

Harmony

Parallel Planes, #2

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Chapter 1

Floods and Probes

Two Years and Ninety-Six Days Before the GRC's Investigation into the Air Division's System Breach

Flashes of lightning sparked so brightly that the night sky lit up like midday, and the vast mountainside glistened with every burst. The relentless tapping of raindrops on the vibrant green canopy of towering trees and lush underbrush nearly drowned out the claps of thunder. Along the mountain range, the rainfall had formed small rivers, carrying sediment, storm-whipped leaves, and broken branches toward the valley below. One bit of good news: the forest was so drenched that the lightning strikes didn't set the trees ablaze. The other: the storm was passing, and soon the routine cleanup and recovery process could begin.

Kaye Mountainview sat on the hard wooden floor, motionless and unfazed by the torrential downpour. Heavy rains were as common as sunshine this time of year. Besides, she loved the smell of rain—the way the scent of jasmine and citrus carried on the air, and how the crisp, salty breezes from the nearby sea mixed with the raindrops. The blanket of humidity was comforting to Kaye and her four companions—her coati companion, Star; her best friend, Ace; her brother, Burke; and their cousin, affectionately nicknamed “String Bean” or “Bean” because, by age twelve, his then one-hundred-twenty-pound frame stood at six-foot-two.

While she enjoyed the soothing patter of rainstorms as much as Kaye did, Ace couldn't help but jump with each spark of lightning and clap of thunder. It wasn't the sound but the anticipation that caused her to flinch. Although nestled so close to Kaye that they seemed attached at the shoulder, Ace's twitchiness didn't disturb her best friend or the furry animal curled up across their laps. With a disposition that mirrored her human companion, Star

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slept peacefully through the storm. The coati knew she couldn't be any safer than when she was with Ace and the three cousins.

Next to Star, Bean fidgeted in his sleep. He had wedged himself between Kaye and Ace, one arm stretched across Kaye's calves and the other resting on Ace's knee. Bean and Ace had been best friends since they met in a training session ten years ago. It had been one of her free days, and Ace had attended the training on a whim. As she left the session, she collided with Bean, who was doubled over with laughter from one of Burke's comedic accounts of his most recent adventure. While Burke continued to entertain the other students, Bean was intrigued to follow the one person in the group who hadn't been captivated by Burke's dramatic tale. He caught up with Ace before she disappeared into a nearby crowd. When he asked why she hadn't stayed to hear the rest of the story, she simply replied that she wanted to get to the sea before dusk to watch the sunset. She asked if he wanted to join her—so he did. Her buoyant and affable manner was a magnet for Bean, who was typically intense and reserved. The pair quickly found that their polarity made for a dynamic partnership, resulting in them teaming up on every vocational assignment that came their way, including several research trips abroad.

Another flash of lightning illuminated the night, and Ace flinched again. As he had done for the last few hours, Burke squeezed her hand and smiled. Burke and Ace had been practically inseparable since the day Bean introduced them. If Ace was buoyant, Burke was unsinkable. He found joy in everything around him. The sound of the rain was percussive artistry to his ears. The flashes of lightning were radiant threads of light to his eyes. The feel of the heavy humidity was like a blanket of warmth and comfort to his skin. The slight pressure of Ace's hand when she held his was sunlight to his soul. The unfamiliar fourteen-by-fourteen hut where they'd taken shelter to wait out the storm was their home.

"The storm is passing. Do you want to gear up?" asked Kaye.

"No. I want to sleep until daybreak," answered Bean.

As the clouds cleared, white moonlight broke through the slate sky. A sliver of light fell on Burke's face. Ace looked at Burke's kind brown eyes and marveled at how his gaze always looked equal parts innocent and mischievous—and now, a hundred percent exhausted. The storm had kept everyone except Star and Bean awake.

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“A few hours of sleep would be really nice,” Ace said.

Kaye looked at the moon’s position and estimated they had about five hours until dawn. A glance at her tablet confirmed it. “All right. We have about five hours, but I think we should try to get an early start before the rest of the settlement begins stirring.”

“Sounds perfect,” said Burke as he rustled around the structure. Eventually, he retrieved a stack of blankets from a small cupboard and distributed them. After a few moments of nesting, everyone had found a comfortable spot on the floor of the hut. Blankets served as pallets and makeshift pillows, and the steady but softer drops of rain lulled everyone who had been kept awake by the storm. Reclining between Bean and Star, Kaye fell asleep in less than a minute. Next to her, Ace was wedged under Star with her head propped on Burke’s shoulder. The family of five slumbered peacefully as the constant rainfall saturated the hillside.

Four hours passed, and the warm night slowly gave way to dawn. Burke chuckled in his sleep as he reached to search the space around him. He ran his hand along Ace’s side, then nudged the coati.

“I think Star just peed on us,” Burke told no one in particular. Then he sat upright, the grogginess immediately dissipating.

The hut was rapidly filling with steadily rising water. Burke seemed shocked to see everyone, including Star, still sleeping.

“Uh, time to get up,” Burke said as he shook Ace, Star, Kaye, and Bean.

Confused and disoriented, Kaye awoke first. “Oh,” was all she could say as she looked down to see her knees submerged. She tapped Bean on the shoulder, and he slowly woke up.

“Oh,” Bean echoed.

“Glad you two are on the same page,” Burke said with a laugh. “Ace, you up for an early morning dip?”

Ace let out a long, tired sigh. “Kaye, I guess I’m ready to gear up now.” She lifted the snoozing Star as she stood. By stretching out on top of Ace and the cousins, the coati had managed to stay dry and asleep—and was none too pleased to be woken up. Star whimpered and fussed as Ace handed her to Kaye.

Kaye cuddled Star as she tracked the position of the moon. “It’s still an hour before daybreak. You certain you don’t want to sleep a little longer?” she asked with a smile.

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“No, seriously. If we head to the West Tower, we can probably find somewhere to rest. Besides, we can’t do much else until the water subsides.”

Bean yawned and stretched. “Sounds like a plan. Let’s see how high the water level is and how fast it’s moving,” he said, his voice colored with grogginess and grumpiness.

Burke peered out the window to gauge the water flow. “Huh,” he said with a smile as he watched the water rushing around the hut. Without hesitation, he opened the window and climbed out. Soft droplets flattened his sand-colored hair as he stepped onto the windowsill and used one of several horizontal bars attached to the exterior wall to pull himself to the top of the small structure.

The moonlight was still bright, and he could make out the rapid streams of water flowing from every point along the mountainside. The tone of every swish and gurgle told Burke what he needed to know. He swung down from the roof and landed back in the hut with a splash. He’d only been gone two minutes, and the water inside was already waist-deep.

“Bundle Star up. We’ll have to climb on the roof and wait it out—or swim.”

Ace climbed onto the windowsill and pulled herself up to the roof. “Let’s wait it out. I don’t trust this current.”

Kaye handed Star to Bean and joined Ace on the roof. A moment later, Bean and Burke followed, Bean carrying their satchels and Burke carrying Star piggyback. The soft moonlight allowed a clear view of the surrounding area, and from their perch atop the small hut, they could see the water level still rising.

Several more huts were sparsely located nearby, but there was no sign of any other people or animals. This was expected—these huts were used as temporary shelter from inclement weather. At this time of night, everyone would be in residences or vocational structures, not caught out in a rainstorm. That said, it was easy to get caught in the rain—it was monsoon season, after all.

That evening, Bean and Ace had accompanied Kaye and Burke on a scouting assignment, and they were delayed when Kaye took a detour to explore some caves. They had hoped to make it back to the residences before the rain picked up, but the weather was always hard to predict. The group had figured they’d need to find shelter at some point—and they did—but they hadn’t expected another flash flood.

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Flash floods, thunderstorms, tornadoes, and hurricanes were regular occurrences around the globe. Depending on the location and geological characteristics, so were sandstorms, earthquakes, tidal surges, and even volcanic activity. Navigating the perils of volatile and often threatening atmospheric, geological, and oceanic conditions was a way of life—and sometimes death—for the populations that inhabited this world. Tremendous amounts of time and energy had to be dedicated to survival and routinely rebuilding everything that the frequent and intense natural disasters laid to waste. But it was the moments in between that made all the difference.

Ace looked up at the billowy sky. The rain had almost stopped completely. The remaining tiny droplets carried by the wind felt like a fine mist drifting through the mugginess. The scent of lavender, cedar, and citrus swirled through the heavy air and left them all in a dreamy state. Ace sat with her feet dangling over the side of the hut, the steady current covering her ankles. The water was tepid, and the current passing over her feet was gentle and relaxing. She inhaled deeply and let the moisture in the air soothe the tickle in her throat. Bean and Kaye lay next to her, staring up at the cloudy sky, while Burke and Star kept watch.

Ace took notice of how the water moved around the huts, then reached into her satchel to retrieve her tablet. She entered a few notes and took out a small rod. She dipped it into the water and studied the readings on her tablet.

“I’m going to suggest to the builders a modification to the hut structure. Their square shape gives them sturdiness, but a narrower design would reduce water and wind resistance.”

“What about a pyramid?” Bean asked. “The precipitation would flow right down.”

“Yeah, but if this structure were a pyramid, where would we be right now?” Ace asked with a smile.

“Where we’re headed anyway,” Burke said, urgency in his voice. “Grab your things and jump!”

Ace and the cousins turned to see a wall of water swallow the hut farthest to the east. Less than two hundred feet away, the first of the remaining two structures between theirs and the murky wave disappeared.

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They threw their satchels over their shoulders and grabbed the two straps attached to the base of their bags. Burke did a quick check of the satchels' placement on everyone's back.

"When you go over the side, remember to stay below the roofline, and make sure your satchel strap is secured to the bars on the west side of the building. And stay submerged until you feel the rush subside." He kissed his sister and Ace on the forehead, scooped Star into his arms, and leapt. The cloudy tan water lurched up around him, and he waited to hear three large splashes.

Burke almost lost the breath he was holding when he saw that Kaye, Ace, and Bean were already strapped in beside him. Of course they were. This wasn't their first flood. It wasn't even their first this month—though it was the largest and fastest onset so far. They all held on, the straps of their satchels drawn taut as the water fought against metal and canvas to drag them westward. He looked down when he felt Star struggling against him. Burke could barely make out her long snout in the dim light, but he could feel her nose nudge his chin. He just needed to hold her a few seconds longer. The damp crackling of water slapping against the side of the building and the pressure of the current told him Star would be carried off in a violent flurry if he let go.

A second later, the water's pull lessened dramatically as the swell moved beyond them. He released his grip on Star, who hurried to the surface. A very good swimmer, Star quickly made her way to the nearest tree trunk. An even better climber, she immediately ascended to a branch well clear of the flooded path below. There, she waited until she saw four heads bob up through the murky stream.

"OK, I think I see where Star is," Kaye said, pulling her sand-colored, sediment-filled hair from her face.

"Next time, we should consider climbing trees," Burke said with a laugh as he surveyed the scene. The tops of all the huts were completely submerged.

"No kidding," said Kaye, stripping the grit from her debris-matted strands.

Ace looked east. The forest and eastern hillside were silhouetted by a soft amber glow. Dawn was finally breaking.

"We'll be right back."

Ace and Bean dove beneath the standing water and resurfaced several minutes later.

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“This structure held, but most of the others didn’t,” Bean announced.

The four shared a knowing look.

“We’d better get back to the residences,” said Bean.

In an instant, Ace and the cousins began swimming along the flood’s westward flow—which, unfortunately, was precisely in the direction of the residences. Star followed from above, agilely darting from branch to branch and tree to tree along their route.

Their travel was almost effortless as they moved with the current. Several white-and-gray seagulls flew above them, headed in the same direction. The sun was bright enough now that Ace could make out the birds’ yellow beaks. The glimmering sunlight reflected on something just above the gliding gulls. It was difficult to make out in the light, but the way the sun hit it made its presence unmistakable.

It was a small floating sphere.

No. It was a flock of small floating spheres.

“Do you see that?” asked Ace.

Kaye narrowed her eyes to get a better look. “Yeah. It looks like a formation of bubbles.”

Burke stopped and treaded against the stormflow. “Why would bubbles be in a formation?”

“Most likely some new weather measurement devices they’ve cooked up to sample air components and wind characteristics,” said Bean, stopping next to Burke.

“Possibly, but we’d probably have seen them in the lab—or Alexander would’ve mentioned something. Don’t you think?” said Ace.

“Probably, yeah. This is something else,” Bean agreed as he resumed swimming.

A far-off rumbling quickly grew louder, and they looked back east to see another surge of water headed their way. The next thousand feet between them and the residences were free of trees, large rocks, and structures—so at least they could ride the currents for most of the distance. For several yards, they let the floodwaters accelerate their return. It had been raining for twelve consecutive days, so they were hardly surprised by what they saw when they arrived.

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On the hillside, morning dew clung to the white and pink flowers of the blooming trees that grew along the slopes, while seagulls glided overhead. Iridescent blue hummingbirds hovered around intense orange-red blooms arranged like tiny bouquets along a string of deep green shrubs. In the valley, flocks of green and yellow parakeets were accompanied by brilliant turquoise and red parrots as they took advantage of the clumps of spilled seeds and grains that blanketed the racing floodwater.

Kaye chewed her bottom lip. The seed storehouse and the granary weren't all that had been demolished by the flash flood. Nearly everything was submerged—and before them, where the residences had been, lay pure devastation.