an old acquaintance confused Helen. A short mental loop held Helen steady, wondering why he was such a stranger yet felt so familiar.

"Who are you? Why are you following me?" Helen asked when she finally found her voice.

The way the stalker looked at her, head tilted to the side, fingers drumming, made Helen feel like he was examining her.

"You have to come with me!" Said the stalker holding Helen's gaze.

Taking his words as a threat, Helen swallowed and stepped back. With fear invading her stomach, she looked to her right and then to her left. The streets were empty, not a soul in sight. Either it was too early or it was the season; during the summer, most Athenians go on vacation. Walking in a neighborhood away from the tourist areas feels like entering a ghost town.

Helen sized the stalker up and down, looking for hidden weapons. Taking a closer look around her, she wondered if he was a vandal and if he was alone or not.

"If I could find you, so can they," said the stalker, taking a step forward.

"What?" Helen frowned, feeling chills down her ribs.

"Don't let them win. Come with me."

"I'm not coming with you!"

"Then I'll have to abduct you," he said, determination in his eyes glowing like a pair of hot coals.

Helen glanced out of the corner of her right eye. She was sure she could outrun him. The coffee-house was not that far. Inside she would be safe.

Praying her legs wouldn't let her down, she started.

Helen sprinted like a hare. Eyes fixed on the entrance to the coffee-house, heart beating faster and faster.

Five strides later, sheer terror crept up her chest as a pair of invisible shackles bit into her ankles.

Helen's legs were growing heavy by the second, as if carrying twenty extra kilos on each foot. With enormous effort, she could only drag her feet a few inches at a time.

One pull, two pulls, three pulls was all she managed before her legs went rigid as bricks.

Helen struggled to move. The more she grappled, the heavier and stiffer her legs became.

As she found herself glued to the ground, Helen's shaking hands gripped her legs by the calves. She pulled with all her might, but could not lift her feet a bit. Shaking her body from side to side, she fought the evil force that grounded her, but to no avail.

Filled with fear, a mixture of terrifying gasps and moans

escaped her mouth. In a desperate attempt, Helen flung her body forward, pulling at her legs, hoping to lift them up. With her feet anchored to the pavement, all she managed to do was twist and hurt her knees.

"AAWWW, AHHHHHH!" She yelled out an anguished curse. A sharp pain shot through her legs as her joints creaked.

Helen looked around for the stalker. There was no sign of him. Feeling almost defeated, she gave one last pull. A tug for her life.

It hurt. Gritting her teeth but continuing to pull, Helen let out a shrill cry. Then her right knee snapped with a second crack.

Even in pain, Helen kept pulling.

Out of a sudden, that evil force released her in an instant.

Helen flew off and fell shoulder-first to the ground.

A cold taste of panic spread through her tongue as she scrambled to her feet.

The sharp pain in her knees told her she couldn't run.

"AAWWW, AAWWW!" There was another anguished cry.

Shifting her weight to the left and limping, Helen resumed her way. A hand over her mouth muffling her moans, she forced herself, taking her pain step by step.

Before reaching the coffee-shop, Helen's heart dropped into her stomach. Through the windows it seemed empty. Her eyes filled with tears as she wondered what day it was today and if it was closed.

A seething agony of fear tore through her throat as her trembling hand jiggled the doorknob.

It opened.

Helen entered the store and looked through the glass door. Though she couldn't see the stranger, she knew he had to be out there, watching her.

There was no time to rest.

Helen spun on her heel. There was no one inside, no lights on.

Feeling lucky that the door wasn't locked even though it was

too early to be open for customers, Helen didn't wait a second. Limping and mustering a strength not her own, she pushed a loveseat against the doorway. Looking at the barricade and thinking that it wasn't enough, she pushed a second one.

"HELLO? ALEX! ARE YOU HERE?" She screamed with a heavy, tired breath, heading for the counter.

"I NEED HELP! PLEASE! ANYONE?" She cried with a broken voice.

As she reached the counter, she made out a shadow behind it. Only then did she allow some relief to run through her body.

"Alex," she gasped. "There's a guy out there. He wants to take me awa—"

Helen's heart skipped a beat. An electric stab of panic shot through her scalp as the shadow behind the counter turned to her and said, "hello."

It wasn't Alex. It was the stalker.

In terror, Helen backed away. Her heart splashed a cold wave as her gaze met those two flaming eyes. Though her

legs were about to give out, she thought about running....

...Her plan fell apart as she turned and found the barricade she had built. She had locked herself in.

Then she felt something like a rough vine crawling up her wrist.

"NOOOOO! LET ME GO!" She cried at the stalker's cold, metallic grip on her arm.

Helen pulled, but with the strength of ten men in the stalker's hand, her efforts were useless.

"What do you want from me? Please let me go!" She moaned in horror, fearing for her life as she saw the gaze of a hungry predator leave the stalker's eyes.

The stalker tightened his unnatural hold on her. Helen lost feeling in her fingers. She looked down at her wrist, where a warm, wet sensation ran down.....She was bleeding.

With a morbid look in his eyes, the stalker licked his lips the moment his hand came into contact with her blood.

"HELP! I NEED HELP! SOMEBODY HELP ME!" Helen screamed like she had never done in her life. Her lungs

about to burst out of her throat.

"Please let me go!" She begged. "PLEASE, PLEAse, PLEase, PLease, please!" Her voice weakened as her hopes began to abandon her.

The stalker's eyes grew thin. Helen expected the worst.

"You have to remember!" He said in a serene voice.

Helen's heart was about to blow with fear.

"Don't be afraid," the stalker said. Then he released Helen from his grasp.

Like a slingshot, Helen sat bolt up right, waking from her vivid dream, shivering in her bed, chest damp with sweat.

Breathing fast and ragged, it took her a while to recognize her room. Though she calmed down, she was sure that this was not the first time she had had such a dream.

Still adjusting her thoughts, she looked at her wrist, unharmed. Even so, she stroked it twice, making sure it hadn't been more than a nightmare.

Helen often had strange and vivid dreams, some of them

recurring. Like those in a dungeon, dark, cold and damp. There were also hybrid creatures parading through a giant mesh of caves. Stained glass windows in massive rock walls flashed in her nightmares from time to time.

Her instincts had always told her that her dreams were either visions of things to come or things she had lived through and forgotten. Over time, she had given up the idea that her dreams had any meaning. When she talked about them with her friends, they made fun of her. Maria claimed that Helen's theory was illogical. At best, she had said, Helen's dreams were the result of repressed emotions.

For the next hours, Helen rolled onto her bed unable to go back to sleep. When the clock on her wall had struck eight, she had gotten up. Two hours later, Maria's voice surprised her, as she was lost in thought sitting on the couch.

"Get ready. Alex will be here soon," Maria said in her usual bitter morning voice, bringing Helen back to earth.

Always struggling to make decisions, it took Helen half an hour to decide what bathing suit to wear. She first tried on a pink two-piece bikini with sequins on the top, but she thought it was too classy. Then she tried a black one-piece, with slits on the sides that exposed her ribs, but it didn't convince her. She tried on several more until she ended up

choosing a white two-piece.

She was packing a towel, sunscreen, flip-flops, and a copy of her script when she heard the intercom.

"Who is it?" Helen asked on guard.

"It's breakfast!"

With relief, Helen buzzed Alex in.

Alex walked in, holding a box full of croissants. Crumbs tangled in his beard from the one he had already eaten. He hadn't finished crossing the threshold when Helen couldn't hold her tongue.

"Alex, do you remember the guy from yesterday? Behind me in line?"

"No one left a phone number for you if that's what you're asking!" Alex joked.

"Come on Alex! I'm serious. Do you remember him?"

"Why?" He craned his neck forward, ready to tease Helen.

"Have you seen him before?"

"Little Helen has a crush, uh?" He scoffed.

"Come on!"

"I have no idea!" Alex said, shrugging.

"Did he seem strange to you, even dangerous?"

Alex's eyes went from Helen to Maria. In the silent look they exchanged, they told each other that this was one of those moments where Helen was dramatic.

"No more dangerous than me!" Alex joked, flexing his arms, acting masculine and aggressive.

Frustrated, Helen slapped her hands against her legs and headed for the living room.

Maria suppressed a short laugh. A second later, she narrowed her eyes as she took a croissant from Alex's box.

"You ate without us!" She scolded him.

"Who me?" Alex feigned offense.

With a gotcha face, Maria tore a crumb from Alex's beard. As she turned it between her fingers, her eyes asked Alex for an explanation.

"What this? This is from yesterday!" Alex teased, scratching the back of his head.

Maria's face disapproved of Alex's. Though she wagged a finger at him, she couldn't help but brush the remaining crumbs from his beard. She then went to her room for her bag.

In the living room, Helen waited on the sofa, disappointed. She was looking out the window when she heard Alex speak to her in a silky voice.

"I didn't mean to scare you yesterday," Alex said in a tone that wasn't his. "I won't hurt you, Helen," he added.

"What did you just say?" Helen asked in shock, spinning to Alex. She could have sworn that the voice she had heard was that of the stalker.

"I said we have to pick up Harris on our way," Alex replied.

"No... ...no, you said you didn't mean to scare me yesterday," Helen corrected, one finger in the air.

"No, I didn't."

Alex looked at Helen with an awkward pair of eyes that made her feel kind of stupid.

Shaking her head, Helen touched her temples, thinking she was imagining things. As she grabbed her bag ready to go, she made a pact with herself: she wouldn't think about the stalker. He was a random guy, stupid and weird. She, too, would not think about the nightmare she had had. It was only a dream and, as her friends often told her, 'dreams do not mean anything'.



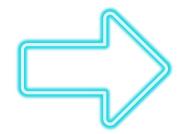
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