



E.R.E.B.U.S

A Novel By:



Chapter 20 - Who Can We Trust?

The Control Squad returned to the Leviathan residence in silence.

None of them dared to speak a single word until they were in the confines of their home. Hunter listened intently for anything peculiar along the way, but nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. In fact, it was as if nothing had happened at all.

Once inside their apartment, Jaida ordered everyone to sit around the large dining table as she checked the flat for anything strange. Anything that could be used to spy on or monitor them, like hidden cameras and microphones.

Once satisfied that everything was in order, she stood at the head of the table with her eyes locked on to Hunter. "Tell us everything," she demanded, raising her hand to silence Kai when he tried to speak. "I want to know how much of this is real. I want to know who we can trust," she said, her eyes flicking around the room with a hint of distrust.

Everyone shifted uncomfortably under her gaze. Moonlight dripped into the room with the reflection of swaying water dancing across the clear glass pane. Hunter glanced across the waters, unsure if he could trust his own eyes anymore.

"It started before the tournament," he began, recounting each detail as they happened. He told them about his dreams and how they'd progressively gotten worse. The several conversations he'd had with Cassi. But all he could provide were mismatched clues to a larger picture. None of it made sense, which was the most frustrating part.

"None of this explains the light though. And how we can just walk into the forest without getting completely lost," Jaida said, not understanding the situation in the slightest. The answers were shrouded in mystery, yet it seemed like they were staring them in the face.

"Maybe the forest uses similar technology to the ARC, and there's some sort of glitch in the system?" Aaron suggested, but Jaida just ignored him.

"Hold on, that might not be far off," Leila added, gaining everyone's attention. "When Elise blew Siren sky high the other day and destroyed the castle, I'm sure she did something to the ARC's system. Now that I think about it, the same shimmering light occurred in the sky whilst the rubble was all distorted."

"So you're saying that whatever powers the ARC is also transmitting around the entire academy," Hunter said, trying to keep track of all their information.

"There are countless issues with that theory," Kai said, earning a nod of agreement from Jaida.

"The most obvious being that no one knows how the ARC works," she added, making their only progress seem futile. Any concrete evidence they had didn't really help in trying to figure out what was really going on. "I think our best lead so far is Cassi," she said, hoping that the girl would enlighten them with something they'd missed.

"If she really is being brainwashed there's a chance she won't be any help at all," Hunter said regretfully.

"In that case, I think Elise and her squad might be able to help," Jaida suggested, knowing their proficiency in technology would be invaluable.

"No, not a chance," Hunter said firmly. "I'm not risking anyone else getting caught up in this. Could you imagine what would happen to us if the Academy found out we knew something was wrong here?"

"I agree; I think we should talk to Cassi for now. At least she won't need convincing," Kai said, not wanting to waste any more time.

"For fuck sake just get both of them," Leila groaned amongst the bickering.

They all stopped to look at her as silence filled the room. "If we can't make a decision on this, how are we supposed to find out what's going on around here," she huffed, annoyed with how they were just going around in circles.

"She's not wrong," Aaron added light-heartedly to try and lift the awkward tension in the room. "It's getting late though so maybe we should just wait until morning," he said with a loud yawn.

"No, this can't wait," Jaida cut in immediately. "Leila is right, we can't just sit around and bicker like we usually do. This is real now, we aren't just playing a game anymore."

"So what do you suggest?" Hunter asked, feeling like his entire world was being turned upside down.

"We get Cassi and Tech, meet back here as soon as possible," she said firmly, hoping for some clarity. "Now!" she clapped aggressively, urging everyone to move. Hunter watched as Kai, Aaron and Leila rushed to grab their jackets and head for the door. Out of everyone, Jaida seemed the most shaken about what they'd found. "You too," she said to Hunter who hadn't moved.

"Are you okay?" he asked, standing beside her. He placed a hand over hers which were sprawled out over the table holding her up.

"That depends on the next few hours," she said coldly, swiping her hand away from him. Her expression was stern, and it was clear she wasn't in the mood to be assured or consoled. She was extremely headstrong and her emotions were clearly clouding her judgement. But Hunter knew better than to say anything, so he left quietly to find Cassi with Kai.

"What are we all doing here?" Elise asked, annoyed that they had been woken up and marched across campus at such an ungodly hour.

It was extremely late in the night, and any sane person would be far into a deep sleep by now. Jaida had marched over to the Baphomet residence and demanded that the entire Tech squad follow her back to the apartment. Meanwhile, Hunter had gone with Kai to pick up Cassi, who seemed just as confused as the others.

"This is going to sound insane, but it's paramount you listen to every word Hunter says and take it as the total truth," Jaida said, neglecting to take a seat from the stress building up inside her.

She'd resigned herself to filing her nails to try and calm herself down. Cassi and the Tech squad sat around the dining table whilst Kai, Aaron and Leila sat on the couch waiting eagerly to see their reactions. Leant against the breakfast bar, Hunter sighed heavily, thinking where to begin.

"I guess the easiest place to start is the wall," Hunter said, earning confused looks from the Tech squad. He told the group everything he'd told his squad earlier, making sure to go over every detail as he went along. He could see the confused looks on their faces, but he tried his best to ignore them. It sounded insane, he knew that, but it was the truth.

"Do you know how crazy you all look right now?" Ferro said, taking Becky's hand in his own. She was chuckling along with Eeva, who both couldn't believe what they were hearing.

"Yes, we do. But we believe that the same technology used by the ARC is being replicated to create an illusion that's concealing the wall," Hunter said firmly, hoping conviction was clear in his words.

"Leila pointed out that there may be some sort of glitch in the programming that's growing. Which is why we were able to see the wall," Aaron added as Leila looked smug from beside him.

"I promise that what I'm telling you is the truth," Hunter assured.

There was a short pause as everyone stared at him, eyes fluttering around the room and as the silence grew longer, nobody was sure of what to say next. But a slow clap broke through the tension, and all eyes turned to Cassi as she grinned from ear to ear.

"It's about time you figured it out," she said with a toothy smile. "I was beginning to think we'd be trapped in here forever."

"So you do remember," Hunter said, hope rushing through him.

"Not exactly," Cassi said, pulling out a small pocketbook. "You're right that I'm missing memories, Hunter. I found it odd because up until this last year I'd been able to remember everything. But now things seem to be slipping away, which I put down to finally having too much stored in here," she said, tapping on her head like it was a filing cabinet.

"They really did brainwash you?" Kai stuttered out, clutching his hair hoping he too hadn't lost any memories.

"Hold up," Elise suddenly blurted out, standing up from her chair. "Who the hell are 'they' and why would they be wiping your memory?" she asked as things began to get all the more confusing.

"The Academy," Cassi replied back. "Everyone who works here, maybe some of the students too. My Enhancement allows me to learn things extraordinarily quickly. So quick that I'd notice if things were even an inch out of place."

Flipping through the notebook she placed it down flat on the table. "Don't get me wrong, I don't remember ever coming across most of the stuff in here. But I think that's down to them discovering that I've caught on. I believe they're wiping my mind every day as a precaution."

"I don't think they're joking Elise," Rob said concerned.

She gazed back at him and then at Hunter with worry. He shook his head, knowing what she was going to ask him, but he couldn't lie anymore. He had to be honest with himself and with everyone.

"So what's the plan?" she asked, to which Jaida stopped filing her nails and looked over like she'd been given the tournament cup.

"First things first," she said, marching over towards the table and grabbing the pocketbook. "Hunter, write down everything I tell you to. Aaron and Leila, call everyone over here that you know we can trust. Elise, can you guys try figuring out what powers the ARC? Cassi go through each page of this with me please."

"What about me?" Kai asked from the couch. Everyone had been assigned a job beside him.

"Could you make me a drink of water, please? I'm parched," Jaida said, sitting down and flicking through the book.

Hunter glanced over at Kai, who was frozen in disbelief. After everything, he'd hoped they wouldn't go back to bickering and teasing each other. He shrugged simply as Kai rolled his eyes but headed to the kitchen nonetheless.

The teens stayed up the rest of that night talking about what they'd discovered. While hard to believe at first, each of them was starting to accept that the life they were leading could all be a lie. Aaron and Leila had called Jalen, Valentina and even Flare at Cassi's request. Once they had all been caught up to speed, they began to devise a plan.

If they really were being held against their will, the tournament may have been set up with ulterior motives. Jaida suggested that to minimise the danger for themselves and other students, a night-time heist would be the best plan of action. They needed to find out the truth before the tournament's finale in a day's time.

In the meantime, they had to keep a low profile and not draw attention to themselves. With no classes due to the tournament, the only thing they had to keep themselves busy with was training. Which wasn't exactly a bad thing with what could be going down, they may need as much fighting practice as they could get.

Hunter and Jaida sprawled out on the sofa together enjoying each other's company. With no sleep due to planning and training, they were utterly exhausted. They had the entire apartment to themselves as the others decided on eating lunch at the canteen, too tired to bother cooking. "It's nice," Hunter sighed as Jaida's head raised up and down on his chest.

"What is?" she asked, weaving her fingers through his.

"The quiet. For once we actually have time alone to relax together," he chuckled, knowing he sounded silly.

"I suppose it's been pretty hectic around here," she chuckled. "This is nice," she agreed, before pushing herself up from his chest. "But what is this?" she asked, pointing between them.

"We agreed on not putting a label on it just yet," Hunter replied, sitting up so he could see her properly. Jaida was now knelt on the couch with her hands on her knees as she tried not to look Hunter directly in the eyes.

"I know but these past few days have been... Challenging. I just want to make sure I have someone I can rely on to have my back," she said sheepishly, not wanting to directly ask Hunter what she really intended.

"I'll always have your back. And so will the others, you know that," he assured, but Jaida shook her head dismissively.

"That's not what I mean," she shot back quickly, her cheeks flushing slightly. "If things go bad tomorrow, I don't want us to have never had the opportunity of being together."

"What are you asking me?" he replied, with utter confusion on his face.

"Are you really that dense that I have to openly ask you!" Jaida exclaimed, unable to keep her feelings contained any longer. But Hunter just looked on blankly, totally oblivious to what she was trying to say. "Of course you are," she sighed, feeling her throat drop into her stomach. "I want to be your girlfriend," she said in a soft hushed tone. Her voice cracked at the thought of rejection, and she couldn't lift her head to look at him.

"Sorry, what?" Hunter stuttered out, unsure if he had heard her correctly.

"Are you deaf or dumb!" she exclaimed in frustration, the crystal on her bracelets bursting out sharply as she released the built-up emotions inside her.

Just as she began to lay into him with a tirade of insults, Hunter pulled her in for a sweet kiss that soothed her frustration. Almost immediately, she calmed down, and her crystals began to reform their normal shape.

"Nothing would make me happier," he answered softly gazing into her glistening emerald eyes.

"You're such an idiot," she replied jokingly, pulling him in close for another kiss.

With the plan ready to be set into motion, Hunter still had some concerns he needed to iron out with Cassi. After dinner, he told his squad mates that he was going for a walk to calm his nerves. After both Jaida and Kai eagerly offered to come with him, he declined, telling them that he wanted to be alone to mull over his thoughts.

He organised to meet with Cassi by the lake as the sun began to set. The orange skies looked beautiful as the moon appeared beside the sun. "It's a shame it isn't real," Cassi said as she approached Hunter who was sitting on the pebble-covered bank. Taking a seat beside him, she silenced any attempts for conversation.

They sat in silence, watching the sky change from amber to midnight blue. As night fell, the stars twinkled in the sky like diamonds. "Look there it is!" Cassi suddenly exclaimed, pointing up to the sky. Suddenly a collection of bright white lights raced above them, leaving a beautiful shower in the shimmering dark sky.

"It's incredible," Hunter said in awe, as the spectacle passed over their heads.

"It's not real," Cassi replied, placing her hands firmly into the pebbles so she could lean back and enjoy the sight above her.

"How can we know for certain though, what if we're wrong?" he asked eagerly, hoping to find answers to his many questions.

"That light was the Orionids meteor shower caused by Comet Halley," Cassi explained, seemingly ignoring Hunter's questions. It seemed to bear little significance to him as he clearly hadn't the faintest idea as to what she was talking about. "The last recorded time Comet Halley entered our solar system was 5 years ago. Before that it was 1986, meaning it orbits our solar system every 76 years."

"How does that answer anything?" Hunter asked, wishing she would just explain everything to him without a confusing and convoluted story.

"My point is that I've been coming here for the past month to watch this same meteor shower every night at this exact time."

Cassi gazed up as the lights began to fade, staring at each flicker with precise intent. "It's not astronomically possible for it to occur every single day. If our sky isn't real, who's to say that the very people we call friends are too? Everything around us could be a lie, Hunter."

"That's what I'm afraid of," he sighed, doubting that he could trust even the people closest to him. "I need to ask; do you get visions in your sleep too?"

"I can't give you the answers you're looking for. My memories are gone and there isn't a trace of doubt in my mind that I'll ever get them back," Hunter's head dropped in defeat. Whenever he got a vague answer, it only seemed to create countless more questions. "All I can say is that we can't trust anyone here. Not the staff, not the students. Not until we figure out what's really going on."

"You're right," he replied, gazing back up at the night sky. It was hard to believe that what he was looking at was just a mirage. An illusion to keep them all trapped inside.

"You should get some rest," Cassi said, standing to her feet. "We'll need as much energy as we can get for tonight."

Hunter arrived back at the apartment, feeling even more in the dark. He couldn't shake the feeling that someone was working against him, discomfiting his efforts and keeping everyone ignorant of what was really going on.

But once he saw Aaron and Leila teasing Jaida in the lounge, he couldn't help but grin. If at least one thing was constant, it was his friends' ability to tease each other and pretend like nothing was wrong.

It may have seemed inappropriate with everything that was going on, but in reality, it was reflecting how close they had become. "Hunter, they are driving me insane!" Jaida called over, rushing to his side seeking shelter from their mockery.

"Oh look, her prince charming has come to save her!" Aaron gleamed, fluttering his eyelids and pretending to swoon. It was clear they were trying to embarrass her to lighten the somewhat sombre mood that shrouded the past couple of days.

"You and Leila seem to have gotten awfully close lately," Hunter responded back, causing both teens to straighten up slightly. "Is there something going on between you two we should know about?" he winked as they shuffled on the spot uncomfortably.

"We just have a similar sense of humour," Leila said firmly, folding her arms and pouting as if she wanted nothing more to do with Aaron.

"That's right! Can't two friends tease the people they care about without being labelled as a couple?" Aaron gasped as if his world was shattering to pieces. "Honestly, I find you impertinent," he huffed, before pushing past Hunter and Jaida towards his room.

"Just so we're clear, nothing is happening between us," Leila added with a deathly stare. She barged her way between them and towards her room, leaving them alone in the lounge. Hunter and Jaida broke down in hysterics once the lounge door had flung shut.

"That was hilarious," Jaida cried out, holding her stomach fearing it was going to crawl out of her throat.

"I'm glad we can still have a laugh," Hunter admitted, trying to catch his breath through chuckles. "It's a relief that we're still the same after all this."

"I know what you mean," Jaida sighed with bemusement. "On that note, I'm going to head to bed. I'll probably wake up an hour before everyone to make sure all the preparations are ready."

She leaned in to peck a sweet kiss on Hunter's lips who blushed at the touch. As Jaida began to walk away, he grabbed her hand and pulled her back into a warm embrace.

"Whatever happens tomorrow, know that I'm glad we got to spend this time together," he said softly. She sighed into the hug, losing herself to his warmth. Kissing him once more on the cheek, she pulled away and made for her bedroom.

Deciding that it would be a good idea to follow suit, he began to walk to his own room. But the dim light that crept into the hallway from underneath Kai's door caught his attention. That's when he realised he hadn't talked to Kai properly since yesterday. If Aaron and Leila knew about his new relationship with Jaida, there was no doubt Kai knew as well.

Unable to shake the feeling of guilt, Hunter tapped on Kai's door and waited for a response. A quiet groan signalled that he could enter, so he silently opened the door and tiptoed inside, hoping he didn't make too much noise.

"So it's true then?" Kai said blankly as Hunter closed the door.

With his back to the room, he stiffened not expecting Kai to be so cold. "Judging by the way you just snuck into my room I guess they weren't rumours after all," he added, awaiting a response from Hunter.

Slowly turning, he saw Kai standing in front of his bed, bathed in moonlight. In nothing but his underwear, it was clear Hunter had disturbed Kai as he was sleeping, making him feel all that guiltier.

"It doesn't change the way I feel about you," he admitted, but Kai scoffed, folding his arms over his bare chest.

"It changes everything, Hunter," Kai replied angrily. Hunter couldn't hold his head high, in fact, he let it sink as low as possible. "I know I said I didn't want to come between you and Jaida. But how can I not be upset by this," he admitted, slumping down onto his bed to sit with his head in his hands.

"The last thing I want is for you to be upset," Hunter said, cautiously approaching. "Me and Jaida, it's something I've wanted for a long time," he added, inching closer with each word. "But we have something different, Kai. We have something special."

"I have nothing, Hunter!" Kai suddenly sobbed out with tears rolling down his face. "I wanted to fall in love like a normal person. And have the guy of my dreams sweep me off my feet like everybody else," he confessed, trying to keep his voice down but still pointed. "Instead I get a best friend that kisses me whenever he feels like it, his girlfriend belittling me every chance she gets and an ex that refuses to let me be happy!"

"Kai please listen..." Hunter tried to console him, but Kai waved him off when he reached out.

"After tonight, I might not even have a home or memories that I can trust. I literally have nothing, Hunter. I have nobody."

His voice cracked and tears streamed down his cheeks. His sandy hair draped over his face sticking to his tear-stained skin. Kneeling down, Hunter took Kai's chin in between his fingers and pulled his face up, so their eyes locked.

"You have me," he said boldly, staring into the pools of despair behind Kai's eyes. "You'll always have me," he repeated, pulling Kai's head into his chest to comfort him. The younger boy sobbed into his chest, his tears staining Hunter's shirt until it stuck to his skin.

They stayed like that for several minutes, neither saying a word to the other. Hunter only pulled away when Kai's sobs faded to sniffles.

"I can't do this anymore, Hunter," Kai said, finally shaking his head. "What is it you want? How do you really feel about me? I need to know?" he said with hopeful eyes.

But Hunter was lost for words. His feelings for Jaida were clear, and he knew where they stood. But with Kai, it was more complicated. "That's what I thought," Kai muttered when Hunter didn't say anything.

He sounded utterly broken.

Kai pressed his hands against Hunter's chest to push him away. But they were quickly encased within Hunter's grasp who held onto them tightly.

"You're my best friend," he stated, something that had always been true. "But you're more than that. You mean more to me than anyone," he said honestly, pulling Kai closer. Their faces inches apart, Hunter could see Kai's red-stained cheeks in the dim moonlight.

Unable to resist his urges, Hunter pressed forward pushing his lips against Kai's. They locked together as Hunter forced Kai backwards onto the bed, grazing his hands over Kai's body.

"Hunter we can't," Kai breathed out in between kisses. But he lost himself in the moment as Hunter massaged his thigh. Removing his shirt, Hunter tossed it across the room as he pressed his body down onto Kai's. A tickling sensation rushed throughout his body at the touch of Kai's cold skin.

"You mean everything to me, Kai. This whole place could burn to the ground if it meant I knew you were safe," Hunter mumbled, kissing the nape of his neck passionately.

Without thinking, Kai's hands snaked down Hunter's back and wrapped around his hips, pulling his waist to press against his own.

Hunter's lips moved down, kissing and nipping Kai's soft skin and tracing the bumps on his stomach with his tongue.

"Fuck, Hunter we should stop," Kai moaned out, but their bodies moved in tandem, inviting him to continue.

Sliding his hands over Kai's boxers, Hunter grabbed his bulge and squeezed it teasingly. Kai let out a stifled whimper, covering his mouth with his arm. This only spurred Hunter's desire further, and lost in a moment of ecstasy he tugged at Kai's underwear before sliding his hand inside.

Taking him in his hand, Hunter couldn't believe what was happening. This was the first time he'd done anything like this, and he never thought it would have been with Kai. Absolutely nothing else mattered in that moment. He wanted to feel every inch of his best friend, taste him and claim him as his own.

Hunter moved further down, his lips inches from Kai who was still squirming in bliss. With his warm mouth just a breath away, he was suddenly pushed back forcefully. Looking down at Kai, who didn't dare look back, Hunter knew he'd gone too far.

"Kai I..." he started but a cold finger pressed against his lips. Shuffling himself out from beneath Hunter, Kai moved to sit beside him, so they both sat on the edge of the bed.

"As much as I'd love to... And believe me, I'd love to..." he sighed, mulling over what had just happened. "Jaida's my friend too, and I couldn't hurt her like this," he said regretfully.

This was everything he'd ever wanted, but it felt wrong to take. "I can be happy if you're happy. That's enough for me," he smiled, hoping that he truly did believe that.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that," Hunter said, realising that they crossed a line best friends should never cross. Guilt began to bubble in his stomach as Jaida's face flashed in his mind. Kai glanced across to him, and quickly back to the floor once understanding that Hunter would never choose him.

"This doesn't change our friendship," Hunter stated, leaning in to kiss Kai's forehead. It lasted longer than it should have, but they'd already gone beyond that point.

"Goodnight Hunter," Kai said, as Hunter made his way to the door. He half-heartedly smiled as he left, leaving Kai sitting in his dimly lit room alone. "It changes everything..."

