



D A R & EARTH  
O R A C U L I



ATHENA M. KAIMAN

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EPILOGUE

# THE MISSION

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2018 9:00 AM

**A**ELISH STOOD IN the Great Rotunda of Peace before the Head Council of DAR. The Rotunda was as imposing as the first time she had entered it, so many years ago. The marble dome's hand-carved, historical scenes depicting the legendary figures of DAR towered above her.

The Head Council was seated on the elevated U-shaped dais known as the Arc of Leadership. Aelish remained poised before them, a solitary figure with at least five thousand citizens of DAR in attendance. The citizens at her back observed the proceedings from marble benches in the multitude of tiered, curved rows under the monumental dome. Her brocade gown was partially obscured by her green velvet cape. Her long red hair was secured by her signature fishtail braid and hung down the back of her cape.

“Congratulations on attaining the position of Oraculi,” said the Council Chair, with a bit of whimsy in her voice. She smiled toward the citizens upon hearing the appreciative low murmur of laughter echoing throughout the Chamber. It was rare for them to witness a living legend before the Head Council.

Aelish bowed her head and smiled at the Council Chair. She had the greatest respect for Melanthia, since first meeting her as a child—their bond now unbreakable.

The Council Chair continued in a more serious tone, “Have you been keeping a steady watch over the twelve-year-old Human female child named Isabela? The Council has observed she is in rapid decline both in attitude and motivation.”

“Yes, Council Chair. I can see that the obstacles confronting her are beginning to overwhelm her. I feel we have miscalculated the appropriate

time for she and I to meet. With the Council's permission, I feel it is in her best interests if I leave when the sun is directly overhead," suggested Aelish.

"Hmm . . . do we all agree?" asked the Council Chair.

Seated in the center most powerful position on the dais, Melanthia looked left and right toward the other Council Members. The eight other females that comprised the Head Council of DAR nodded in unison.

"Very well, then. Do you fully understand the gravity of what we are attempting to achieve through your responsibilities as an Oraculi to a Human child?" asked Melanthia.

Aelish firmly nodded and continued to pay close attention to the Council Chair.

"We cannot afford to lose this young girl as she is presenting an extraordinary aptitude for science. You must nurture and imbue the child with the necessary confidence for her to succeed in this branch of knowledge. You must prevent her from becoming consumed by the severe obstacles in her life, which in turn could derail her from reaching her fullest potential. She also demonstrates deep compassion, an attribute we always cherish.

"Your supervision of the Environmental Commission and their most recent report, demonstrates that the Earth is nearing devolution. This has caused consternation for the Head Council. As an Oraculi, your primary responsibilities are to the Human child. But it is crucial you report to the Head Council any transformations you observe since your last trip to Earth. The Council must be prepared for the impending crisis. We need dedicated Human scientists that are not only highly educated, but are also emotionally capable of withstanding the repercussions of this turning point. We must never again be caught off-guard, as we were in the last millennium. Based on this report, we expect to be facing even greater devastation," said the Council Chair.

"I understand the importance, Council Chair," said Aelish. Aelish felt her stomach flutter with nerves and anticipation. But she was confident the unprecedented policy she was about to initiate would be successful.

"Excellent. The Head Council wishes you safe travels and the best of magic. Please let us know if there is anything you need while you are in the

Human world. If you encounter any problems, we will of course send assistance,” concluded the Council Chair.

Aelish nodded, signaling her understanding that her audience with the Head Council was finished. Demonstrating the utmost of respect, she began walking backward. When she was the proper distance from the Council she turned around and faced the audience. She heard a groundswell of applause and made her way up the steep aisle to the exit. The Guards of the Rotunda opened both sets of enormously heavy wooden doors. She walked past them, outside, into the sunlight.

Once back home, Aelish packed her supplies and stuffed them into her flypack. She carefully retrieved the most important item from its place of safekeeping. The white linen pouch had yellowed over the years, but the item was still secure. She tucked it inside the bodice of her traveling gown, keeping it close to her heart.

She took a last look through her Earth Capsule Viewer. She watched Isabela’s father and brother gently lower her mother onto the hospital bed in their new home. Aelish deeply sighed, as tears streamed down her face. She wiped them away with the back of her hands and pushed the Viewer deep inside her flypack. Her mission was going to be very hard, indeed.

## SKIPPING CHURCH

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2018 9:00 AM

ISABELA WOKE UP and was momentarily disoriented. As reality replaced her dreams, she felt sad.

*Will I ever get used to waking up in my new room in this new house? Oh, no . . . and tomorrow, a new school. This is never going to feel like home.*

Abuela's cooking seemed to refute her thoughts, as the familiar aroma of beef enchiladas enveloped her bedroom. Then she remembered why Abuela was cooking at eight in the morning—there was a festival at their new church today after mass.

Isabela was desperate to skip church today. She was not allowed to, unless she was very sick. With the exception of her mother, her family had attended mass for the first time at the new church last Sunday. Nothing about it felt remotely similar to the one she had left behind in the city where she was born.

She turned over onto her side and looked at the beautiful picture window in her room. It had plantation shutters, which were now closed, allowing only the smallest amount of light into the room. Her bedroom faced the backyard and had a view of the pool. She had always dreamed of having an in-ground pool, but somehow it did nothing to alleviate her sadness.

Her old room was definitely not as grand, but she missed it terribly. She closed her eyes and tried to remember L.A., but the sounds were different. Other than Abuela making noise in the kitchen, it was so quiet.

Her family had spent most of the last week in a hotel by the Nashville airport while they waited for the moving truck to arrive. Her father had been distressed because the physical accommodations had been very hard on her mother. For that reason alone, Isabela was relieved to finally be in their new house and out of that depressing hotel.



There were boxes everywhere, but at least the tall wardrobes with metal rods had been easy to find. They contained her hanging clothes, which had gone straight into her closet. Unfortunately, she had to search all over the house for the boxes that harbored the rest of her clothes that belonged in her dresser. She spent all day yesterday unpacking—carefully hanging up and refolding everything. Her clothes were wrinkled and smelled of cardboard, but if she held them up against her nose, they still smelled of home.

She couldn't believe how fast Abuela had unpacked, washed, and put away all the kitchen items. There were so many boxes labeled KITCHEN that the movers had to stack them to the ceiling. But Abuela had finished it all in two days. She had even found time to go to the grocery store and last night she cooked the family's first dinner in their new house. And now she was cooking trays of enchiladas for the church festival.

Isabela marveled at Abuela's strength, energy, and focus. She knew she was going to get quite an earful about not wanting to go to church today. The priest had come by yesterday to bless their new house, but Isabela did not feel blessed. She knew she should be grateful for her family arriving safely after their cross-country move, but she just felt sad and exhausted. She could have stayed in bed the whole day.

She was repositioning her covers to try and sleep a little longer, when Abuela cheerfully burst into her room, "Buenos días, nieta, estás bien?"

"Sí, Abuela. Your cooking smells so good," said Isabela, stretching.

Abuela opened the plantation shutters as Isabela hid under the covers from the light and the day to come. Abuela began looking for her under the covers. It was a game they had played since Isabela was very little.

"Dónde estás, Izzy?" laughed Abuela.

Isabela kept squirming and going deeper and deeper under the covers. She also began laughing, as she ran out of mattress and began falling onto the floor. She had played this silly game with Abuela since she was in her first real bed. Despite now being twelve, it always brought a smile to her face.

"Ay! I found you!" exclaimed Abuela. She began kissing Isabela's face all over. Abuela sat on the floor against the bed with Isabela. She turned to look at her granddaughter. "You look so tired, nieta—and you look like you want to tell me something. Qué pasa?"

Isabela could never understand how her grandmother always knew when she was worried about something. Isabela sighed.

“I don’t want to tell you because you are going to get angry and I love you and I don’t want you to get upset.”

“Let’s go, tell me,” instructed Abuela.

“I don’t want to go to church today,” said Isabela, not looking at Abuela’s face.

When there was no response she turned and saw Abuela rubbing her face. Abuela always rubbed her face when something was troubling her.

*Please don’t be angry and let me stay home.*

“Por favor, Abuela? I am so tired and nervous about my first day of school tomorrow. I want to be with Mom and just stay home. I know you will be at the festival all afternoon. I could get dinner ready for us?” pleaded Isabela, trying to sweeten her request.

“You know I don’t like us to miss church, nieta, especially with your mother so ill,” said Abuela, tears forming in her eyes. “I feel it is very important we demonstrate our devotion to God by attending church each week. We’ve had so much upheaval in the last month and we need Padre and the members of our new church to pray for us.”

“I understand,” sighed Isabela, resigned.

“Let’s sit on the bed and talk, before I’m not able to get up from the floor.”

Abuela extended her arm so Isabela could help pull her up. It was moments like this when Isabela realized Abuela was getting older. She couldn’t bear to think of it. Abuela had always been the constant presence in her life and she could not imagine living in a world without Abuela by her side. They settled themselves onto the bed and Abuela held Isabela’s face in her hand.

“All right, mi amor. Only this Sunday, okay?” said Abuela, as she kissed the top of Isabela’s head.

“Gracias, Abuela,” said Isabela, hugging her grandmother. “I love you so much, thank you for letting me stay home.”

“I need you to do some other things while I’m gone, besides preparing dinner,” said Abuela, in a serious tone. “Can you change your mother’s sheets and give her the medicines at the right time? I also need you to finish unpacking your mother’s things. Your father did not get to it yesterday. I

want their room to be finished by tonight, so he doesn't have to worry about it. I think he is also nervous about starting his new position tomorrow."

"Yes, of course," agreed Isabela. She couldn't believe she was free from having to face all those nosy people at church, who already knew of her family's circumstances.

"I mean it," Abuela said sternly. "I will not be happy if you do not finish everything I have asked you to do."

"I will, I promise," said Isabela.

"Okay, go wake up your brother and tell him to be ready to leave for church with me and your father in thirty minutes," instructed Abuela. "I have to go and check on your mother and make sure your father is awake as well."

Isabela gave Abuela a big hug and a kiss, before going to wake up her brother. She was relieved and almost felt the stirrings of normalcy, as she gently knocked on her brother's bedroom door.

She opened it slowly and peered around the door whispering, "Javier? Javi? Are you awake?"

Javier moaned and began to yawn loudly.

"What is it, Izzy? What time is it? I keep waiting for the traffic sounds to wake me up, but there aren't any," complained Javier.

"I know. The quiet is so loud I can barely sleep," Isabela agreed. She pushed opened the door and stood inside Javier's bedroom.

"Why aren't you dressed for church?" asked Javier, looking at her pajamas.

Isabela took a moment to consider how to answer him. Javier had recently turned eighteen and looked like a grown man, but he could still act like a baby.

"Abuela said I don't have to go to church today," said Isabela.

Javier sat straight up in bed and yelled, "What? Why not? Why do I have to go?"

"I promised Abuela I would make dinner, change Mom's sheets, give her the medicines, and finish unpacking Mom's things," Isabela stated firmly, ready for him to sabotage her arrangement with Abuela.

"I would rather go to church," groaned Javier, as he flopped back onto the bed.

Isabela came over to the bed and sat down on the edge. Javier turned on his side to look at her.

“Are you as sad as I am?” asked Isabela. She could feel herself getting warm as she tried to stop the tears from coming.

“Of course, Izzy. I was supposed to be settled in at UCLA by now. Instead, I’m starting my training as a barista tomorrow—how do you *think* I feel?” asked Javier.

Isabela knew the money Javier was going to earn from his job would help defray the extra costs not covered by the family’s health insurance for their mother’s new medical treatments.

“I know, Javi, but UCLA will hold your place. It’s going to be so weird for me, starting a new school in the beginning of *October*. I’m actually glad you are still home with me. I know that’s very selfish, but it’s the truth,” sighed Isabela. “I would miss you so much.”

“Me too—come here.” Javier extended his arms beckoning Isabela for a hug.

As she hugged Javier, Isabela thought about all the sacrifices he had made for the family. Javier had packed up their old house with barely any help, he had deferred college for a year to take their mother for her treatments, and now he was lagging behind all his friends who were already ensconced at their new universities.

Javier remained with his family, trapped in this nightmare, when he could have been free. He was a very special person, an outstanding athlete, and had received a full baseball scholarship to UCLA. Isabela hoped she could be as amazing as her brother by the time she turned eighteen.

Their private moment of comforting each other was interrupted by Abuela shouting from the kitchen, “Javier! Come and eat something before we leave for church!”

“Ay,” grumbled Javier. “Let me get ready, Izzy. You better do all the things you promised Abuela or she is going to be so mad. Do *everything* she told you to.”

“It’s a lot of things. I hope I can finish them all,” said Isabela.

“Well you better, otherwise she is never going to let you miss church again,” warned Javier.

“I know, I know,” Isabela replied, already overwhelmed at what she had promised Abuela.

Isabela left the room so Javier could get dressed. She had looked up to her brother all her life. He was a talented and generous person. Despite being incredibly busy during high school with sports and his schoolwork, he had always made time for her, taking her bike riding or surfing. Isabela knew the one thing she and her brother would miss the most were the sunsets over the Pacific, after a day of getting knocked off their surfboards. She sighed and went to the kitchen to make her breakfast.

### 3

## MAKING MOM'S BED

ISABELA SAID GOODBYE to her father, Javier, and Abuela and began cleaning her cereal bowl. She went into the laundry room and grabbed a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved top folded in a laundry basket. After dressing, she gathered up the clean sheets for the hospital bed and headed toward her parents' bedroom.

She was beginning to feel like the hospital bed had always been in her parents' bedroom. It was becoming hard for her to remember a time when it *wasn't* there. Her mother had gotten sick around her tenth birthday and the last two years felt like her whole life.

She quietly opened the door and dropped the pillowcases and sheets on the bench at the foot of her parents' bed. Her mother was sleeping, but began to stir as Isabela approached the hospital bed. Isabela rested one hand on the rail and used the other to gently stroke her mother's face. She was careful not to disturb the woolen cap Abuela had knitted for her mother's bald head.

Her mother slowly opened her eyes. She turned her head and saw Isabela and began to smile.

"Hi, Mom, how are you feeling?" Isabela sweetly whispered.

"Better now that I can see my angel's face. Why aren't you dressed for church, sweetheart? I thought I heard everyone leave?" asked her mother, her breathing labored.

"Abuela let me stay home today so that I could spend some time with you. I need to change the sheets on your bed and give you your medicines after I'm finished," replied Isabela, still stroking her mother's face.

Her mother said with a weak laugh, "Well, at least you got something out of taking care of me."

“I really didn’t want to go to church today, Mom. All those new people . . . and I’m nervous about starting school tomorrow.”

“I understand, sweetheart. I’m sorry you’ve had to make so many changes and leave all your friends and cousins behind. Do you at least like your new room? I thought you’d like facing the pool. Can you believe we could afford a house with a pool?” asked her mother.

Isabela noted her mother’s speech was sluggish. She was so ill.

“The houses are much less expensive here in Brookdale than in L.A. I’m glad you finally got your pool. I hope we can go swimming together soon,” said her mother, weakly.

Isabela knew how unlikely that was to happen. But she was determined to be strong and not let her mother see the tears welling up in her eyes. She turned her head away from her mother, toward the bench where she had dropped the clean pillowcases and sheets.

“Are you ready to change the sheets now, Mom?” asked Isabela. She was anxious to begin Abuela’s list.

“Yes, my angel,” answered her mother.

“Let me get your pillowcases. We can start there,” directed Isabela.

Before getting the pillowcases, she moved the rolling hospital table away from the bed. Then she removed her mother’s cell phone from a small pouch that hung on the right rail of the hospital bed. She didn’t want it to get damaged during the process. Abuela had designed and sewn the pouch so her mother’s phone would always be securely accessible. The pouch prevented the phone from falling off the bed or hospital table. Isabela temporarily stuck it in the back pocket of her jeans.

There were many pillows on the bed. A nurse at the hospital in L.A. suggested they be put around her mother’s shoulders and arms so she wouldn’t hurt herself on the rails of the hospital bed. It was a wonderful suggestion and had made her mother much more comfortable.

As Isabela began pulling out the pillowcases tangled in the sheets, she asked her mother, “Do you need help getting to the commode before we start?”

“No, sweetheart. Your father helped me to the commode before he left for church. Then he helped me put on an adult diaper, since I thought you would all be gone for the day—with mass and the festival afterward. Who

knew I'd be in diapers before Abuela?" asked her mother, with a faint laugh.

Isabela started laughing. Her mother had always been the funniest person in the family and Isabela was happy she still had her sense of humor.

Isabela began removing the pillows and changing their cases one at a time, leaving her mother's head pillow for last. She temporarily placed them all on her parents' bed. Then she gently lifted up her mother's head and slid out the pillow.

"I know you're uncomfortable, Mom. I will change the sheets as fast as possible."

"Don't worry, honey. Let me know when you're ready and I will help as much as I can," said her mother.

Isabela had watched how the nurses at the hospital changed the sheets, while her mother remained *in* the bed. She'd asked them to teach her how to do it and was proud she had learned, as it was not easy. But it made her feel useful to her mother.

When she finished changing the case on her mother's head pillow, she gently removed her mother's blanket and top sheet, tossing them onto her parents' bed.

"This won't take long, Mom, I know you're cold," comforted Isabela. "Okay—you need to roll onto your right side and grab the right rail with your left arm. I will help you roll. You need to hold onto the rail and stay in that position, until I can pull off this side of the fitted sheet. Ready?"

Isabela helped her mother roll onto her right side, while at the same time pulling the elastic of the fitted sheet off the mattress. The mattress was about the same size as Isabela's bed. Once all the elastic was loose, she began scrunching the first half of the fitted sheet up against her mother's back.

"Okay, Mom, are you ready to turn toward the other side?"

This was the hardest part. Her mother had to roll over the scrunched up sheet against her back, so Isabela could pull it out from under her mother, onto the other side.

"Yes, sweetheart," said her mother.

Isabela helped her mother roll to the other side so her mother could grab onto the left rail. As her mother rolled over the fitted sheet, Isabela



simultaneously pulled the sheet out from under her mother and detached the elastic from the mattress.

“Stay like that, Mom, and let me get the clean sheet hooked onto this side of the mattress,” Isabela instructed.

She grabbed the clean sheet from the bench, secured the elastic, and scrunched up the balance against her mother’s back.

“Okay, Mom, last time.”

She helped her mother turn over one last time as she pulled the clean sheet from underneath her mother. Her mother had lost so much weight that pulling the sheet out from underneath her wasn’t very hard anymore. Isabela finished securing the clean fitted sheet onto the mattress and told her mother she could lie flat again. She briskly returned to the hospital bed with her mother’s head pillow.

“Whew, that was exhausting,” said her mother. “And to think I used to run half marathons.”

“You did great holding the rails, Mom. I couldn’t have done it without your strong arms,” complimented Isabela.

Isabela got the clean top sheet from the bench and began tucking it under the mattress. She grabbed the blanket she had thrown earlier onto her parents’ bed and placed it gently over her mother, also tucking it under the mattress. She knew her mother was cold and needed to warm up. Isabela finished the final step of repositioning all the extra pillows against the rails.

“I’m going to get your medicines now,” said Isabela. “But first, can I press the button that raises your head up? I always worry you’ll choke when you swallow your medicines if your head isn’t high enough.”

“Yes, my angel,” whispered her mother.

Isabela lifted up the head portion of the hospital bed. She could see her mother was utterly exhausted from the ordeal of changing the sheets. She rolled the hospital table back alongside the bed, checked to see that her mother’s cell phone was fully charged, and set the volume on the loudest setting. Then she placed the phone back inside the pouch.

By the time Isabela had returned with the medicines, her mother was asleep. Isabela pulled a chair over to sit with her. She would let her rest for thirty minutes since it was too early for her medicines anyway. She stared at her mother and couldn’t believe this was the same person she had gone to

Disneyland with for her tenth birthday. It had been the best vacation they ever had, and now it meant so much more.

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