

## 8 The Bow in the Clouds

He entered the café, and, apropos of nothing, sat down at one of the bistro tables before the host could seat him. Without a menu, he ordered sparkling water and lemon, three hard-fried eggs, two slices of buttered toast, and two slices of crunchy bacon. Even though it was 12PM, and the café didn't normally serve breakfast fare since it was a “lunch and dinner” restaurant, his waitress took his order with a smile and asked him how his day was.

“Good so far,” he replied, flashing a winning smile that still felt a little weird on his face, even though he had worked many years to earn that smile.

Many, many years.

Today was the first day of his vacation, and he was relishing every moment of it. He stretched his long legs, feeling his skin rub against the lamb's wool trousers, and placed his hands behind his neck for a long, vertical, cat-like stretch. He wiggled his toes in his soft leather shoes. The cotton shirt underneath his argyle sweater moved along the long arch of his back, and that felt good, too.

*Damn, it feels good to wear real, comfortable clothes for a change.*

He looked at his skin, a little pale under the light of a cool, rainy November day. He felt some of the filtered coolness through the café window hit his face and hands. In the summer, he'd be able to turn a slight shade of toasty tan, something he'd never been able to do when he was working, 24/7 on call. And when he wasn't on, he was in hurry-up-and-wait mode: waiting, waiting, waiting for the next assignment, the next mission.

Personally, he hated waiting, but it was part of his job. And, truth be told, he was grateful to have his job, especially experiencing the bum's life after being laid off the first and – God help him – only time. But even so, he hadn't had a break since... since...

He couldn't remember when he wasn't on the clock since his return. But even with his impatience at times, complaining was just not done. However, taking a vacation was not usually done, either, and so he was surprised when, out of nowhere, Central announced, via his commanding officer, “You need a vacation. Take some time off. The last thing We need is burnout.”

“Your order, sir.”

“Oooh, goody.”

The eggs, toast, and everything else were exactly how he liked them. Even the sparkling water with lemon had two slices of lemon and no ice in a standard pub pint glass – exactly how he liked it. He

wasn't surprised, although the waitress had a slightly confused look, as if to say, “Where did we find the pub glass?”

He tucked into his food, relishing the taste and texture of everything in his order. Hearty, real food for a change. None of the tasteless, malnourishing stuff that he'd had in the past or, as events usually would turn out, doing without.

Not that he could actually *starve*, that is. But eating good, simple food was an enjoyable thing, kind of like a wine connoisseur's relishing a particularly fine vintage. Also wearing nice, comfortable clothes – that was another of those simple pleasures.

And seeing people enjoying life, for a change.

Over his pint glass, his eyes traveled around the bistro, staying briefly with one person until his whimsy took his eyes to another destination. A woman with kelly-green eyes and summer wheat skin was writing in her journal, nibbling on her pen cap. She was thinking of a better transition from one part of her rant to the other, and she wrinkled her nose in concentration. Her freckles stood out on her nose, as she thought hard.

She was very pretty.

Two elderly gentlemen were in heated discussion, their hands moving animatedly, nearly mirroring each other. Both men were white-haired, with snowy eyebrows and deep, brown lines along their cheeks. The thinner of the two would roll his eyes while the fatter one would bring his left hand down, just barely hitting the little bistro table in staccato, karate-chop motions. Old friends now, but they met on opposite sides, in a bombed-out building. One a German-born Jew, the other a Palestinian-born Muslim. They should've killed each other that hot, rainy day in Abu-Ageila, but they didn't.

To this day, they still didn't know why they didn't.

A young couple sat facing each other, their elbows on the table as they leaned across it for a solitary, and fleeting, kiss. They knew eyes were on them. They didn't care. It had been months since they were like this, since the baby, since the weight of parenthood sidetracked them from each other, when they used to be goofy and free. So a date, a lunch date on the Day of the Dead, when they could pretend they weren't married, could pretend that the baby wasn't at Mother's, could pretend that they weren't responsible spouses and parents and adults.

After the kiss, they leaned back into their chairs, like images in a mirror, and stared at each other, slightly awed.

He knew all of this, knew everything about the people his eyes alighted upon, like a butterfly sipping nectar from flowers, and he was thoroughly enjoying himself. For once, he was with people who didn't, deep in their desperate, aching souls, need him.

“Sir?”

He looked up, and smiled. “And a cherry cobbler with vanilla ice cream, please. With black coffee.”

“Yes, sir.”

Knowing happy people and eating good, simple food and wearing proper, comfortable clothes and being embodied for a change – *aaabbbb...*

“Hey, there, Ed.”

He blinked away his reverie and saw a woman with dark brown hair shot with gray here and there, cut in a no-nonsense bob. A little middle-aged body on the verge of gracefully entering her sixties. But her cobalt blue eyes – they were the same as he remembered. “Zoey.”

The angel stood up and hugged the woman like the old friend that he was. He gestured to the empty chair across from him and watched her give her wet umbrella a discrete shake and set it, with her satchel, down next to the bistro table chair she had settled in. She stared at the large empty dinner place, the empty salad plate, and the half-drunk pint glass of water with lemon slices floating in it.

“I'm sorry – I ate before you came. You did say over the phone that you might be late, so I hope you don't mind.”

She looked over the person in front of her – a tall, fit man with short-cropped salt-and-pepper hair, wearing clothes appropriate for the weather but still within his usual taste for simplicity and comfort. “No, I don't mind. It's just --” she gestured at the table and then at the café in general – “I didn't know angels needed to eat.”

“Huh. I thought you would know, since you've seen my memories. Also, you have this:

‘and food alike those pure  
Intelligent substances require  
As doth your Rational; and both contain  
Within them every lower faculty  
Of sense, whereby they hear, see, smell, touch, taste,  
Tasting concoct, digest, assimilate,  
And corporeal to incorporeal turn.’<sup>1</sup>”

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<sup>1</sup> Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Book V, lines 407-413.

“Milton’s Raphael,” Zoey identified.

“That’s the one. True – unfallen angels don’t really need to eat since we’re, uh, Son-powered. But we can switch to material food if we want.”

Zoey groaned at the pun. “Okay, but --”

“ $E=mc^2$ ,” Ed interrupted, holding up his hand. “‘Corporeal to incorporeal turn.’ We eat, convert the matter 100% to energy, and produce no byproducts.”

“In other words,” she said, “angels eat, but they don’t poop.” She stifled a giggle.

“Woman, what are you – eight?” But he was smiling.

“I wish.” Zoey patted her flabby midsection. “I had a lot more energy at eight than I do at fifty-eight, that’s for sure. Speaking of energy, I guess I should order --”

The waitress brought in a dish of cherry cobbler and ice cream, flambéed. She extinguished the rum-alcohol blue flame and then set the dish on the table in front of Zoey. From a nearby cart, she placed a perfectly simple cup of black coffee next to the dish, cleared Ed’s empty plates, smiled sweetly, and returned to the kitchen.

Zoey stared at her dessert. “How did you --”

“You may not have sent, but your stomach spoke loud and clear what you’ve been craving for lunch.”

“Hah.” She took one bite and gave a sound only a woman deeply in love would give. “Oh wow. This is *good*. Hey, wait a minute.” She looked at Ed. “They don’t normally offer cherry cobbler a la mode – especially cobbler drizzled in rum and set on fire – here.”

Ed shrugged. “A little angelic persuasion.”

“Can you do that?”

“Do you mean, am I allowed to do that?” He shrugged. “It won’t get me damned, if that’s what you’re worrying about. Relax. I’m on vacation.”

Zoey chuckled into her cobbler. “You’re on vacation. Do you know how weird that sounds to a human being, that an angel can be on vacation?”

“Hey, I deserved it. I’ve been on angel duty for, oh, about a millennium or two since I’ve been back.”

“A millennium or two? But it’s only been eighteen years.”

“For *you* it’s been eighteen years. But when I leave this spacetime into timeless space, go where I’m sent, it can be not only anywhere but anytime in humanity’s spacetime continuum. Everything’s the

eternal present in Heaven, so it's only when I'm immersed in your spacetime do I realize how much time has actually passed.”

She stared at him. “You travel through time?”

“From a human's time-bound perspective, yes.”

“To do what?”

“You really want to know?”

“Yes.”

“Helping dying people's souls not get dragged to Hell, mostly.”

Zoey set down her fork. “Jesus Christ, Ed.”

“Yeah, that's what I tend to say, too, when I'm doing it.” Ed shook his head. “As I said – eighteen years ago, you say? – my first gig as a Celestial Engineer's obsolete, my second as a field tactician didn't last all that long, my third gig was to help rebuild Heaven after The War, and my last before I fell was to build a soul transition center. You can see that I'm no soldier. I'm no St. Michael the Archangel warrior. But me running defense while you saved your brother gave Central the idea of assigning me active Charon duty – not just ferrying souls to Heaven but also protecting them against Lightbearer's machinations.” He stopped, looking at Zoey's odd smile. “What?”

“Do all angels call God the Father ‘Central?’”

“Why do you ask?”

“It seems so – impersonal.”

Ed smiled. “But it makes sense. He's central to everything we are, everything we do. It's actually very personal, without being irreverent.”

Zoey chewed her lip, considering the information. “And ‘Lightbearer’ is --”

“Direct translation of his pretty boy Roman name.”

“Lucifer.”

“Yup. Pretty ironic how it's come to mean the Prince of Darkness for believing humans.” Ed pointed at Zoey's cobbler. “You know, that's best when it's still warm.”

Zoey sat back and laughed. “God, I missed you, Ed.” She took an especially big bite of cobbler, followed with ice cream and then coffee.

“Missed you, too. That's why I made sure to pick the right place in the continuum to visit you while, uh --” He paused.

“While I'm still alive? But – hold on. If you can travel through time, wouldn't you have seen my death? Wouldn't you have seen me in Heaven – if I end up in Heaven?”

Ed shook his head. “You’re my Beatrice. Don’t ask me how it works because even I’m not sure how it works, but I’m bound to your own personal spacetime and timeline when it comes to you. It’s been – eighteen years, you say? – since I last saw you, and I will not see you in Heaven until you end up there. Once there, I won’t be able to enter your previous spacetime continuum because it will be sealed since your story on Earth – so speak – would be over.” He shrugged. “So weird angel-human time paradoxes are averted.”

Zoey shook her head. “Okay. My brain officially hurts. I’ll need more food to digest all that.” She smiled and continued eating.

His elbows on the table, Ed propped his chin on his hand and watched her eat. “So – how’ve you been?”

“Besides working at the same place and raising a daughter who reminds me of both Jamie and me, but without the traumatic experiences? Pretty good.” She finished her cobbler and ice cream and sat back, sighing contentedly.

The waitress returned with a coffeepot to refill Zoey’s cup. “Coffee, sir?” she asked Ed.

“Sure.”

“Cream and sugar?”

“Yes, please.”

She nodded and left the table for the kitchen again.

Zoey snorted. “You drink kid coffee.” She sipped her cup.

“Damn straight.”

She laughed, nearly choking on her sip.

“Seriously now, how’s AJ like Jamie and you?”

“Well, like we found out when she was ten, AJ can see the unseen, like Jamie always could and what I could do after his death. But while she also has Jamie’s personality, she’s learned to be selectively empathic and even outgoing, so her ability doesn’t bother her as she interacts with other people. It’s like she can choose to acknowledge what her special sight sees or just ignore it when it doesn’t seem particularly helpful.”

“Well – that’s impressive.”

“Yeah, it is. But not only that. AJ is a genuinely amazing kid. She finished out her last two years of high school taking college classes, so she graduated with both a high school diploma and an Associate’s degree. She’s at the university where I went to because it has a doctoral through-plan, where she can

get all three of her degrees in five years. She’s majoring in Math – Math! – and volunteers in my workplace’s tutoring center.”

“She wants to be a teacher – she sounds just like you.”

“Maybe. But because she didn’t have to suffer through traumatic shit like me or Jamie, she actually has a healthy dating life. Not that I’m nosy or anything.” Zoey wrinkled her nose. “The sex talk was pretty awful. I ended up just recommending a couple of informative books to her when she was twelve, since I was pretty useless.”

“Pretty useless?”

Zoey nodded her head. “I am a right coward when it comes to dating. It was hilarious how my co-workers tried to figure out who the father could possibly be when I was pregnant with AJ since I was single and had the reputation of being an academic celibate – pretty much married to my college work.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It really was funny. The official office rumor was that I went to a sperm bank.”

Ed leaned back into his chair and guffawed. “That’s – thank you,” he interrupted himself as the waitress set down the cup of coffee with a small pitcher of cream and a saucer of sugar packets. “That’s brilliant.” He prepped his coffee and took a sip.

“Yet, in spite of that, my co-workers were very supportive. Baby showers, well-meaning but unsolicited parenting advice, offers of babysitting – I was a very lucky single mom.”

“And then?”

“And then it was me working and raising AJ, and here I am, eighteen years later, still enjoying teaching my classes and having raised a well-adjusted AJ. Only my graying hair, expanding waistline, and sagging skin tell me that eighteen years have passed – it doesn’t seem that long at all.” She patted her belly again and then looked over her hands, their thinning skin slightly freckled with age spots. “Inside, I’m still that Zoey who finished high school early to help out her mom and brother. Inside, I’m still that Zoey who helped her little brother die.”

“Are you happy?”

She dropped her hands lightly on the table. “You’re the angel. You tell me.”

Over his coffee cup, Ed gave Zoey an appraising look. “Yes, you are,” he started slowly, “but you’re worried about something... and waiting for something else, aren’t you.”

“Hmmm.” Zoey finished her coffee and set down the empty cup, but her fingers still wrapped around it, tapping lightly the ceramic surface.

“Well?”

Zoey was slow to answer. “Well...” She shrugged. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“‘Human, not nephil,’ you said, way back when. Are you sure AJ’s only human? She’s so extraordinary that sometimes —“

“You fear her.”

Zoey shook her head. “I fear *for* her. I looked up information about the nephilim. The hybrid fallen angel/ human children of the fallen Watchers, like Miranda’s son. They’re the cause for the Reboot, aren’t they? It’s not a happy story.”

“That, Zoey, is an understatement.” Ed gave a heavy sigh. “The nephilim were never a part of Earth’s original code, so their existence was --” he paused, looking for the right word, “— problematic.”

“How so?”

“Their existence threatened all of humanity. While angels exist as service folk to God and Man, and mankind exist as caretakers – remember what Adam and Eve were intended to be before the Fall – the Watchers intended the nephilim to exist as overseers of humanity, absolutely obedient to their Watcher fathers, to secure the Watchers’ power over the Earth. Your Bible describes them as giants, destroying mankind, which is a metaphor for what they were meant to be and actually did.”

“Which was?”

“They spurred wars that threatened to destroy all of mankind. The closest human word to what they were in relation to humanity would be *übermenschen*.”

“What? Super men?”

“Not quite – more like superior creatures in relation to humans. The fallen Watchers only married daughters of kings and warlords, ensuring that their progeny would be future kings and queens. As human/angel hybrids, they would have natural bodies, but their angelic qualities would render their bodies effectively immortal. They would age until reaching adulthood, but then they would choose to freeze their aging, eternally regenerated by their angelic quality.”

Zoey observed, slowly, “They’d be worshipped like gods. Or feared like monsters.”

“It was both. Imagine the power the nephilim would amass and command, bidding men to serve and fight for them, without fear of ever dying. Imagine the annihilation humans would suffer, trying to resist these immortal children of fallen angels, who ruled mortal humanity.”

“That sounds horrific.”

“It was horrific. But fortunately there was a limitation to the nephilim – they could not beget nor bear children. They are sterile.”

“Why?”

“Simply, ‘be fruitful and multiply’ does not apply to angels, even to the fallen. Even though the fallen Watchers disobeyed that edict, the consequences would fall on their offspring. By ensuring that their children would be powerful and immortal, the Watchers cursed them with infertility.”

Zoey shook her head, amazed. “Then the Reboot happened – and they all died?”

“No.”

She stared at him. “No?”

“Angels cannot die. The nephilim’s mortal bodies would likely be destroyed, but their angelic spirits would remain, and if enough of their human bodies remained, they could regenerate.”

“And those who couldn’t regenerate?”

“They would be like their fallen fathers – rootless fallen angels. Like Miranda is. Like I was.”

“So – after the Reboot – the nephilim are in Hell?”

Ed reluctantly replied, “No.”

“What?”

“The nephilim do not belong in the pattern of Heaven and Hell. They do not belong in Heaven, and Lightbearer – in his jealousy that he didn’t come up with that idea of thwarting Central in that way – refuses to allow the bodiless nephil spirits to reside there. Which would be a blessing of some sort, come to think of it.”

“Wait – what? If they’re not in Heaven or Hell, the only place they’d be would be on Earth.”

“Yes.”

She stared at him. “Jesus, Ed.”

“It’s not as bad as it sounds.”

“How?”

“Pre-Reboot, the population of humanity was much smaller than it is now, and only a small percentage of that had risen to the level of kings and warlords. And not every Watcher participated in the marrying of women. The nephilim are literally a rare breed of creatures. By the time of the Reboot, only fifty-nine nephilim existed.

“But --”

“And,” Ed continued, “not all nephilim wanted to fulfill their predetermined destinies.”

“Huh?”

“Free will always complicates everything. Certainly, the majority of the grown nephilim gladly fell into their role as amoral followers of their totalitarian fathers. But some were fortunate to have fathers who wanted nephilim and humans to co-exist, and a few ironically rebelled against their fathers, choosing to wrestle against their very nephil natures. These even rarer nephilim only wanted to live as ordinary humans.”

“So you mean... there are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ nephilim?”

“Yes. And the good ones keep in touch with each other and collaborate with the unfallen, to look out for the bad nephilim, as well as the fallen arriving from Hell. So --” he leaned across the table, looking Zoey straight into her eyes, “do not worry about the nephilim and do not worry about AJ. She is most definitely NOT nephil and, if she so chooses, can have future children of her own.”

Zoey sighed, suddenly aware that she had been holding her breath. “Okay, then.”

“Now about that second part,” he pointed a forefinger at her, “you’re waiting for something. What is it?”

She leaned back in her chair. “After all that talk about the nephilim, it’s not very important.”

“Zoey. Don’t force me to scan your thoughts.”

“Hah, I know full well you can’t unless I let you in.”

“Zoey--”

“Okay, okay.” She shrugged. “Well... you mentioned the future. When AJ finishes school in five years with her PhD – her plan, not mine – I’ll be sixty-three years old. I’ll have lived in the same city for fifty-one years, have taught at the same place for thirty-eight. I think by that time I’ll be ready for a change.”

“Of what?”

“Of place. Maybe even career. I’ve been thinking of my parents these days – my dad being Navy, my mom being a nurse – moving around, helping people. Maybe I’ll take some nursing classes, get a certificate, and then go where people need me instead of being that old lady, puttering around in her retirement.” She made a face at the thought of being old and puttering around.

“One would think, what with your experiences with hospitals, you’d want nothing to do with them.”

Zoey shrugged. “Except for AJ’s birth, those hospital experiences were godawful – that’s true. But not once did a nurse ever lie to me, and – like my mom – nurses helped me more than they would ever know. I wouldn’t mind doing that when I’m old and gray.”

“Hmmm,” he responded and then added, “By the way, sixty-three isn’t old.”

“Well, to *you*, Mr. Ariel Angel, it’s not.”

At his name, he made a face. “Hey – call me Ed.”

“Why? Don’t you like your actual name?”

“I do -- although that Disney movie doesn’t make it easy. ‘Lion of God’ isn’t a girl’s name.”

“Tell that to the three Ariels in my classes this semester.”

Ed shook his head, taking a sip from his coffee. “You humans.”

“What?”

“For humans, it’s just the first name of a person. But for angels, our name is not only a person’s name but what we are.”

“What you are? Like a surname?”

Ed frowned and set down his cup. “How to explain – okay.” He pointed at himself. “I am Ariel the same way a tiger is Tiger. But unlike a tiger, there’s only one member of the species Ariel. If I were to die, not only Ariel the angel would die, but the Ariel angel would be extinct. In all of Heaven, I’m the only angel who possesses the name Ariel, just like Gabriel is the only Gabriel and Michael is the only Michael.” He took another sip of coffee. “So my name is an important signifier of my existence.”

Zoey stared at him. “But isn’t that even more reason for me to call you ‘Ariel’? Why ‘Ed’?”

He smiled, shrugging. “Sentimentality. That’s YOUR name for me.”

Zoey stared at him, speechless.

He leaned back. “Anyways, I’m on vacation. You calling me Ariel will just remind me of work.”

She shook her head, chuckling. “Okay then.” She saw him continue drinking his coffee. “You on vacation... won’t they miss you?”

“What? Oh no – Abdiel’s filling in for me until I return.”

“Abdiel?” She blinked. “Who’s Abdiel?”

“Besides being an angel?”

She stuck out her tongue.

“He was a soldier under Michael in The War. But after the Fall of Man, when the first righteous started to die, he’s been one of the Watcher trainers for the Communion of Saints. That’s still his primary gig, but the training corps can spare him, so --” He shrugged.

“Watcher trainers? Communion of Saints? What are you talking about?”

He gave an impish grin. “Easy enough to explain. All the angels were created once and only once, you see. While angels don’t die, angels can fall.”

“That, I know.”

“That, you know. But what you don’t know is that fallen angels don’t get replaced, so the existing unfallen just have to pick up the slack. No problem when the human population was small – gets tricky when humans get really busy with ‘be fruitful and multiply.’ When the Watchers fell, in addition to the third of Heaven that fell with Lightbearer, we unfallen really felt that loss, with shouldering their duties.”

Zoey started laughing. “Wait – you’re telling me that you angels were feeling overworked and understaffed?”

Ed rolled his eyes. “Sounds silly when you put it that way. However, we didn’t have to deal with that for too long. What we angels didn’t realize was that human souls, once disembodied and in Heaven – that is, the saints – are virtually indistinguishable in spiritual capabilities as angels.”

“Really?”

“Really. So instead of reconstructing the corps of Watcher angels, Central commissioned the Communion of Saints to serve as Watchers – watching over and listening to the embodied souls on Earth, alerting the angelic host or even Central if intervention is requested and needs to happen.”

Zoey shook her head in wonderment. “Is that how prayer and the intercession of the saints work? How... odd.”

“Well, compared to Earth, Heaven is very odd. But awesome and wonderful, too.” He finished his coffee and looked at Zoey. “Still hungry?”

“Ah, maybe a little bit more cherry --” Zoey began, but then she saw their waitress again with another serving of cherry cobbler flambé with ice cream and coffee, approaching their table. “Ed,” she started as the waitress placed the dish and refilled their coffee cups.

“Hey, they already had all the stuff made. There’s no such thing as a recipe for one serving of cobbler,” Ed interrupted, watching their waitress clear the table of empty plates and return to the kitchen.

“You have better give her a damn good tip, then,” she scolded. She looked over the dish. “This is a double serving – it’s huge! I can’t possibly finish this.”

“You don’t have to.” He pulled out the second spoon sticking out of the cobbler. “I haven’t had dessert yet.”

As they worked on the cobbler, they didn’t speak, instead watching the rain through the wall-to-ceiling window next to their table. After a time, the rain lessened and the dark overcast started to break up, allowing thin streams of sunshine, illuminating the clouds and the moisture lingering in the air, in

what photographers called god light. Ed pointed at a rainbow forming between the empty spaces of the downtown city.

“I now set my bow in the clouds and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth,” he recited.<sup>2</sup> He gave a soft chuckle. “You can take the angel out of Heaven, but you can’t take the Heaven out of the angel.”

“Which is a good thing,” Zoey reminded him. “Guiding you back to Heaven once is enough for me.”

“Amen.” He raised his coffee cup in salute and took a long drink.

“Ariel.”

Ed blinked and looked up, seeing the familiar face of their waitress, but he could see something else behind the eyes. “Abdiel.”

Zoey saw an unfamiliar golden glow shining through their waitress’s body and an odd double-exposure-like image of a concerned angel – wings and all – superimposed on the woman.

“We’ve been trying to contact you all day. You’ve turned off your comm.”

“Well, I *am* on vacation.”

“Not anymore you are. Your leave’s been postponed.”

“Why?”

“We have a situation. Only you are best suited to solve it.”

“Where?”

“Purgatorial Sea.”

“What? But that’s part of Sacred Space. Why do you need me?”

The non-waitress Abdiel glanced at Zoey. “This is Need to Know.”

“Abdiel, she is my Beatrice. Whatever you have to say, just say it.”

“All right, then. The soul in question is this woman’s father. The situation is unusual because Miranda has latched onto him, even into his death. She has made it into the Purgatorial Sea with the human soul. Can you see now why you are best suited for this mission?”

Ed gave a curt nod. “Yes. Of course. I’ll report back immediately.”

The waitress face looked confused for a moment as Abdiel’s presence left her. She shook her head and then gave her familiar sweet smile as she cleared their table again.

“Check, please,” Ed said.

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 9:13-14.

“Yes, sir.”

He turned to Zoey, who only stared at him in stunned silence.

“It’ll be okay.” He reached into a pocket and placed on the table a one-hundred dollar bill. “I’m sorry that you had to hear that.”

“No, no – I’m fine.”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

“I know.”

Ed reached across the table and held her hands in his. “I promise you – he will be okay. Remember? You never have to worry about Miranda. You believe me?”

“I believe you.”

“Good.” Ed let go of her hands. “Time for me to go.” He stood up.

“I can’t come with you, can I,” Zoey observed. She remained seated.

“Zoey.” He walked over to her chair and squatted down to Zoey’s level. “I’ll be in a spiritual realm – there’ll be no bodies for you to dwell, like you could be with Jamie. It’ll be Miranda, me, and your father’s soul. There’s no place for a person who’s embodied.”

Zoey accepted this information in silence. Then she said quietly, “I didn’t even know he was still alive.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

She suddenly looked around at the mundane hustle and bustle of the café, busy in its lunchtime crowd. It suddenly didn’t feel real. “Can we at least go to Thanks-Giving Square – before you leave?”

In answer, he grabbed Zoey’s umbrella and satchel, stood up, and extended a hand to her.

As they walked hand-in-hand on the city sidewalks, as other pedestrians scurried past them to escape the unexpected cold snap that came after the mid-day rain, they didn’t speak. While Ed had been officially on vacation, Zoey had respected his wish to do just ordinary, verbal communication – even in his use of phoning Zoey that he was in town. But now that his visit was being cut short, Zoey felt free to send.

She sent no words but fading images of her father. She sent long-buried emotions of anger, of sadness, of undying love for the man who abandoned her and her family – out of fear, as she had come to understand. Being a parent for the past eighteen years finally helped her to understand her father – of the intense, overwhelming love parents have for their children. Of the intense, overwhelming panic parents have for the destruction of their identity up to that point, of what terrible

choices they would do for the sake of their children. Of the fear of ruining their children if they make the wrong choices.

Anger, sadness, and love, all entwined and roiling together, Zoey went until they reached Thanks-Giving Square, only a short walk from the café and empty of visitors because of the previous rain and the present cold. Once there, Zoey let go of Ed’s hand as she drifted towards the stair steps where AJ was conceived, the golden ring where Ed had left the first time.

Ed put the umbrella in Zoey’s satchel, followed behind her, and tapped her shoulder to give back her belongings. She shouldered her bag, looked straight into Ed’s eyes, and said, “I’ve forgiven him.”

“Have you?”

She breathed deeply and smiled. “Yes. Yes, I have.”

“Good girl.” He hugged her and, in doing so, whispered, “That means you’re ready for this,” and then he went.