

Bratley

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Books

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Interior design by Colleen M. Bratley

Paperback Edition September, 2026

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ISBN 978-1-969142-36-9

Printed in the United States of America

Dedication

To my third grandson,
Luke R. Sonntag

The day you were born was like reliving the first sight of your dad so many years ago. You looked identical to me, and as life goes on, you are still more like him than you know, with your unique and precious soul. You have received the best of both your mom and dad. We are truly blessed.

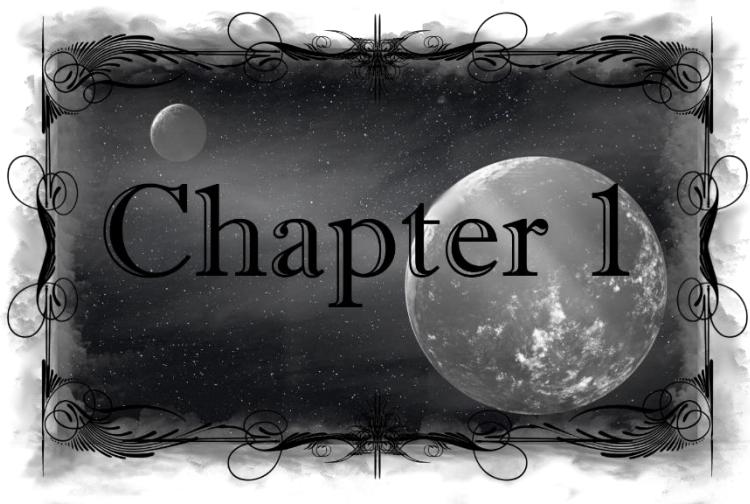
You are special, having talents beyond the norm. Your heart is full, giving to others with a passion few possess. I am captivated by you and enthralled with your ever-expanding stages, gaining extensive steps of knowledge and heart that others only hope to achieve.

To experience your beautiful life from my seat, I am greatly privileged and so thankful for you and your love. I know there are only greater things for your future, and I will enjoy watching them unfold for many years.

Thank you for sharing your brilliant gifts, boundless knowledge, and endless love with me. I am honored and so deeply grateful for the time we have together, whether it be in person, a phone call, or even a text; it is treasured. You are a precious, unmatched gem that everyone covets, but very few are granted. You are a gift, to a very thankful grandmother and family.

Quest

The Morac
Book 3



The rads moved from the kitchen to the basement couches, stunned, scared, and exhausted. They had wept, sobbing and silent, in fear for Aleah, and wondered if the Morac would really retrieve her, and if not, why. When would they know, and if she returned, how would she be upon her return, both physically and emotionally? The questions were mulled over continuously as they waited for the Morac to get back to them. They were all scared and anxious, and the endless waiting made it worse.

“Hey guys, maybe we should think about what to do next on our own and not just sit here and waste time waiting for the Morac,” Julian queried with worry etched on his set face as he paced, his anguish unmistakable.

“I know we set ourselves up on a treacherous path, stealthily jumping back to Earth unbidden,

but I wouldn't have changed that course if I had to do it over again. I would only change going to visit Aleah's parents. That is what changed everything. They were obviously still grieving as if she were dead, and it deeply hurt her. She was sobbing all the way to our jump point. Had I realized how deep the pain was, I wouldn't have done less than keep her secure in my arms until the jump was over." Julian dropped into a chair, portraying a dejected state, and the others worried about him. He was terrified for Aleah.

"Julian, don't blame yourself," Qita offered to hopefully soothe his broken heart. Placing a hand on his arm, she felt a cold, icy jolt. It startled her as she wondered if it was from Aleah's missing heart or a product of simmering anger for their hosts.

"I am scared and sorely miss her, but I believe everything happens for a reason, and maybe this is a frightening part of how we get to our end goal. Maybe this pain of ours is what keeps us in the emotional state we will need to succeed in our freedom for all of us here and at home. I don't believe for a second that she won't be back here with us, and very soon too."

"Yes, and I believe she is okay, and we will get her back," Emmalia added, feeling a huge hole in her heart for someone she had only met so many weeks ago. Her words were strong, but her heart, not so much. Scooching closer to Ethan, she sought comfort for her sad and worried soul.

The rads, being very traumatized over Aleah, have a strong sense she is in terrible trouble, but what kind of trouble and what they could do to help her eluded them. She could be hurt right now or

worse, but they refused to let their minds go that far. They couldn't be a group and do what they were expected to do without her. They wouldn't do it without her.

Arden's words about jumping without approval echoed in their brains, 'That may not bode well for you. They will find a way to punish you for breaking their control. The Morac always needs to feel in control, so be aware of that'. Did they now need to worry that they would punish Aleah while she was still on the old Earth? Did they already? Is she hurt? Dead?

The fears and speculations were rampant for the rads about Aleah, and it drove them to seek their own remedies.

Kelten was flipping through scenarios and outcomes in his mind for Aleah's rescue. All the rads were doing the same. Wondering how they could talk about this and what they could or should do about Aleah, and waiting for the Morac to update them or bring Aleah home was unbearable. "I don't know how we can talk about this, but we must," Kelten began with an adamant determination etched on his face and laced in his tone. "I don't think it matters what we say about getting Aleah, though, do you? I mean, they are going to punish us in some way for jumping without permission, so...."

"I have to agree, Kelten," Derek pushed with a sigh of relief that someone had started the conversation that was so desperately needed. He sat on the couch, Lydia right beside him, his knee bouncing in nervous fear and agitation. "I am going crazy waiting for Aleah to show up or at least get an update on what happened or what will happen next.

So, I say we jump back and get her. Period. No matter what.” With that said, Derek looked at the others, certain they would agree.

The rads unanimously and loudly agreed, all clamoring to speak at once, but Emmalia won first position.

“We will have to get some sleep and more nutrition before we jump, though,” Emmalia stated, leery of jumping without the needed help.

“I don’t know how we are going to be able to sleep with this fear and anxiety so strong right now, though,” Ethan added, feeling frustrated. Looking at Julian, he wondered how he was holding up. He couldn’t imagine how he would have handled this had it been Em.

We can take some melatonin, which will get us to sleep, I think, but we would probably have to set alarms due to our aggravated exhaustion,” Lydia offered for support, wringing her hands, revealing the nervous tension she had.

“I will go start making some brunch for us.” Qita would not leave her friend out there for anything. “I, for one, am jumping. I am not leaving Aleah alone with or without the Morac. No! She needs us, and we will be there. As soon as possible. Julian, do you agree?”

Julian had been silent, mulling over the situation, the Morac, the rads, and how best it must come together for Aleah. He had been switching from pacing to sitting most of the time since they had gotten back, not comfortable with either position. Fear was so strong it may be permanently etched on his brow, as he fought the misery his heart felt for the one person he couldn’t lose or disappoint. “Do

you all remember the dream Aleah told us about?" Julian washed his hands over his face, as if to set a strong will and determination as his new look.

The rads nodded assent, silently watching Julian's face and waiting for him to continue.

"She said, something happened that left a hole in her soul so large she could hardly breathe, and she was arrested. For what, she didn't know. Now all I can think of is the Morac set something in motion that got her arrested. Remember, Dad said, because we didn't alter our energy signature, the Morac already knew we were back on old Earth." Julian stopped pacing and looked at his friends. "I don't believe they are going to help Aleah. They are punishing her, and us through her. I believe they will leave her to suffer the consequences of what they put in motion and use some excuse why they can't bring her back now or yet, so we will also feel the pain, to some degree, that Aleah is experiencing."

Julian felt the physical exhaustion and enormity of what he just said and dropped into a chair. His heart was broken and devouring his energy as much as the jump had.

"I have to agree with everything Julian just said," Kelten offered, and the rads all chimed their affirmation.

Qita wrapped her arms around herself in a protective mode and started to cry. The magnitude of fear and anguish for Aleah now overwhelmed her. "We have to jump and go help her. I don't know how, but I cannot and will not leave her there." Now sobbing, she fought to push out the rest of her words. "She could be hurt or think we won't come to

help her! She said, 'Please promise me you will help me. Don't leave me there to die', and I won't!"

Kelten rushed to Qita's side, gathering her in his arms with a strength of love and passion of assurance that proved he was in lock step with her quest. And all the others did the same, with Em and Lydia's eyes brimming with tears, while the guys swallowed theirs, ready to start the plan with a strong and no fear of consequences mindset.

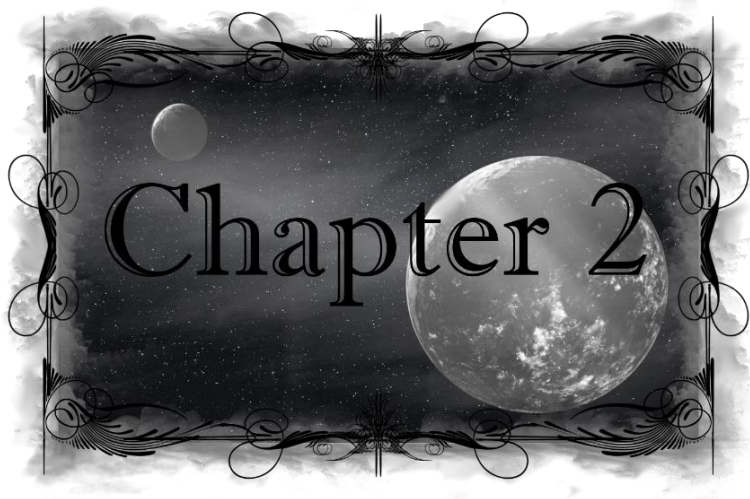
"It's settled then," Kelten exclaimed as he pushed Qita out in front of him to look at her face. "We need to eat, sleep, and then jump to get Aleah. Qita and Em, can you get a meal for us, please? Lydia and Ethan, can you concentrate on the energy signature of Aleah and see if you get any readings from her? I don't even know if that is possible from here, but everything is worth a try. Julian and Derek, please join me in the library to plan out scenarios and plans on how to get Aleah, assuming she was arrested as her dream had predicted."

The rads didn't hesitate to comply with Kelten's directions, preparing for their jump rescue of Aleah. The love for their friends, their will, and their powerful determination far outweigh the onslaught of fear they keep facing. They will do this and succeed, is now the cohesive mindset.

The Morac knew what the rads were doing, but did not interfere. Their silence was purposeful and needed to ignite the rad's cohesive pact, yet ensure they felt the injuries of stepping outside the orbit of the Morac's ultimate excellence path.

The Rads thought they were in control of their destiny, but the clash with the Morac was going to

be an epic explosion of wills with emotional tolls and a quest for survival.



Julian, Kelten, and Derek race to the library to establish tomorrow's rescue plan. Their minds are already churning out ideas, anxious to see Aleah and halt their fears that she is hurt or worse. Hoping for them is not nearly enough; they must see her for themselves.

Kelten leads the group, deciding Julian's emotional trauma has taxed his mind and body enough. "Derek, how can we learn where, if she did get arrested at her home, would the police take her?"

"From here, that is going to be hard. I can't access Google and search, nor can I contact the police or their website to find out where she went. I suggest we create a prioritized list of items that must be done immediately once we are back on Earth at Julian's house. We are jumping to his house, I assume, right?"

"Yes, we must, in hopes Dad can help us. And you're right, we do need to create a list of things we

must do immediately that we can't do from here, and also, what we are going to do if she has been arrested or hurt, or..." Julian couldn't even finish the sentence. "Losing her is not something I will ever be able to handle. So, for the Morac's sake, they better make sure she is okay." Julian jumped up and started pacing the room, running his hands through his hair, showing his nervous tension, fear, and exasperation.

Kelten watched him, feeling his pain, and wishing he could wave a wand and make everything like it was. It may not have been good, but it was a lot better than this. He is very worried about exactly what happened back on Earth and knows without a doubt that it won't be simple. The Morac never did anything simple, let alone straightforward, of that he was certain.

"I believe the Morac will absolutely make things complicated for us. Not only by what they executed to punish Aleah and us, but if she was arrested, we have the police, attorneys, bail bondsmen, and whoever else, now in the thick of it."

"Yeah, Kelten, you're right. It has become a mess, real fast. What in the Milky Way's detritus are the Morac thinking, making this such a huge mess?" Derek washes his hands over his face and then whips them out over his shoulders and above his head in vexation.

"Agreed, it makes no sense," Julian returned, pausing his pace to meet the others. His face was a mixture of fear, sadness, and anguish, with his right eyebrow displaying a nervous twitch. His tone, though, blared his indignation, and a grave determination that buried any present fear as he continued. "They approached us. They wanted us to help them. And yet they made it nearly impossible.

They have made it ridiculously hard from the beginning, and now they trample on our group's cohesive pact of survival by threatening us with this. Whatever this is, it will not stand. We will fight, and it will be a fight they will not like. Or expect."

Lydia and Ethan are sitting in the chairs in front of one of the bookshelves, searching for answers to their energy signature assignment. Hearing the conversation of the guys, Ethan jumped into the discussion.

"We need to talk about this. I know it is vague speculation at best, and catastrophic fear at its worst, but it must be done." Ethan hesitated, as if he wasn't sure he wanted to continue, or didn't know exactly what and how to say what he was thinking.

"Okay, let's talk about it then. What is it?" Kelten asked as he placed an inviting hand on Ethan's shoulder.

"Well.... I...., Ethan began animating his hands as he talked, "Okay, I have to just spit it out, I can't figure out how to be delicate about it. We have ideas, many ideas even, but no plans for any situation. Plans to put into action once we know exactly what has happened. What if she has been arrested? Are we going to break her out? What if she has been hurt? Badly? How are we going to deal with that? What if we try to break her out, and we can't? What do we do about that? What if the Morac stops us and sends us back here, to the new Earth without Aleah? I mean, the possible deterrents or roadblocks and different scenes are double digits for sure, and we are not prepared to handle much, if any of it." Ethan paused for a moment, running his hands through his hair in exasperation and a tinge of fear. "I'm sorry, but with a mission this great, I don't think we

are ready for it, and I'm not sure how we will handle it with all of us staying intact. I know we will go get Aleah, and I wouldn't have it any other way, but we need to work through the different scenarios, you know? I just don't want something to happen to another one of us, or something worse happen to Aleah."

"Yes, I agree, and I completely understand," Julian replied with a tender tone. "I have the same fear and anxiety about this. I think we all do. I, for one, am counting on my father helping us. Some way, somehow. I'm certain he is aware of what happened. Two, I am confident in our intellect and fortitude to address the situations as they arise, and I know we will win every time. Didn't we decide we were going to win at this game the Morac are dealing us? We would be doing this for any one of us in Aleah's situation, no matter what was in our way. Right?"

Qita and Emmalia entered the library with fueling snacks for the rads, hearing Ethan's points and then Julian's.

The rads all agreed with their points, bringing the cohesive solidarity back together once more. Qita keenly felt the tension and Ethan's struggles, knowing he loved everyone and was just worried for them all. His concern for their survival was a heart pump of love for him, and Qita cemented that fact with a powerful hug and thanked him for his thoughts.

"All right, you guys discuss the plans as best we can guesstimate for what we will encounter, and I will fix us some more fulfilling food to eat shortly." Walking out of the library to the kitchen, she held her hand up, wiggling her fingers as a wave to the others. She was still anxious and afraid, and even

though Em was with her, she still felt vulnerable, but persevered for Aleah's sake. She would get her dearest friend. Whatever it took.

The group split up back to their designated chores, vividly conscious of the scarce time they had left until they must rest to ensure success with their next jump.

Lydia and Ethan were in a corner of the room and concentrating on the energy signals of not just Aleah, but everyone. They played with the energies program Arden had left them, determined to figure out how to change each of their signatures and be able to locate anyone at any time.

"The last time we saw Arden, he said he left information on the laptop under Cabin Stars, Constellations, and Reiki. We need to look at those and see if anything else in there can help us with this. I have to say I am not a rocket scientist, and it has never been more evident than right now, trying to understand and process this energy concept." Lydia's face was contorted in exasperation from the pressure she felt to conquer this energy manipulation in what little time was left before they had to rest.

"Lydia, you are wicked smart, as we all are. It's one of the reasons we were chosen to do this. You sense a strain from this new environment and the events unfolding, which are threatening and oppressive. I feel the same, believe me. I am in the same boat with you, and we're both using the same oar. Hence, the sense we are going in circles and getting nowhere. But, in truth, we are soaring high above the norm back on old Earth, and we are going to prevail in all our efforts. You know why?"

Lydia was looking at Ethan with a half-grin on her face. She loved his pep talk. It was

straightforward, to the point, amusing, and yet accurate to the tee. She nodded no to his question, anticipating a brilliant answer.

“Because we have love. Love. Pure unconditional love for each other, our families, and all the other souls back on the old Earth. We honor our brethren. We treasure their thoughts, their views, and their freedoms. Well, thoughts that make sense, am I right? That is light above dark, and it will win every single time. Patience and truth are the key.” Ethan is grinning from ear to ear as he watches Lydia struggle not to laugh.

“Okay, that was good. Amusing, comical even, and yet truthful. Thank you. So now, let’s look at the other programs or files Arden mentioned, and I guarantee something will stand out to us so we can conquer this trial. Arden hasn’t let us down yet.”

Ethan was already opening the other files. They weren’t programs, just information they needed to help figure this all out. “Oh, and the race is still on. We need to command the ship, though, not let it steer us because of frustration or fear.”

“Ha, ha, I think I already got that from your speech, doinkus.”

“D,o,i,n,k,u,s? Doinkus? Is that even a word?” Ethan was almost shouting while laughing at the same time, as he spelled out and then repeated the word, but just for emphasis. “Doink is a word meaning a sound or motion of something bouncing off a surface, or it can mean a rude or inconsiderate person. The us, at the end, is all of us? So which are we? None? Both?” Now Ethan is full-out laughing at Lydia’s word choice, while typing it on the computer and setting it as a screensaver. “I must tell Kelten and Julian, we have a new word of the day! You are a force, Lydia.”

“Okay, it’s not that funny, but if it lightens the mood for anyone or all, I’ll take it,” Lydia returned with a full smile and renewed energy. Sitting in the cushioned chair, her legs folded under her, leaning on the armrest, chin resting in the palm of her hand, she looked assured and confident in her ability, giving Ethan a grin of satisfaction. He knew they were powerhouse brainiacs that would succeed in their mission.

Getting back to work, Ethan opened the Reiki file and skimmed the content. “Oh, glorious sunshine, I think we have a winner, Lydia.”

Lydia looked at the screen and saw the details of what she assumed was Reiki. “Reiki. Rei means God’s Wisdom or a Higher Power, and Ki means life force energy. The Japanese use this technique to heal by manipulating energy. The same can be done to manipulate your energy signature, I believe. You’re right, you found the key we needed. As I said, Arden has not failed us yet, and you are a bright and shining star, Ethan.”

“Thank you, Arden!” Ethan expanded the text in the file for easy reading as he stretched in his seat to ease his stiff muscles. “Alright, let’s talk about what this means and how we use it for this jump, if possible. Then we need to get to bed. We only have a couple of hours left, so dig in.”

Julian, Kelten, and Derek were on the other side of the room talking about the possible scenarios of what had happened, and what the plan was for each possibility.

It was hard for them to even imagine this. Their plans and foresight just a day ago never saw this coming. Why would they? They would never hurt anyone.

“So, if Aleah has been arrested as her dream prophesied, and she is in jail, how are we going to get her out?” Derek asked.

“If she were arrested, I am positive my dad would have gotten her out on bond, if possible,” Julian announced with doubt and maximum concern still clouding his face.

“I see uncertainty on your face, Julian. What is that about?” Kelten queried, quite troubled that his friend wanted it to be true, but his expressions showed he clearly didn’t have the belief locked.

“Well, knowing the Morac as we have discovered already, I fear they wouldn’t let my dad do that. If that is the case, she would still be in jail, and it tears me apart just thinking about it. She is the most loving, kind, and compassionate person that the Morac may be trying to destroy right now. It absolutely kills me. Of all my emotions, the anger and knife-stabbing fear prevail while I so want to protect our souls, hearts, and minds with only calm, loving thoughts. The why of all this boggles my mind. Why would the Morac do this when they want us to help them create a better life for all? I... I just can’t fathom it.” Julian’s fears rose to the surface in full display on his face and mimicked in every tense muscle throughout his body.

“So, if she is in jail, what is our plan?” Derek asked, feeling the despair Julian felt, wondering how he would feel if it were Lydia.

“Well, friends, if the mountain won’t come to you, we have to go to the mountain. In other words, we will scope the place and figure out how to get her out. We know that whatever they are accusing her of, she is innocent, so it doesn’t matter what the law wants; we will take her out and back to the new Earth. They can search for her all they want. I don’t

really care.” Julian slapped his knee to emphasize his point.

“I agree with that, but what if she is hurt? What do we do then? Derek asked the question burning his brain since their first discussion with Ethan earlier.

“Again, we will assess the situation, get her moved to the hospital, and break her out from there. Or, if she isn’t badly hurt and in need of a hospital, we will still break her out and have Dad help us get her the medical attention she needs before we jump.” Julian had already thought these scenarios through as well as he could, considering they were all still blind to the reality of what had happened to Aleah. He was determined to make this all work to get Aleah safe and healthy, as quickly as possible. No matter what was thrown at them.

“I’m still worried about how we’re going to break her out. We are not criminals. How can we do this?” Derek raised the question with alarm ringing in his tone. He was having a hard time seeing them do that. Rising from his chair, he moved to stand in front of his friends, worry stamped on his face.

“Don’t worry, Derek, we will have help from Arden. He may be a silent partner, but he will still help us in any way he can. I literally feel success in my gut that we will retrieve Aleah and be none the worse for wear either.” Kelten was certain of this and hoped Derek could climb on board before they jumped. They would definitely need his help.

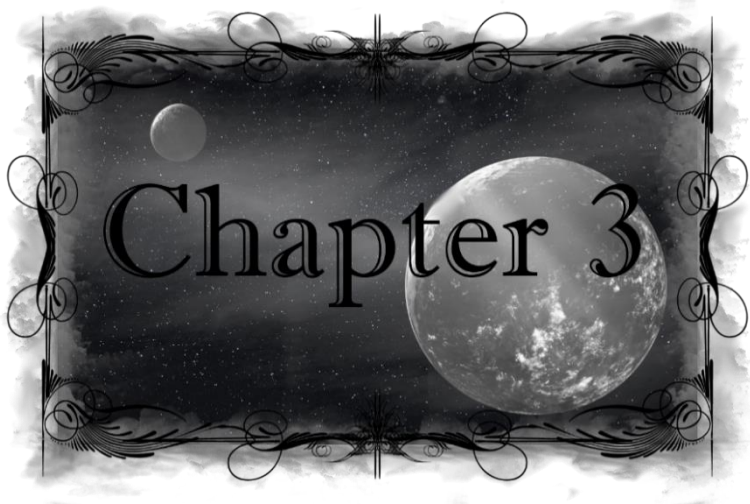
“Do you remember the city stealth training we had?” Julian asked to help Derek feel more assured of their abilities, and Derek nodded yes. “Well, that is how we will do it. We now have abilities far beyond the norm, and it will serve us well to use them for this task. We will be able to do this, and it will be

successful. You know conviction becomes commitment. What we live and all that.”

Derek thought about that. It was true that what we live behooves what transpires. We have been programmed and trained to do what we are about to do, and the Morac should have anticipated this. We will succeed because their programming has not worked as they had expected. We were on to them and thwarted their efforts to our advantage. The light bulb blinked in his mind, exploding his confidence. Julian is right. We will succeed, and we will win this battle.

Qita and Em brought a tray each laden with their meal into the library. All was quiet while they ate, each contemplating what needed to be done just before and after their jump, so they could save Aleah from the Morac’s punishment.

The need for sleep was closing them down and slowing their minds. It was time to assess and prepare. Quickly.



The rads finished their preparations to jump and then went to bed. Nervous, excited, and scared were the emotions they all felt.

Jumbled together all at once, it almost overwhelmed them. Taking the melatonin Isabel had stocked with the herbs and essential oils did help them achieve a calm and refreshing sleep, so at least that was a plus on their side. Dreamless, tranquil sleep is what they had needed, and thankfully, that is what they received.

Each rad had set an alarm to wake them in time for their jump, just in case the melatonin worked better than they thought it would. Even with that little sleep, they were now wide awake and ready to begin their 'bring back Aleah' mission.

Gathering in the cul-de-sac for their first jump, their adrenaline rose along with their vibrations, masking the drain that the unbridled stress had on their limited energy levels. Their preparations

included an adjustment to their individual energies as well, hoping for an invisibility cloak to maneuver without the Morac detecting their every move.

The first jump was quick and easy. Without noticing any hiccups, the rads were enveloped with a firm and steady elation to complete their mission successfully. This euphoria created an elevated feeling, stamping them with no fear of the second jump, which was taken in a lackadaisical and reckless manner. After all, the Morac were, supposedly, already on old Earth, trying to “save” Aleah. They could have traps set or complications of any kind in the works to deter or punish them from not just one unbidden jump to old Earth, but now two. The revelation of this possibility will soon haunt their every step.

Reaching their old Earth with a successful and seemingly easy jump, they only had one more leap to Julian’s house, and the toll of energy was now a hard mark on their bodies. They landed in a sitting position, alerting them to the toll on their bodies the jump had taken. Just contemplating the next jump was like running into a brick wall. A hard and loud thud echoed in their minds. Clambering to their feet, Kelten’s voice brought them into focus.

“Let’s quickly get this last jump done so we can rest a bit and try to recoup the energy just used,” Kelten commanded. He was in high gear to complete this mission as quickly and cleanly as possible, no matter what reservations they all had ringing in their minds and reverberating in their ears. No deaths, injuries, or pains of any kind would be allowed. This may be a tall order against the Morac, he surmised, but we can and will do it. Somehow, someday.

The other rads all agreed, each feeling their sapped energy, grabbed hands, raised their vibrations, and jumped. Landing in the cul-de-sac of Julian's original home again, they furtively looked about, hoping no one saw them appear out of thin air. Noticing no one, they walked quickly to the front door. Opening it to the foyer, they stepped in, disappearing from the street in seconds. Feeling as vulnerable as they did, they still worried and hoped no one saw them. No one. Per niente. Especially not the Morac.

It was a very different feeling for Julian, Kelten, and Qita, sneaking around a home Julian had lived in, and the others had visited freely a few short months ago. For all the rads, the feeling of being home, their original home, was not what they felt. It was more like they were in a foreign land, committing treason against their overlords, the Morac.

The rads were definitely breaching their faith in the Morac; otherwise, they wouldn't have jumped. They believed this jump was a necessity, due to their trust that the Morac would bring Aleah back to them was slim to none. That fact alone wore on the rad's tenuous grip on their relationship with them. It was exhausting; almost as draining as their jumps.

"Dad, Mom," Julian called out, hoping for a response even though he knew there was only a slight chance they were home.

The rads listened, quiet and weary for a return hello, or anything from another human being, but all was quiet.

"Let's go downstairs, guys, and Julian call your dad," Kelten advised. Without a word, the rads trudged downstairs to the bunker while Julian called

his dad. He had to leave a message, but he knew his dad would come home as soon as he could.

On the walk to the bunker, Julian and Kelten grabbed some food and drinks from the kitchen in the basement, hoping to help replenish their drained energy from the jumps.

Qita and Emmalia grabbed some blankets and pillows from the closet for them to rest on, hoping that would also help. Every one of them felt the strain from the jumps, physically and mentally, as their minds churned, unable to quiet their fears.

Entering the bunker, the girls handed out blankets and pillows, while the guys handed out food and drinks. They all spread out the blankets, making soft beds to lie on. The pillows cradling their heads or backs for comfort

You could almost hear a pin drop, the rads were so silent and tired as they all settled in to rest for as long as they could. No words were spoken, no sighs were heard. Just an impenetrable stillness.

Contemplation was evident on their faces. What they were all contemplating, though, was a mixture so intense that it rivaled the storms they experienced just after the event. Each rad fighting their own emotions of what was to come.

They all knew this was not going to be a few hours visit on old Earth, and they instinctively knew that the rescue of Aleah was going to be a much bigger and harder mission than they had hoped for. It tipped the scale from easy and legal to hard and whatever it takes, and they didn't care. Aleah was coming home with them, no matter what they had to do to achieve that feat.

"We all need to try and sleep until my dad gets home," Julian softly advised. "I know it is hard, being in the emotional and physical state we are in,

but it's absolutely necessary if we want to complete this mission successfully. I know it is a lot to ask you all to help me with, considering my family's involvement in how we even got into this turmoil, but I deeply thank you for everything you do. Truly, I couldn't do this without you all, and I would never want to either. I need you all, and love you all. So, thank you."

"Julian," Qita responded with a soft, comforting tone. "You are not responsible for what happened, only the Morac are. Not even your parents and we don't, and I mean not one of us, feel anything but love and respect for you and your parents. Believe me, we know what happened and how, and most of why. The Morac could provide some more details to explain certain things, but not you. Nor your family. Just them. We will be with you all the way, without anything but love for you, and we are also thankful for you, your parents, and all that you have done for us as well. I mean, where would we be if we had to do this without you three? I hate to even think about that."

The other rads murmured agreement to Qita's statement, the words hitting home for each one of them, assuring all the rads that they are a team, complete and dedicated to each other for the whole ride, whether they survive or not. This was their mission, their destiny, and they would be in it as one.

It seemed to Julian like he was only asleep for minutes when the bunker door cracked open. It woke him in a defensive mode, thinking first that it was the Morac or the police. Someone that he had to be wary of. Realizing it was his dad, he jumped up. "Dad!" Julian rushed to hug his dad, which woke the

others with a start. Rising together the rads joined Julian beside his dad.

“Julian!” Arden returned in almost a whisper as he hugged him back, wishing he didn’t have to let him go. “I got your message, but I was surprised and not sure it was from you. I questioned if it was a setup, testing my allegiance, so I didn’t leave until close to the normal time, so as not to raise any suspicion or alarms. Wow, I am so happy to see you all.” Arden exclaimed his joy at seeing them, he reached out to hug all of them with a strong embrace.

“Dad, do you not know about Aleah?” Julian implored, fear and worry gracing his face and sorrow in his tone.

“I do, but I was told the Morac are retrieving her. Is that not true?” Arden asked, looking from one rad to another.

“We don’t know,” Kelten answered. “We believed they would at first, but their tone and attitude were placating at best, so we didn’t feel it rang true. Then we heard nothing. No assurances, no plans, no timeline, nothing. It wasn’t good enough. We simply don’t trust them, so we came to get her ourselves, and we are not leaving without her. Whatever the consequences are.”

“Dad, what have you heard? What exactly happened? Do you know?” Julian asked in rapid fire, anxious to learn how she is.

“I was told she was at her home and murdered her parents.”

The shock on every face of the rads was stark. A harsh reality of what they are now facing was as if they just endured a blunt blow to their heads. It left them almost speechless. And confused. They knew that is not what could have happened. Not by Aleah.

“You know that can’t be, Dad,” Julian murmured, trying not to cry for Aleah’s painful predicament.

“No, of course not!” Arden exclaimed, putting his arm around Julian in a half hug. “If she is still here, then this is all by the Morac’s design. This is your punishment for jumping without their approval, and I really don’t know how they intend to get her out of this. The police arrived with her on the floor next to her parents, lying dead on the floor.” Looking at each other, Arden could see the anguish they all felt.

“I am so sorry, guys, I can’t believe this happened. Why didn’t she jump with you?”

“She was with us, and we thought she jumped too until we landed, and she wasn’t there. She let go of my hand at the last minute, and I thought she was holding onto someone else, but obviously wasn’t.” Julian’s hurt was now overwhelming as he thought about that night again and what she was facing now. Looking at his dad, he wanted to crumple to the ground and hope his father would be able to help him get back up. The emotions for Aleah were debilitating.

“This is all my fault. I should have realized how bad off she was,” Julian lamented. “She was sobbing all the way to the jump point because she saw how devastated her parents still were with her missing. They truly believe she is dead, and it cut her heart in two. I think she went back to tell them she is alive and it’s okay, that she would see them again soon. I don’t know if she thought she could jump by herself or what, but I don’t think that’s what she cared about. She has a hard time seeing anybody hurt, and being her parents hurting so bad, cut her to the core. She wanted to fix it.”

"I am sure that is exactly what she was thinking," Qita added. "She had had a prophetic dream where she thought she was arrested, but couldn't believe that because she had never done anything to be arrested for in her entire life. She said, 'Please promise me you will help me. Don't leave me there to die', and I won't. We won't. It's another reason we came back. I also don't believe the Morac will retrieve her. They will leave her to die or rot in prison, even though they know she did not kill her parents. Oh heavens, I can't believe they are dead!" Qita began to cry for them, imagining the pain her dear friend must be feeling.

"Well, I don't believe they are dead," Arden interjected. "I am certain they are alive and well, just somewhere else, by the Morac's doing. If I can find the truth out, I surely will, trust me."

"I don't know, Dad. I have a memory, or a partial one, of the Morac and dead people all over the place. I don't know where it happened, or when, but it came to me when the Morac first acknowledged us on the new Earth when we got back to the house." Julian was recalling the memory as best he could and feeling the anguish and shock all over again.

"I am not sure what memory that is, Julian, but the Morac did go to dying planets and save a lot of people. At least that is how it was presented to us. Can you ever really be certain that all is true? No, but you most often give others the benefit of the doubt and trust in their word because that is what you would want others to do for you. Understand?" Arden was looking directly at Julian, his hands on his shoulders, waiting for an answer.

"I understand what you are saying, but now that we know some other information about their own planet and society, I trust them even less than I did

in the beginning. And now this, this is the icing on the cake, and it is a bitter and choking concoction. This is devastating for us, Dad, and I can't even imagine how crippling it is for Aleah." That last sentence broke Julian's voice as he fought the excruciating need to cry for her.

"I also understand what you are feeling, Julian and all. So, now we need to figure out how to handle this situation and get her back to you without a police chase or any harm to any of you. Let me see what I can find out at the office in the morning, and we will proceed from there. By the way, did you alter your energy signatures before you jumped?"

Ethan bounced in to respond. "If I understand it correctly, the energy manipulation that is, then yes, we did alter each of our signatures slightly. I don't know if it was enough to hazard their tracking of us, and I also don't know if it stopped the tracking they put in our arms, but at least we tried."

"Well, I will know tomorrow, so we shall see. Mom is cooking a midnight snack for you all and will be down here shortly. After you all eat, you must get some sleep. As much as you can, because when we put this rescue in motion, there will be no time for sleep or refueling your energy stores. Understand?"

"Mom is here?" Julian cried.

"She sure is and will be down here shortly. She can't wait to see you all either."

Shortly became more than ten minutes before Isabel appeared in the doorway with a food-stacked tray. Hot, home-cooked food. She placed the tray on the desk and quickly reached out to hug Julian.

"Mom, I am so happy to see you!" Julian rushed into her ear as she hugged him tight and rubbed his back. He smelled the familiar perfume she often wore and felt the same secure feelings he had felt

before the event had ever happened. It was a delicious moment for his heart and soul. One he desperately needed in this turbulent time.

“I am way happier to see you, sweet Julian. I have worried so much since you disappeared. I knew your father would watch out for you, but it didn’t cease the heart-wrenching fear I had for you anyway. I never trusted the Morac, and I was right. Now here we are again, facing another awful, trying event, and they are who we have to thank for it.”

Isabel turned to look at the others, and as Arden had on their first jump back, knew them by name. “Emmalia, Lydia, Ethan, Derek, and of course Kelten and Qita. I am so very happy to see you all. You look well, healthy, and in great physical shape, but the toll of fear and heartache marks your faces. I believe we will set that straight in the next day or two at the most. Don’t get me wrong, though, I don’t want to get Aleah back to you and then have you leave, but it must be so to fix this tragedy we put in motion during our deceptive understanding of the Morac people and agenda.”

“What is their agenda, exactly?” Kelten asked as he placed an arm around Qita’s shoulder. Knowing everything the Bratleys did could only help them in their goals to right this outrageous event.

“We don’t know, exactly, unfortunately. They are hard to read, and even worse to understand. I am sure you have experienced that with your interactions. They only allow you to know, perceive, and understand what they want you to. I am not sure how they do it, but their control of what we see, hear, and comprehend is quite advanced, and we aren’t even close to understanding or learning how they do it. Yet. We are, though, hoping you will get a

much better advantage and learn what we have not been able to.”

“That is disappointing, to say the least, because we are having trouble on that front as well,” Derek replied while Kelten stewed on the thoughts presented.

“We sure are,” Kelten stated, finding his voice and dropping his hands to his hips. “We were aware of their ability when their ship showed doors in the hall that weren’t there the previous day. It is unnerving and makes me feel like they are conning us.”

“Exactly, so how do we get past this present con of Aleah killing her parents?” Lydia asked. “I am feeling devastated for her and very angry at the Morac for doing this.”

The other rads chimed in their agreement with Lydia’s comments, each showing anger and still fear on their faces.

“Our feelings of devastation and anger for the Morac and what happened to Aleah are stronger than I think the Morac could have ever guessed. Proof that they really don’t understand us like they think they do.” Kelten added. “They are in for a surprise when they see the lengths we will go to protect our people, especially one of our rads.”

“Indeed,” Arden responded, shaking his head in agreement along with Isabel. “A surprise is coming, and it will make them think twice about trying to hurt the chosen ones again.”



The Morac were now certain the chosen ones were back on old Earth, but they couldn’t find them. Realizing they had learned to alter their signatures

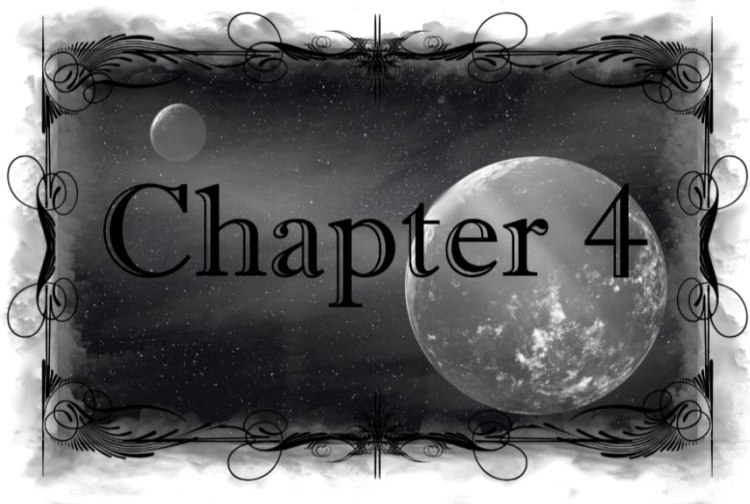
did not deter their search, but it did please them knowing their charges were so smart.

“The charges might have learned an aspect of changing their signatures,” Veskell relayed, “but, they aren’t strong enough to keep that up for long, so we will find them. It is only a matter of time.”

Eirdan looked at Veskell with no expression, but was wondering if that was true. So far, they had been doing the unexpected and succeeding. “Aren’t you curious about what they will do next? Every step they have taken so far, since their first unsanctioned jump back to old Earth, has been surprising to say the least.”

“No, I am not really concerned. They will be under our control and feeling the punishment we mete out, soon enough,” Veskell returned with a conviction he had not fully absorbed yet.

Eirdan was not seduced by Veskell’s assurances and knew there was a lot to be alarmed about. Earthlings are a lot more complicated to understand and predict than anyone seemed to comprehend. Time was going to show them the errors of their estimations. He should get a promotion when they discover how on target his concerns were, and how grossly negligent their dismissal of them was. Eirdan rubbed his hands together just thinking about his possible advancement.



After their dinner, the rads settled in to sleep for the night, hoping the restoration of their energy would be at the highest level possible. They knew it would be desperately needed for their mission. Even though the drain on their energies made the emotional turmoil worse, which also made them toss and turn a bit, the physical exhaustion still pulled the drape of dark stillness over their anguish. Relinquishing their turmoil, they slept soundly, but not without dreams.

Dreams of running, flying, hiding, and fighting to survive plagued all the rads most of the night. Their dreams had them running to find Aleah, hiding from the Morac, fighting to free her from society's prison, and jumping back to the new Earth. All of them. Together, safe and sound. They were living their mission in their dreams, determined to outsmart and outmaneuver the Morac. Daring to survive it all.

All the conflicts they were experiencing now were due to the Morac's need to control the rads. And all the rad's actions were due to the survival instinct they had. None of which the Morac apparently understood. The Morac knew the rads were going back to old Earth before the rads changed their signatures. Being as arrogant as they are, though, they had no fear of losing them or any control over them. Not now. The rads would endure the punishment issued and comply as needed to avoid a repeat scenario. At least that's how their overzealous, without error, thought process envisioned it anyway. The rads had other ideas.

Waking up, the rads were famished, but Isabel had seen to that and left a tray of home-cooked food just inside the door. The tray was laden with scrambled eggs, toast, bacon, pancakes, sausage, cantaloupe, strawberries, orange juice, coffee, tea, and milk. It looked like enough food to feed an army, but once the rads dug in to refuel, there was little left when they were done.

Feeling replete and thankful from their silently consumed breakfast, the rads now looked at each other, wondering how to broach the urgent matter at hand. The fear and anxiety of their mission quickly returned to each face, shouting for resolution. Their angst was begging to be released with a victory, wholly reuniting the rads. It wasn't a wish, it was a demand, and Julian was leading the charge.

Contemplating what he remembered from his dreams, Julian wondered if they were prophetic dreams or just him playing out possible maneuvers and outcomes.

Emmalia, on the other hand, remembered her dreams but didn't like the fear or anxiety still

weighing on her, and wanted to quickly get moving and get it done. As soon as possible.

Sitting on the floor with a pillow cushioning her back against the wall, she drew her knees up and hugged them, signaling to Ethan her distress and vulnerabilities, seeking protection. Looking into the faces of the others, she broke the silence, startling them with her soft yet firm question.

“So what is the plan, and when are we going to implement it? I am just asking because I really can’t take the mental trauma my mind, with an unflagging need for resolve, is going through right now.”

“This is for sure,” Ethan returned with a squeeze of his hand wrapped around her shoulder. “We, meaning Ethan, Derek, and Julian, do have a plan, well, a few actually, but we won’t know which one to implement until Mr. Bratley advises us on what he finds out about Aleah’s situation and location. If anything. Right, guys?”

“Yes, we do, and yes, we are waiting to hear back from Arden to put the finite plan, adjusted if needed, into action.” Derek returned with a strong and confident tone that was way more intense than he really felt. There were so many variables they needed answers to that could be possible hitches or, hopefully, strengths in their tentative plans. Arden and the knowledge he could obtain became a pinnacle point in defining their strategy for the most favorable outcome. They were determined to find and retrieve Aleah and return to the new Earth unscathed. That placed planning with precision, the crux of success.

All the rads understood that, but waiting for the answers needed was as great a test of their patience and endurance as the mission was. Emotionally, it

was hard to curtail their fear and anxiety, so they started exercising their bodies by stretching their muscles to occupy their minds. It worked for a while, at least.

When a phone rang, they all jumped. Hearing a phone ring had been nonexistent for months now, so it was not anticipated. Having useless phones on the new Earth didn't stop them all from keeping their phones charged and within reach all the time, as usual, though. They wholly expected and pursued a return to their normal lives every single day. This was just another assurance of what they believed and sought, keeping vigilant and prepared for that event to happen.

Julian stared at his phone as if he didn't believe he had heard it ring, and it didn't. Looking around, he wondered whose phone was ringing. Each rad pulled out their phone, realizing none were ringing.

"It must be through the computer," Kelten noted, "because a signal can't get through the bunker walls."

"Computer phone open and on speaker," Julian commanded. The call could only be from one person, so Julian stated, "Hello, Dad?"

"Son, I can't get there until tonight, but I have news. Good and not so good. Eat as much food as possible, keep your energy levels high by maintaining your rest, and your vibrations at a higher level. And stay cloaked. You will need as much energy as you can get. Talk to you soon."

Staring at the computer now had everyone wondering what was said. Julian was processing all he said and now wondered what the not-so-good news was, and why they would need all the energy they could get. Fear and unease are severely carved on his face now, replacing the softer concern and

tension evident seconds ago. Turning to his friends, he relayed the details, word for word.

“Stay cloaked. Does that mean it worked? Do the Morac not know where we are? Dang a dang dang dang! Stop the orbits! That’s what I’m talking about!” Ethan hollered, pumping his fist in the air before jumping up and hopping around, almost imitating Julian’s boxing exhibition months ago.

His antics brought some subdued laughs, which were direly needed, even if, considering their situation, they weren’t heartily felt.

“You two are amazing!” Derek screeched in excitement as he pointed at Lydia and Ethan. Both are smiling, elated that their study and implementation of energy manipulation appear to have worked.

“Yes, thank you both, you are amazing for all the help you have afforded us. We are all grateful. But now I want to know what Arden meant by not so good news and why we will need high levels of energy. I don’t see us jumping any time soon. Going out on a limb here, but it sounds like we may be here more than just a day or two. Anyone else get that feeling?” Kelten was pondering Arden’s statements. He never put stock in words meaning only what is said by him, especially in this situation where they are most likely guarding his interactions closely, knowing that Julian one of the rads, is his son.

“It does appear that the cloaking worked, at least to some degree. We won’t know more until Arden returns tonight, but there is also good news, or maybe that is the good news. So let’s celebrate that. One win at a time is how we win the whole war.” Derek was grinning ear to ear as he talked, thankful

the first news they heard was not all doom and gloom.

“I am feeling a bit relieved, but I’m still leery, and worried for Aleah, praying she is not hurt, and surviving this trauma while staying mentally solid. Now, let’s do as Arden instructed and go get some food in the kitchen. Can we do that? Do we need to re-up or re-engage our signature changes, Ethan and Lydia?” Qita questioned, excited that things are starting to move forward again. Refusing to entertain any negative thoughts, Qita was certain that Aleah would be back with them soon and would be perfectly fine.

“I am not sure, but it can’t hurt for us to combine our energy since we haven’t done that in a while and adjust our signatures as we did before the jump, since we will be outside of the bunker,” Ethan proposed. “Do you agree, Lydia?”

Lydia nodded yes, adding, “Being overprepared can’t hurt, if that is what we are actually doing.”

Julian, having sat quietly while processing all the things being said, stood up. Raising his hands in the air just above his head, he signaled his wish to speak. Looking at his friends, the now familiar pang in his gut confirming Aleah’s face was not among them, couldn’t stop the fear and worry from either his face or his tone.

“Rads, I know we will get Aleah back. There is no doubt because I am not leaving until that happens. And by the way, the only reason I would go back to the new Earth now is for the other four rads still over there. We are all chosen ones and therefore, comrades, and I will not leave anyone stranded with the Morac or anyone else.”

“I know it won’t be easy, how could it be? We are dealing with people who lied, controlled, set us up

with fear, shuttered our minds, and provided no facts or even leading information, which left us to stutter and blindly seek answers as to what was going on. Who does that? Narcissists? Egomaniacs? Manipulators? Psychos? Or are they just that blind to our society? Oblivious to our culture and emotionally run lives? Could be, but what type of person does that? Our hearts and souls must be so different from theirs. It seems compassion is non-existent in their world. Their understanding of us is too minuscule to be seen, let alone change their perception and actions.”

“I trust my dad to help us, guide us, and silently cheer for us to win. I think that is a weird word to use for the situation we find ourselves in, but I can’t think of another that means what win does. We must and will, without a single doubt, win this war for our very lives. Lives with freedom. Freedom of choice, freedom from oppression, and freedom to experience any emotion we want in every way we may possibly want.”

“Please don’t think I am choosing Aleah over any one or all of you. I just can’t lose her or any of you, so I am trying to choose the best path to keep us safe and whole. All of us. All the chosen ones. Now, enough of my blubbering, let’s gather to combine our energy, adjust our signatures as before, and then go eat.” With that said, Julian raised his hand in the rads salute, and the others followed, all shouting in unison, the conviction in each other solid, stark, and boldly plastered on their faces.

Early afternoon was proving to be a draining time for the rads. Lunch was a delightful interruption to their anxious states, but it didn’t dampen their fears for Aleah or their mission. With that replenishing and energy-building meal finished,

they had to retreat to the bunker and plan out their next moves. All their moves, not just retrieving Aleah. Then they must rest, as Arden advised. If, as Arden said, they would need oodles of energy, then they must store as much as possible before tonight, assuming their first exploration or operation would be in the mask of darkness.

The rads, sleeping lightly, their vigilance on red alert at all times, woke immediately when Arden and Isabel stepped into the bunker.

“Dad, Mom,” Julian whispered.

“Hey, guys, did we wake you?” Arden inquired, looking from one rad to another. Not waiting for an answer, he continued. “I’m glad you have been resting, but I know you are anxious, so let’s get right to it. Here is what I have found out.” Arden paused slightly, knowing that what he was going to say next would leave a mark on their hearts.

“Aleah was arrested, interrogated, and confined for the murder of her parents.” Arden and Isabel were acutely watching the rads, gauging their reactions for elevated stress or anxiety, which could greatly undermine their mission.

The look of shock and terror on the rad's faces was undeniable. It gave Arden pause, wondering if they could overcome those feelings to muster the courage and resolve to see this mission through quickly and safely. Isabel’s heart was breaking for them.

“I know that is not what you all wanted to hear, but listen closely now. I am 99.9 percent certain that her parents are still alive. The Morac are not known for killing people. At least we haven’t been able to see that so far anyway. But their pension to punish you guys for stepping out of their control led to this result. They have created the scene and expect

everyone to believe it without question. You all included. Look at what has happened so far.”

“You went back to the new Earth and asked them for their help. They said they would help you, and then appeared to do nothing. Right?”

The rads nodded in agreement, their eyes wide, their hearts beating rapidly with fear and sorrow. None of them was able to say a word as they waited for Arden to continue.

“I don’t know if they anticipated that you would return to save Aleah, but even so, they prepared a plan to thwart those efforts. That is apparent now by what they did.” Arden slowed his words down, seeking a precise yet gentle, if that is possible, way to lay out what has happened.

“Some way, somehow, bending the ear of the right person, the Morac have put this travesty in high gear and high profile as an example to others who may want to follow this avenue of perceived murder. Their real agenda? To keep you chosen ones in line and under control after this.”

“What does that mean, exactly?” Julian asked in a soft, tremulous voice. His disquieted mind and doubt of the words said, plagued his face and the look in his eyes. This just went way beyond the possible scenarios they had thought of. So now their resolve withered to uncertainty, and their determination was tenuous at best. Julian stood up and started to pace, running things through his mind, unable to calm down.

“Julian, please sit down and listen,” Arden requested, and Julian, with difficulty, complied. “Look, what I told you doesn’t mean your mission is impossible; it just means it will be harder. Not unattainable, though.”

“You all survived and rose above so far, right?” Arden looked from one face to another, seeking their agreement. “So, you will rise above this also. You will get Aleah, you will get back to the new Earth, and you will all do it unscathed and uncompromised. Are you with me?”

Relief started to filter through their faces, each realizing that Arden would help them to navigate and complete their mission in their favor. They were on a mission to win, and that is exactly what they would do.

Arden clapped his hands together and dug in, “Okay, let’s lay out all the facts as we know them, and plan this out.”



The Morac were looking over their chosen ones' tracks and realized then that these charges were much smarter and cunning than they had given them credit for. Keeping control was going to be harder and more intense than they had planned. It seemed to be a good thing that this situation was cultivated when it was. The Morac felt assured that the chosen ones would be amiss to any other option than to follow the course presented and beg for help at just the right time.

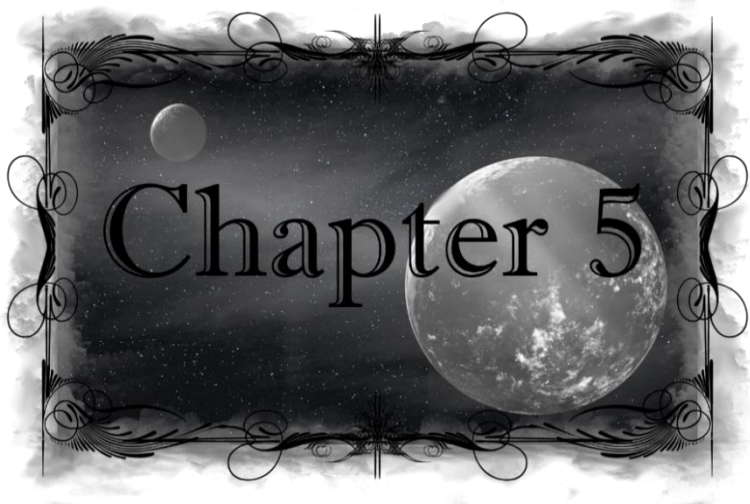
They knew their charges had figured out how to alter their energy signatures to elude their detection. Clever. But the Morac were more than clever, and they would fix that issue soon enough. At least that is what they told themselves and thoroughly believed.

Veskell and Eirdan were watching Arden and Isabel, certain that Julian and the gang would contact them at some point. They did not detect the

rads at the house, so they decided to wait. They would find them soon because they knew the rads would go after Aleah, and they would be ready for them. Or would they? Eirdan wasn't so sure.

It was fully confirmed in their minds that they were a superior race, and they would be back in control very soon. No matter what happened, they could not even entertain the possibility that the rads had favor on their side with intellectual and emotional determination. It was unfathomable that they would or even could overtake the Morac's commanding positions.

The Morac's conception of Earthlings was well short of what it should be and needed to be. This confrontation would be a shocking revelation, pausing their cold beating hearts.

A decorative title card for Chapter 5. The background is a dark, starry night sky with a large, detailed full moon on the right side. The text "Chapter 5" is written in a large, elegant, black serif font across the center. The entire scene is framed by a decorative border of black, swirling, vine-like patterns. There are also some faint, wispy clouds or smoke-like effects around the edges of the frame.

Chapter 5

Arden had laid out sticky notes on the table, each indicating the surrounding buildings, and the wooden path through them all, designated with toothpicks. It was a depiction of an area of the park where Aleah would be marched out to face the community, showing the people what a killer looks like. The hope was that no one would take pity on her, thinking she couldn't have done such a thing as murder, and to her own parents no less. The idea was to use it as a deterrent for anyone else who might think they could follow in her footsteps. That no one was above the law. This was the Moracs' plan, though. They pushed hard to get this done, specifically for the chosen one's punishment. Designed to be severe enough to discourage them from challenging or forging their own path outside of the Moracs' direction. The rads gathered in an arch around the table, studying the

notes and toothpicks, gathering a design in their minds to build their plan upon.

This spectacle was set in motion by the Morac to make it seem, at least, impossible to save her from prison or worse, death for the murder of her parents, and it was directed at the rads. The Morac had learned to whisper in the right ears and massage the exact greedy palms to get what they wanted. Their stoic expressions were trained to mimic their prey to gain the purpose they wanted. Sadly, they didn't really understand what or why they were mimicking at all.

Waving his hands to encompass the model on the table, Arden began voicing his thoughts.

"I think the Morac are placing their bets on knowing what you will do to save Aleah. I am placing my bet on the fact that they don't know you all as well as I do, and that will be their big mistake. You will take control and stay in control, reaching and extracting Aleah like the great and genius people you are."

"The good news for you is that physically, Aleah is fine. No injuries, except raw skin where they zip-tied her wrists way too tightly. The not-so-good news is that she will be marched around an area of the park, specifically the reserve area, which features a wooden path built just above ground level in some places and five feet high in others. The path was constructed to allow people to be in that area without disturbing or trampling the grass, flowers, waterways, or animals. It's an 'experience nature up close' without messing it up, idea. How no one thought about the people coming to observe this travesty would damage that very concept is beyond me." Arden shook his head at their ignorance before continuing.

“The different height from the ground was done just to keep the path more level. Rest assured, she will not be in any danger on that path. She will be scared, maybe even terrified, but no one will try to hurt her. During her walk is where you come into the picture.”

The rads stayed silent, as they reviewed the table and mulled over all that Arden was telling them. Isabel had excused herself to go make some food for them, already knowing what Arden was relaying to them. They had researched the park, and all that was to happen tomorrow before they reached an insight into how the rads could get Aleah back to the new Earth. The fear on the rad's faces slowly turned to resolution as they talked this all out with Arden and his ideas for success.

“Tonight, I want you to go to that area and get familiar with it. Deeply familiar. Entrenched even. A clear and precise picture in your mind of every step, stone, tree, bush, and building in the area. I want you to know how many steps it takes to walk the path. Where the ground level is from that path, at each point where the level changes. You must learn how many steps it takes to each level, from beginning to end. I want you to know, in case you have to escape, where you would go. Knowing what direction you would take from any position on the wooden path to get to safety must be known at all times. I want you to memorize where every tree, bush, and waterway is from the wooden path, all the way to your safety area. Whichever safety area that possibility takes you to. I want you to anticipate what will happen if the police are after you, and where you could go to safety until you can reach your jump point. Every detail must be known and memorized by each of you. There can be no

mistakes, or someone could get caught or hurt. You may have to separate from each other, so you can't rely on one person to lead the charge. You all must be able to do so."

Arden stopped for a breath, looking over these kids who had quickly become adults, having to fight for their lives. His heart broke for them. He desperately wished he could help them in the fray of it, not just from the sidelines, but knew he would be executed or exiled if he did, and then there would be no help for them from anywhere.

"Remember, a lot of people will be there. This is a new event, an incomprehensible sight in this day and age, which draws people in like flies to sugar. People are very curious and want to see for themselves what is going on. The murder has been sensationalized for the benefit of promoting the death penalty or, at the very least, life in prison. It is like a medieval times spectacle, so there will be a lot of people there wanting to see what this is all about, for themselves. Please understand that when you are memorizing the area and paths to safety, you must have this drawn out to perfection in your mind. What could she be wearing, and can you change it, and quickly? Will she have handcuffs on or shackles or both? How will you get them off, and when will that happen? Will she have enough energy? If not, what can you do about that in very little time? Every moment must be planned out and planned to perfection, with plans B and C in reserve for every turn if needed. There is absolutely no room for errors or even apprehension. Your thoughts and decisions must be split-second moves."

"She has had the same training as you all, so use that to your advantage. She may be weaker than

you energy wise, but she will remember her training and be able to act quickly.”

The rads were still silent, looking to one another, contemplating all that was going on and all they were hearing from Arden. Fearful, but determined to succeed. It was all they had left. They either succeeded or they didn’t survive it. They all agreed that no one would return to the new Earth without Aleah. They were a team. All for one and one for all. Could they get locked up or killed, they wondered. Yes, they believed they could, but they were willing to take the risk. She was worth it. They were all worth it, and they refused to do this without her.

Julian was rocking in his chair, staring at the table, memorizing the layout, and hoping that going to the site would calm their nerves and solidify their plans. He knew they would only get one shot at this, and it was vital to get it right without a hitch.

Kelten was also studying the table and now had it down pat. Leaning on the table with his elbows out to each side, he rested his chin on his hands, playing the rescue scenes out in his mind from every angle possible. Seeing it in person, getting the counts down, and selecting their paths to safety would solidify the plan.

Turning to the rads, Kelten proceeded to rouse them up. “Guys, I am feeling confident about this. We do need to see this in person, get the counts down, and the layout and scenes perfectly pictured, though. I have no doubt we can do this. Flawlessly. Remember the game we played, going through a city, unnoticed, encountering various traps and tragedies? We can conquer this quest. Are you with me?” Kelten looked at each of his friends and saw only complicity on their faces as they raised their

hands in the rad salute. They were ready to go, and as confident and determined as Kelten was.

Arden was in awe, watching them. His pride in them flipped his heartbeat to double speed. These chosen ones were the epitome of strength, resolve, intellectual wonder, and deep-seated love for one another. It can't get more powerful than this, he thought

Isabel returned with enough food for an army again, and a list of what she thought they might need for their reconnaissance tonight. "Everyone, grab some food, and dig in." Settling in a seat herself, she continued. "I made a list today of what I thought you might need for your venture tonight. I know you don't have a change of clothes with you, but I have some black pants and shirts that should fit the girls, as well as plenty of dark sweaters and sweatshirts. You guys should be okay, except for Derek's light blue jeans. I think Arden has some black sweatpants or cargo pants you can have, and he also has dark sweaters and sweatshirts, which are available for anyone who wants them. It is cold out there, so take what you need. You don't want to make any of this harder than it needs to be. In other words, don't expend any more energy than necessary trying to stay warm while you are doing this trial." Looking over her list, Isabel sitting next to Arden, began to eat. Looking at the rads sitting with them, she smiled. enjoying every moment they had together. It was a refreshing feeling of home. One she has dearly missed since the event.

Finishing their meals, Isabel took the remnants and dishes to the kitchen. Arden grabbed all that they wanted from the other parts of the house or garage, trying to minimize their exposure to the

Morac until they left for their trial run, while the rads changed their clothes.

Upon Arden's return, the rads took stock of the gathered equipment they wanted to take with them. Isabel had returned with black sweatpants for Derek and placed them on the table. Arden had revealed a bathroom in the bunker that the rads had not previously found. The door was a hidden panel, undetected unless you were carefully looking at each seam in the wall. Ducking into the bathroom, Derek quickly changed his pants for their masked venture. Joining the others, they looked like black-clad ninjas, ready to blend into the night.

"Guys, it looks like your cloaking is working for now, but rest assured, they know you're here. They also know you've altered your signatures enough to avoid detection so far. That means they are working nonstop to figure out your new signatures and then control and manipulate tomorrow's event and your plans, to ensure this goes down as they want it to.

"I thought about that, Mr. Bratley," Ethan stated.

"Arden, please Ethan. You are like a son to me, and Mr. is way too formal."

"Thank you, Mr. Bratley, er Arden, I appreciate that. We have the utmost respect for you, and we are grateful for all that you have done to help us. Thank you," Ethan bowed just a hair to indicate his solid appreciation.

The rads all followed in a strong, heartfelt, and unified sound of thanks. Julian reached out to hug his dad, showing him just how unwavering his love and respect still are.

"So, I anticipated they would realize our deception when they first tried to find us on the old Earth. I believed that would give us the night,

anyway. Then I assumed we would need to do the altering just a little differently again today, in hopes of staying one step ahead of them. I have it mapped out for us to adjust each of our energies with a little distinct minor move each day, for as long as it takes.”

“That is brilliant, Ethan, and not surprising to us that you thought ahead like that. You are all so highly intelligent and wonderfully advanced in every way. Isabel and I are so proud of you all. We love you all so very much and have every faith that you will succeed in everything, including this feat of getting Aleah back safe, sound, and on your terms.”

The rads grinned, thankful for the confidence a scientist of that caliber was affording them.

All right, rads, let’s get it together and get out the door. We have a lot to accomplish tonight for a big day tomorrow,” Kelten exclaimed, clapping his hands in a hop to command.

“Dad, what car should we take, or should we? If the Moracs are watching the house, staying cloaked is not going to help us when driving a car out of the garage in front of them.”

“That’s correct, and we already thought about that. Your mother left a rental car on the street three blocks over, behind the house. She parked, walked to the end of the fourth block, and I picked her up. You will need to go out the back, go through the woods, and hop the fences to retrieve it. It is registered to a shell company owned by a trust, making it untraceable should you get stopped. Make up a story of being on a business or pleasure trip with your friends, and just agree to any ticket, using this license we created for you. So Julian, you must drive. We only have insurance on one driver and that license. That should allow you to stay cloaked and

move with ease. You will need to move from the park to each safety location and then to the new Earth jump point. So, place the car where you need it, and hike back to the park from there. Leave it wherever you want, either before or at your jump point, but realize that the Morac will expect you to be at the jump point once you have Aleah. I have IDs for all of you in case you get stopped tonight or tomorrow; your real name will not be known. Memorize your temporary names and addresses, also which high school you go to. You know the mundane facts that can trip you up.”

Isabel handed Julian the keys and then stepped back, allowing the rads to enter the tunnel and trudge determinedly back to the basement floor.

It had been quickly decided who would carry what, so they each grabbed their assigned items and exited the bunker into the tunnel.

The rads weren’t worried right now; they were excited to get this plan in motion to get Aleah back. They had gathered their energy together, changed their signatures again, and stored their memories and thoughts behind their fortress, ready to face any force of nature or evil. They felt strong, protected, and united in their fortitude to get this done. Flawlessly. With all of them on the mission and zeroed in on their task, no one had a speck of doubt that they could do this. That they would do this, and do it well.

Exiting the back door, the cold temperature hit them in the face, normally giving them a shock check, but no one reacted. They were so focused on the mission, the cold air didn’t even register in their thoughts. Of course, layering their clothing with sweaters, sweatshirts, and sweatpants certainly helped. They also all had hoods or knit hats covering

them, attempting to blend into the dark enveloping night. The girls all had their hair up in knotted but flattened buns, tucked under their hats, and brought what they needed in anticipation of doing the same to Aleah's hair, deciding to do a mock run of tomorrow's event tonight.

They quickly but carefully crossed the backyard, entering the woods, all while studiously observing their surroundings nonstop, fearing the ever-searching Morac may see them. Their adamant stance to elude their hunters was foremost on their minds, keeping them vigilant and carefully avoiding an encounter.

"Guys, we need to jump two fences. Are you ready?" Julian asked in a loud whisper, indicating ahead of them with his outstretched arm and pointing fingers.

The rads whispered agreement and moved forward, sticking close to the trees. Each rad moved to a different tree, blending into the night, masking a group moving through the woods. No one should notice anything going on other than the norm.

Stopping just before the first fence and still in the tree line, they all looked at Kelten and Julian. Kelten signaled to the rads that each of them would go to the fence one at a time, jump up to grab the top, and then push with their feet to swing up over it. Derek went first so he could help catch the girls coming down on the other side if needed. His move was very quick and easy. All the physical training they have been through shows how well developed physically they have become.

Qita was the next to go. She ran up to the fence, jumped high, grabbed the top, and swung herself over so fast she couldn't slow her momentum coming down on the other side. She didn't even

climb and push up with her feet. She had that much strength in her arms and abs to do it alone. She made it look just as easy as Derek had. The force was so powerful, though, that it pushed her to the ground on the other side, propelling her forward and making it hard for her to stop the momentum. Derek stood to the side of the landing and grabbed her around the waist before she face-planted.

“Thanks, Derek, I think I used more power than I needed to. I’d better tone it down a bit on the next fence,” she hoarsely laughed in a whisper, imagining herself on the ground face-first.

Derek laughed in a whisper, too, picturing Qita eating dirt as well. “Yeah, I will as well, because I did the same thing and couldn’t stop myself. I was on my feet, but then had to take two steps forward and still fell to the ground, unable to stop the drive. They both laughed quietly as Ethan was the next one over the fence.

“Whoa,” Ethan exhaled on his landing, also finding it hard to stop his forward push. Derek grabbed him quickly, avoiding another face plant.

“Thanks for the assist, Derek!”, Ethan whispered, almost a yell somehow.

Derek laughed again, still seeing Qita in the dirt and Ethan now beside her. “No worries, it appears that we are a powerful group. I’m willing to bet that Kelten, Julian, Lydia, and Em do the same thing.”

“What’s the wager?” Ethan asked, always willing to play the games.

“Ah, you have to do my laundry for two weeks, or I yours.”

“Deal,” Ethan replied just as Em came over the fence with too much momentum.

“Ah, so far it’s looking good for your detail,” Derek smirked.

Kelten was next, needing Derek's help, but Lydia landed almost perfectly. She didn't need to be grabbed or slowed, but was still a little wobbly, swinging her arms as a countermeasure for balance. Derek reached out to steady her just in case she lost the battle.

"Okay, that is not the same, but not a loss either. I think even if Em and Julian need assistance, this is a stalemate." Ethan looked at Derek for agreement just as Emmalia came whipping over the wall, needing Derek's help.

Julian was right behind her, too close to not slam into Em and Derek, stopping his motion.

"I concede," Derek quietly uttered.

"What?" Kelten whispered in a questioning tone, not knowing about Ethan and Derek's bet. Kelten, looking around, realized they were all standing together, a prime target for detection. "Disperse to the trees, he hoarsely whispered in an urgent, fearful tone.

Each rad moved quickly to their nearest unoccupied tree and quietly waited for the next order to move. Their furtive glances remained vigilant on the lookout for detection, understanding they had made a grave error by being in one group. Any sign of the Morac would be a panic trigger.

Julian stealthily moved over to Kelten to converse about their trek.

He came up behind Kelten and noted he was totally absorbed in searching the surroundings for any movement. Placing a hand on his shoulder, he felt Kelten startle, realizing he didn't hear him approach. "Kelten, we have to keep moving, and quickly. We only have so much time, and I don't know how big an area we need to memorize and

rehearse, or if there will be other people there to avoid. So, can we get moving?”

“Ah, ah of.. of course,” Kelten stammered, and his hands were shaking again. “Julian, you stay last, and I will lead us to the next fence.”

“I know I have a shocked face right now, Kelten, but we need to talk about some things as soon as we get back to the bunker,” Julian advised.

“What are you talking about?” Kelten returned. He had no idea what Julian was appearing to be shocked about, and put the questions aside in his mind to concentrate on their mission right now. Shaking his head in obvious discord with Julian’s comment, he motioned to the group to move forward, keeping to the trees as much as possible, like they had discussed before they ventured out.

Kelten led them to the next jump, and Derek came up to a tree close to him. Kelten whispered “repeat”, knowing he would understand. He wanted him to go first over the fence and help the others like the first jump.

Derek obliged, and Kelten was second to go. Derek didn’t have to stop Kelten this time. He had the climb and momentum down, landing perfectly.

All the rads following had perfect landings. It was a textbook worthy moment, revealing their adaptability, memory, energy, and body adjustments to be at their finest. The jump gave all of them a boost in confidence. It reduced their worries of success, but also stunted their vigilance of risk, which could be their undoing, and Julian was worried about that. Nothing could go wrong if they wanted to rescue Aleah.

Just after the last fence jump, they all paused, solid as statues, watching and listening for any other movement. Quiet. Vigilant. Cautious. No one

appeared nervous except for Kelten. He still had trembling hands, and Julian would bet his stuttering was intact, too. This was not good, and they would need to get to the bottom of it as soon as possible upon their return to the house. It could mean something. Something terrible, even.

Kelten, satisfied they were alone, waved his arm to signal they should move forward. He led the way, and Julian stayed in place to be the final one in the group. They moved quickly, silently, and stealthily toward the car. They ran one at a time through an alley, darting for cover when they could. They stuck close to trees or houses, whatever they could to avoid being in the open, privy to prying eyes.

Reaching the car, they jumped inside, one after the other, and attuned their energies with one another before taking off down the road. They felt safe so far, but they were also aware of the Morac's power. They were afraid, and rightly so.