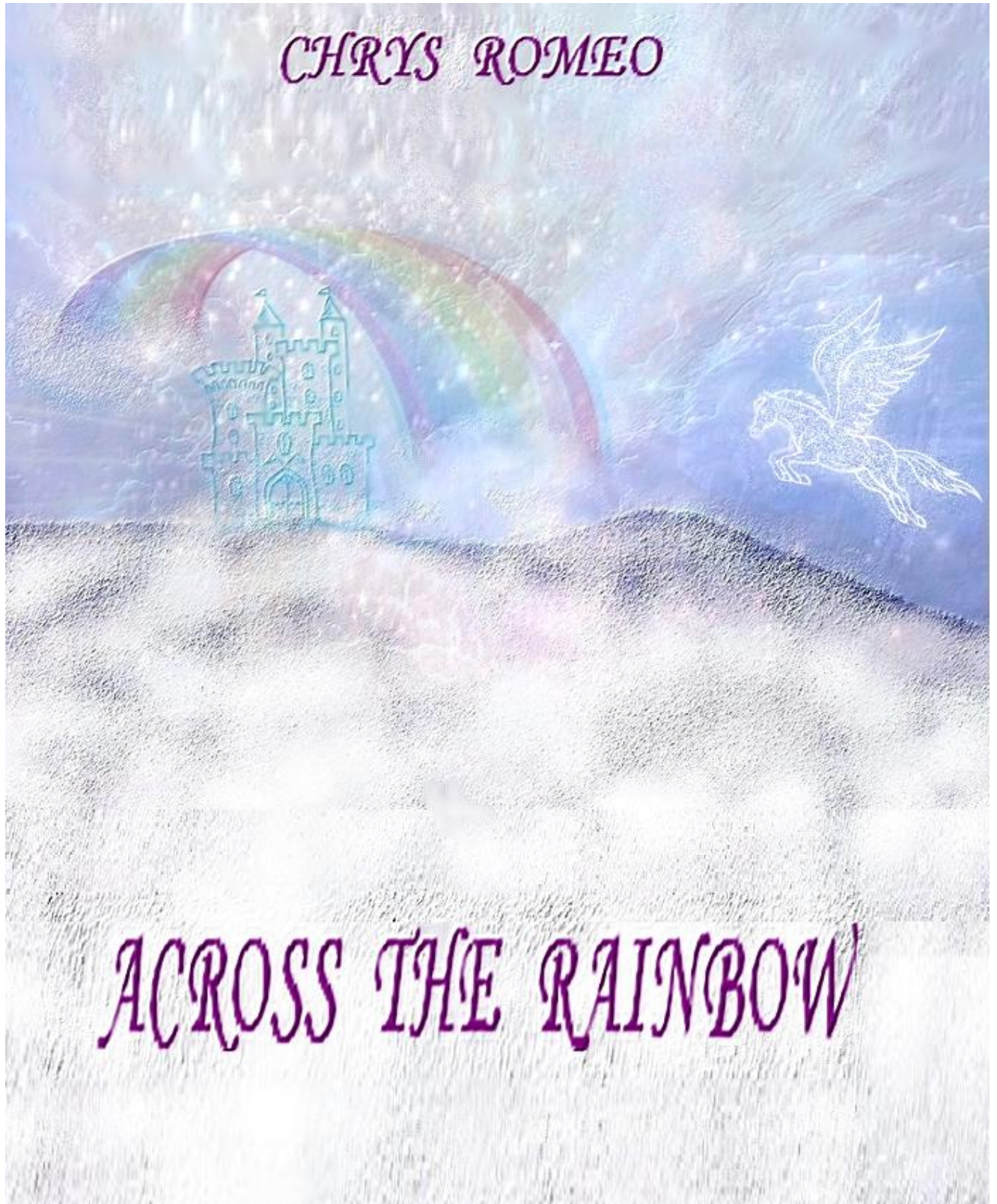


CHRYS ROMEO



© Chrys Romeo 2014

I woke up in a world colder than the deepest frost of a lifeless planet. Only it wasn't completely lifeless. There were some people left... and some scarce hope from one day to another.

I didn't recall how I had arrived in that frozen time of an ice age that covered everything in snow, but I was sure I hadn't been there since forever – and it hadn't always been that way. There was nothing on the surface except snow and a cutting sharp blizzard. The sky was covered in clouds most of the time so the sun would remain unseen for days and days... while daylight had become a confusing pressuring obscurity. People were hidden underground in tunnels, using elevators to descend to other levels. It was at one of those levels that I woke up one morning and I didn't even remember my own name. Then I discovered I had a badge sewn on the indigo jacket I was wearing. It said "Ben level 2".

I soon learned that everything was rather strict and designed for survival in a harsh world of ice. Everyone was supposed to do something difficult. The elevator had 10 buttons and the underground tunnels were vertically expanding on 10 levels. According to the labels with the name and number of the level they came from, each person had a task to accomplish every day: as far as I noticed, level 10 were going down, digging for more space and building new tunnels; level 5 were in charge of medical care, kitchen and supplies; level 9 were digging for coal in adjacent tunnels and my level was taking expeditions outside, looking for anything that might be useful. I didn't know about the other levels. I didn't have access to them. The only time I met people from other levels was at breakfast, in the

dining room. Lunch was distributed in sandwiches on the field and dinner was tea and biscuits in the room.

I belonged to the second level. My room had no window. Instead, there was a 3D built-in aquarium in the wall next to the flexible bed. I wasn't sure if it was real or a simulation, like a liquid wallpaper that moved when seen from a different angle. I didn't spend enough time in that room to figure it out, but sometimes when I would wake up in the night I would see the fluorescent little fish staring at me and whispering in mute bubbles.

There was an alarm going off each morning at 4 a.m. I had to fight sleep, open my eyes, get up, get dressed, have a shower, have breakfast and be ready to go to the surface by 6.a.m because the elevator would only take a ride up and a ride down, to keep energy loss to a minimum. Once outside, the cold stiff air would engulf warmth, energy and motivation out of anyone who would stand in the blizzard for more than five minutes. We needed to wear long boots, insulated jackets, ski goggles, hoods and thick gloves. And despite that, I could feel life evaporating from the cold skin very fast, so I had to keep moving. Movement was difficult because the cold made everything stiff and reluctant – as opposed to life as the frozen air. The temperature went way below -30 Celsius. The sun was barely visible from beyond the clouds and the snow storms turned it into a pale sphere most of the time.

Whatever planet it was, it didn't resemble Earth very much. It was a permanent winter and the surface looked deserted and inhabitable. The blizzards made it hard to resist outside and the temperatures at night dropped to – 50 C. The entire planet was covered by hundreds of vertical kilometers of ice and frozen snow.

There were no oceans, no continents, and no distinction from the endless white. The entire planet was lost in a storm of lifeless emptiness.

I was determined to find out how things had turned out so wrong. But I had little information and I didn't remember enough about myself. Besides, I wasn't allowed to discuss much with other people.

Each day I joined a level two team of explorers. My team mates were named Keith, Victor and Ruby. We were a balanced four different energies. Keith was a teenager who seemed to always need calcium supplies. His face was so pale, that he was easily camouflaged in the scenery outside. He talked slowly and needed time to realize what was going on. He seemed half asleep most of the time, walking around with a dim smile and an unfocused glance. Yet he was useful for keeping track of where we came from. Ruby was a smart girl with black hair and quick reflexes, noticing everything and making plans for every second of the day. She seemed to have many things going on in her mind, but didn't reveal anything; her eyes kept flashing with ideas and amusing situations that hadn't happened yet. She had so many solutions at hand, at any moment she was like a walking encyclopedia. Victor was a former explorer, very disciplined and organized, tough built and with a determined attitude that had probably saved him from many harsh jams. His words were always few, meaningful and somehow solemn, with a particular purpose, never wasted. He was the group watcher, keeping us alertly aware of dangers, evaluating the situation and warning us from his vast experience of many years spent in a camp. And I was the daring one from the group, running ahead, advancing to unknown territory, leading the way and making a path in the snow with a pair of large

paddles attached to my feet. Sometimes, while I was confronting the blizzard and my face was covered in frozen snow flakes and my body went numb from the cold that was draining my energy into the anti-life atmosphere, I had the sensation I could take off against the storm and I would reach another world. I had the unexplained feeling I would actually be able to fly over the endless, lifeless planet, to another place, a better dimension. But I didn't know where these flashes came from: were they memories or imagined powers, I couldn't tell exactly.

One morning, as we were having breakfast, I asked Ruby about the station.

“How long has this place been functioning?”

Ruby smiled, with her witty glimmering eyes.

“For as long as I've been around here.”

“And how long would that be?” I insisted.

She shrugged.

“I was born here. This is how it's always been for me. But long ago, it was different. Before the shut down.”

I knew she would know. I wasn't sure she would tell.

“What shut down?”

“Don't you know?” she tested me, smiling at me sideways.

“I don't think so. Apparently, I can't remember much.”

“How old are you anyway?” she inquired.

It was my turn to answer, but I didn't have that answer.

“I don't know. I might be twenty something... I'm not sure. I might as well be eighteen from the way I feel. I might be more or less or whatever – I might be two thousand or just immortal... I don't remember. Does it matter?”

Ruby laughed.

“It doesn’t matter to me. I was just wondering why you don’t know about the shut down.”

And she casually arranged her ruby scarf around her neck, getting ready to go outside. I stared at her. She was glancing around the room and she wasn’t interested to continue the discussion any further. It seemed pointless to her. Maybe she knew it didn’t change anything.

“Have you finished?” Victor asked me seriously, scrutinizing my coffee cup.

Keith was patiently waiting, with his sleepy eyes open, focused on chewing his toast. I realized none of them would tell me what had happened to the Earth and how the world had turned into an endless frozen winter, with underground stations of people indifferent to anything except fighting for survival each day.

“I’m ready. Let’s go to the elevator”, I said.

They got up and left while I remained one more second to sip the last drops of coffee – which were so precious against the menacing frost outside. As I was gulping down the remains of the coffee, my eyes straying through the dining room caught the stare of another person. A girl from three tables ahead was looking directly at me. Her soft brown eyes were fixing me undoubtedly, like a steady cozy connection, as if she knew me and she found it hard to let me out of her sight. She was slightly smiling, but something from her attitude was completely different from everyone in that station: she calmly displayed an attitude of familiar warmth that I hadn’t encountered in anybody in that underground place.

I remained staring at her too. On her silver jacket I read her name: “Ariel level 1”.

Something like the wings of a blinding brightness passed through my mind. Yet my memory was as blank as the empty and cold white desert outside.

It was the confident shining warmth in her eyes that kept me staring, confused in my thoughts. I had the unexplained certainty we were no strangers to one another. It felt so right to stay there looking in her eyes, as if there was no better place at that moment, no safer place than a room with her presence close by. I instantly knew we belonged to the same wavelength. I placed the empty cup on the table and I was tempted to walk across the room in her direction, but right then she averted her eyes as if it had been an illusion. I stood there, a bit distraught. Did she or didn't she look at me? Did she or didn't she know me more than the others in that underground station?

“Are you coming, Ben? Keith is stuck in the elevator!” I heard Victor's voice thunder from the corridor.

I left the dining room immediately. The elevator door was stuck while Ruby and Victor were trying to open it. Keith had pushed two different buttons and had caused the mechanism to block the commands, with him inside.

“Imagine if he did this while we were outside”, Ruby joked.

“Get me out of here”, Keith pleaded, speaking faster than his usual rhythm.

“Are you scared?” I asked him through the cracking doors.

“Yes”, he answered in his slow sleepy tone.

“Don't worry, we'll get you out.”

We dialed the emergency button and the elevator was unblocked.

Then we went together to the surface. On that day, my mind was apparently attentive to the trail I was making in the snow but most of my thoughts were envisioning over and over the look of the level one girl who had stared at me in the dining room. The warmth of her eyes was haunting me like a light in the snow storm. It was something I knew I had to learn more about. It was a ringing bell from another world that I knew existed.

The next morning I started checking the tables from the moment I entered. I glanced around the room, trying to locate her. "Ariel level one... where are you?..."

To my relief, I found her sitting in another corner of the large room, a bit more distant than the other day. But I was happy to see she had quickly acknowledged my presence too, with a hidden glance, while she was talking to a few girls. I wondered if I could actually go and speak with her. I wondered if they would allow it. There were guards in the station, making sure the interior order would not be disturbed. I knew about the rule of different levels not interacting with one another. But I felt I absolutely needed to go beyond that. Nothing mattered more than the instant brightness we shared when we were in the same place - the connecting wavelength from a better world we both came from. I owed it to myself to learn more about it, even more as I couldn't remember anything else.

Ariel wanted to appear indifferent to the fact that I was there, and yet she couldn't keep her eyes from straying back at me. Eventually, she smiled. I smiled at her too. And for a moment, I could see more light in the room and colorful rays above the tables. It was like another vision changing reality, overflowing in the cold air of the underground world. After that, the guards that were standing by the

door seemed to notice something was going on between us and started to watch us intently, so she quickly got up and left before I could even talk to her.

I became aware that she knew she wasn't allowed to interact with me. However, I could feel the undeniable truth of an absolute longing for such warmth that was absent in that world – a truth only me and her could share.

The chance to talk to her arrived another day, as I went to the surface and passed by the radar camp. Apparently, people were communicating between stations and had to keep antennas outside. There were metal towers, very high, confronting the snow storms, arranged in a row and protected by a fence of barbed wire. I wondered what they were protected from, because there seemed to be no other life on the planet except the underground communities. However, I knew there must have been a reason for it. Ruby might tell me one day, I figured. She was the secret keeper.

“What’s the mission today?” Keith asked sleepily.

“We must find steel under the ice”, I told him.

“Look around to tell us where we must return”, Victor added.

“And don’t get stuck in the snow”, Ruby joked.

It was another expedition to find steel vehicles trapped under thick ice from many years before. As I was just starting off, walking ahead of the team, I noticed a group near the radar towers, beyond the barbed wire. I knew they were from another level because they had taken a different exit and were separated from us by the fence. Unmistakably, Ariel was with them. I recognized her from the first moment, even if she had a fluffy white hat with long ears to cover most of her head from the frost. She was talking and standing with

her back to me. Yet, as I was walking by, dragging my feet equipped with large paddles, she suddenly turned to look into my eyes, as if she had become aware of my presence in the exact instant when I was near her – and just by being there – and I knew we were connected by something more than met the eye.

“Hi”, I said, getting closer to the fence.

“Hi”, she replied calmly.

She seemed a bit friendly, but she still kept her hands in her pockets somehow reserved – or maybe it was the biting cold air.

“I believe I know you from somewhere”, I said. “But I don’t remember where I’ve seen you before.”

She tried to appear casual, but she couldn’t help smiling.

“I’ve seen you in the dining room. Maybe that’s where you saw me too.”

I paused. The others were way behind on my trail. I still had enough time.

“Are you from level one?”

“Yes... it’s on my jacket label”, she smiled.

“What do you do on level one?”

“Computers, communication... programming... stuff like that. Virtual reality stuff.”

She kept smiling at me, as if she was waiting for me to recall something. But I couldn’t. Instead, I started to see a rainbow reflection on the snow around her. It was as if she didn’t have a common shadow, but a rainbow contour modifying the light.

“Is it going to solve this winter?” I asked.

“It might.”

She was amused by my questions but she was giving me honest answers.

“However, computers aren’t going to be enough. The world is reversed”, she added.

I placed one hand on the barbed wire, trying to take it down from my view - from the space between us that should have been free.

“What do you mean, reversed?”

Ariel adjusted her hat.

“It’s too cold. And people are too. Everything is upside down.”

“So I noticed. But what happened?”

“Don’t you remember anything?”

Her question surprised me. She was watching me attentively. Her deep confident stare seemed to stir an entire realm of images in my mind, and I couldn’t avoid it.

“Should I?”

At that moment the guards near the towers started to advance towards us.

“I’m not allowed to be here”, she said quickly, looking back to the guards with discomfort and annoyance. “They’re always watching me, they won’t let me do anything.”

“I know. I’m a level two explorer and you’re a level one computer programmer. We’re not supposed to talk. But you can write me a note about what I should remember.”

“I’ve got to go. See you later.”

Ariel turned away from the fence, leaving again without adding anything more. In her absence the morning light seemed darker. I noticed she would abruptly leave whenever the guards were approaching.

I looked back to the path. Ruby was walking in my tracks, getting closer by the minute and watching me suspiciously. I was sure she wouldn't prevent me from talking to level one Ariel, but I wasn't sure what was going on in her mind. She had seen us, undoubtedly. Yet she wasn't going to tell anyone. But I wasn't convinced she was completely at peace with the idea of me breaking the rules.

I continued to walk. After a few hours we couldn't see the radar towers anymore. Keith kept calculating on his GPS, to find the way back before the evening. At some point I started the metal detector. We spread around the empty field, beeping with our little boxes in the storm. I wondered why people had become so similar to the frost and the harsh conditions, at what point the fight for survival had turned so radical that they had erased warmth, care and affection from their lives, leaving only practicality, interest and competitive detachment.

We found a car skeleton under the ice, two kilometers below. Before marking the spot for later retrieval, we sat on the ice and ate our lunch – sandwiches and thermos green tea.

We got back to the station later that evening. The light had faded to dark blue and the frost was making our feet numb and heavy, while stinging the tip of our fingers and our chins. We had icicles hanging on our eyebrows. Victor stopped us suddenly.

“I sense danger. We can't get back to the entrance. We must make a detour. Something is waiting for us there.”

“What?” I asked.

Victor knew what but he wasn't telling. He looked seriously concerned. Ruby seemed to know too. She was silently frowning. Even Keith appeared to know more than I did and was waiting for instructions.

I stared at the entrance in the distance. Snow flakes were falling continuously, blurring the view. Nevertheless, I distinguished something crouched like a shadow near the door to the elevator.

“What is that? And where are the guards?”

“The guards are gone”, Victor said promptly, without any doubt, but his voice was even more worried.

“Gone where?”

“I’ll tell you later. Right now we must find another entrance to the underground tunnels. We can’t go back the same way.”

I had an idea.

“Let’s go over the fence to the level one elevator. It’s just over there, near the radar towers.”

We sneaked under the barbed wire and rushed across the radar yard. I heard a whistling swishing sound behind us. The shadows were sliding above the snow, approaching the radar zone fast.

Keith got scared.

“The guards are gone from that entrance too!”

“There’s nobody to let us in, and besides, we’re from level two”, Ruby said, struggling to make a new plan in her mind. “Let’s hide in the radar cabin!”

We got in one of the cement buildings near the metal towers and closed the frozen door.

“We can’t stay here the whole night”, I told them. “It’s going to get colder by the minute. We’ll just freeze. I’m already running out of energy in this temperature.”

“And the shadows might get to us in less than half an hour”, Ruby added.

“They are everywhere now”, Victor said, looking out the small window.

“What are they?” I asked him.

I knew he couldn’t hide the facts from me anymore. He had to tell me. Our situation had become too desperate to keep it under the rug. He explained:

“The shadows are something like the impersonated cold. Nobody really knows what they consist of. They just make every living creature vanish in darkness. They absorb life like the frost and they come before the biggest storms. They hunt us and eat us – turn us into darkness. They make any form of life vanish. It’s a consequence of so much negative temperature. It’s like a moving threat. It makes life disappear.”

“Can’t we get away from it?”

“The only way is underground.”

“I’m going to the level one elevator”, I decided. “I’ll send a distress signal once I get in and I’ll give your location to a rescue team that can get you to level two entrance with a field jeep.”

“I’ll come with you”, Ruby said.

“I could go in your place”, Victor volunteered.

“No”, I told them both. “I’m faster than either of you. I can run fast enough so the shadows won’t reach me. If you come, you won’t make it to the elevator: they’ll grab you before you barely get to take a few steps. You need a jeep and I’m going after it.”

I didn’t know why I was so sure I could outrun the shadows, but I was convinced I had the power to do it. So I took off the paddles from my feet and I got out. The shadows were still in the distance. I ran to the level one entrance, even though there was nobody to open the

door for me. The radar yard was silent and the shadows were advancing towards the barbed wire fence. I knew I didn't have much time before they would spot me and get moving in my direction. I knocked on the metal, but nobody answered. At that time of the evening, light was getting dim and nobody had remained on the surface. The shadows seemed to hear me knock. I saw them slide under the distant fence.

I felt frozen and lost. I knew I couldn't go back to the radar cabin because I would give away the rest of the team – and I didn't have time for it anyway. I had to get inside. But there wasn't anyone to let me in.

I closed my eyes and thought about the colors I had seen above the snow, the reflection of a wavelength I shared with someone from a better truth. “Ariel, start the elevator please”, I said in my mind. In a few seconds that seemed like an eternity, silence was replaced by the sound of the elevator cables moving up. It was like a dream in slow motion. I couldn't believe she was actually responding to me so quickly. She had read my thoughts – or even anticipated them. She had come to help me. Soon, the elevator doors opened and I got in. The last thing I saw before the doors closed on the snow were the shadows sliding between the radar towers.

I clicked the emergency switch and the microphone buzzed.

“This is the emergency line. How may we assist you?”

“I'm Ben the explorer from level two. My team is stuck in a radar cabin. Can you get them safely out with a field jeep? The shadows have reached the towers.”

“The shadows?”

“Yes. And the door guards are gone from both entrance one and two.”

“We’ll go to your team right now. You should get to your quarters.”

And the signal went off. The voice had remained detached and unimpressed through the whole conversation, but I hoped they would still send a jeep to the surface.

As the elevator was descending, I could see through the glass windows the different layers of ice and then of earth and stone. I knew I was going to level one. I could feel getting closer to Ariel. I actually felt her warm presence in the underground, despite the closed space sensation. I had the proof she could sense what I felt, but I didn’t have an explanation for it, except that we both came from another world and we both knew another truth – which I still didn’t remember.

I was drawn to where Ariel was. I needed to find her: it was as if I felt incomplete and cold without her. In that frozen world of shadows and ice she was the only one who could bring colors and warmth to that harsh life.

I started walking in the corridors of level one. The tunnels were deserted. Everyone was asleep in their rooms.

“Psst! Ben!...”

I heard the whisper from around a corner, at the end of the silent corridor. And for a second, I saw the white fluffy hat disappearing beyond the next turn. I hurried after Ariel and when I turned the corner we almost ran into each other’s arms. She started to laugh.

“You’re walking around here like in a park! The guards will see you and throw you out. I’ll hide you in my room. Come.”

I followed her along the tunnel. The ceiling was higher than the one in level two.

“Have you noticed”, I asked her, “that there are mostly children and teenagers in this station? I haven’t seen too many adults around here. Except for the guards and a few experienced explorers or workers, most of the underground inhabitants are children.”

“Yes Ben, they’re the rainbow children”, Ariel replied undisturbed, with friendly indulgence towards my lost memory. “This is a children’s station. We’re here to rescue them from the winter.”

“We?”

She paused and turned to look at me. Her eyes had so much trust and warmth that the obscurity around her was beginning to light up and fill with colors, like overflowing hypnotizing waves.

“Yes, we. You and I. We came here together. Actually, I came here for you – because I didn’t want to let you get lost in this world by yourself. You would have become a shadow, had I not come for you in time...”

She continued to walk:

“I’ve always been there for you, at the other end of the rainbow, assisting you while you were flying between worlds. It’s not the first time you don’t remember the past. You disintegrate when you are in the rainbow and that’s how you find it difficult to recollect your memories. This is why I’m around. And I’ve got this for you now.”

She took a camera from her pocket and gave it to me.

“Look at the pictures. You’ll find me there – and you’ll remember.”

I switched it on and started browsing through the images. Ariel was indeed everywhere, with or without her fluffy white hat: near a

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

