

11 In the Beginning

AJ Fitzpatrick settled in her chair, staring at the darkened ceiling above her as the keynote speaker droned through the expected points of a commencement speech – the importance of an education, of life-long learning, of making a difference, of giving back to society.

The other fellow graduates around her seemed to listen in rapt attention, but AJ’s mind was outside the performance hall space, beyond the mid-May torrential rain that made parking particularly hellish that afternoon, to the relative quiet and solitude of her own thoughts. In doing so, she could ignore the pulsing and crashing colors of hundreds of emotionally-charged people, all in close quarters. Equations with very little recognizable numbers but plenty of letters, both standard and Greek, danced and glowed in her mind, ammunition in solving a particularly interesting problem that led to her acceptance into Caltech’s post-doctoral program.

AJ.

Her mother’s soundless voice interrupted her mathematical train of thought. *Yes, Mom?* She could feel her mother’s presence, somewhere in the audience behind her.

You doing okay? It’s a lot of people.

Mom – I’ll only be doing this once in my lifetime. Bachelor’s, Master’s, and PhD, in one five-year swoop. I may be an asocial introvert, but even I know walking across that damn stage is important. Anyways – no problem. You know I can fake social butterfly like a pro.

Okay, sweetie. But remember to pull back in when it’s time to walk, okay? No point going through this dog-and-pony show if you miss bearing your name.

Oh, I got it covered – you’ll just tell me if I did, right?

Ha ha.

AJ smiled. *I’m not a kid anymore, Mom. It’s been thirteen years since I nearly biked into that car wreck, remember? How could I forget?*

AJ could feel her mother’s smile. *Okay, Mom. I’ll switch to listening to what this speaker’s trying to say.*

Good girl. Her mother’s presence receded.

AJ task-switched, and her equations – which were always with her – faded into the background as the man on the stage came into focus. He was one of those coiffed, rich CEOs, businessmen who, after reaching an acceptable height of lucre, suddenly felt their mortality and became active philanthropists. Such specimens would often run for public office, and he actually sounded and

exuded the coloration of the over-eager politician – all pink and fluffy with iron-gray coldness just barely under the surface.

“As my momma would always say, ‘You just make lemonade outta life’s lemons, honey. Even when you’re down and outta luck, just believe in yourself and aspire for greatness. With aspiration, dedication, and perspiration, great things will come to you.’ I took my momma’s words of wisdom and applied it to everything I’ve done, leading up to making my first million dollars in my first business venture. When I was your age --”

AJ rolled her eyes. “When you were my age, you were nothing like me,” she murmured. She stared at the darkened ceiling again.

#

Ever since AJ was a little girl, she knew that she was different.

It wasn’t the fact that she had no father. Every other kid she knew growing up was being raised by a single parent – usually a single mother like her own mother. Having an absent father, while sad, didn’t make her different, even with her mother telling her, “I’ll tell you when you’re older,” whenever she asked about her biological father.

It wasn’t the fact that she was seen as smart by just about everybody. Having a college professor as her mother and attending the daycare at her mother’s community college – where the early childhood students taught – were easy excuses for AJ’s academic overachievements and polite manners at the young age of six, when she was tested right into fifth grade reading, writing, and mathematics.

Her mother had made arrangements, that she would attend a home-school coop hosted by the college so that she wouldn’t have to jostle with ten-year olds when she was barely four feet tall.

So maybe that made her a little different, including all the well-meaning adults who insisted that she had Asperger’s or was some sort of autistic savant, which her mother calmly but firmly disregarded their concerns and their advice.

“Just because AJ prefers not to socialize doesn’t mean she’s incapable of it,” her mother would reply, always with a small smile.

And she was right.

But what truly made AJ different from other people was that she could see colors where everyone else saw nothing. It only took a few seconds of watchful waiting and observing for AJ to realize that nobody was mentioning how orangey-red a particularly upset little boy was, or that a teacher was particularly yellow-gold that day.

At first it scared her, but after reading plenty of fairy tales and fantasy stories, she figured that such people as her must have existed in order for the storytellers to spin their stories, so that helped. After awhile, seeing people's colors almost became ordinary, just like getting used to an interesting shade of pink from one of her teacher's hair dye jobs until it wasn't all that interesting anymore. It became just an easy way to read a person's mood without having to decipher all that confusing body language and subtle attitudes in a person's words and tone of voice.

Besides, if it all got too overwhelming, AJ discovered that she could tune out the colors by doing math in her head, even as she was holding an animated conversation with a person. Multiplication tables. Long division. Then polynomials. Quadratic formula. Polar equations.

But it was doing that – doing math in her head while she was returning home from the lake – that nearly got her killed, when she almost biked right into a nasty car crash when she was ten years old.

However, an angel had stopped her. An angel whom she had heard and seen. Who, as it turned out, was the reason her mother kept telling her, “I'll tell you when you're older.”

After the initial alarm to AJ's scuffed and bleeding appearance – falling off a bike would do that – her mother sat her down after AJ had cleaned up. Fidgeting over the spaghetti noodles that were part of their dinner, AJ's mother finally answered her question.

“You know you were named after two important people who used to be in my life. Ariel, after an old friend. And James, after my brother who passed away before you were born. Well, Ariel was that angel.”

AJ could only sit in stunned silence to that piece of information.

“Your Uncle Jamie was dying of cancer and had been possessed by a bad angel named Miranda. Ariel arrived and helped me get rid of Miranda so that your uncle could die in peace. He also helped me have a baby because I couldn't have one on my own.”

AJ's wide eyes and shocked expression was her only response.

“No. He's not your father. You actually don't have a biological father. You know when we grew those potatoes last spring – that new potatoes grow out of old ones? It was like that.”

“Huh – I'm a plant?”

“What?” Her mother started to laugh. “No, no, you're – jeez, I don't want to give the sex talk now!”

But her mother had to, pulling out old anatomy and physiology textbooks of her grandmother's nursing school days, to point to when her mother was at a loss for words. She learned the difference between sexual and asexual reproduction that day. When it became clear that she was a miracle baby

– a child originating from only one biological parent, just like in those old fairy tales – AJ had only one question: “Where’s Ariel now?”

Her mother could only shake her head. “He’s where he’d be ordered to go. Being an angel is a lot like being a soldier – and being a priest.” Her mother had winced a little at the last word.

When AJ was twelve and had begun her menses, her mother explained more of the story, of why she couldn’t have children of her own without Ariel’s intercession, of why her mother never dated, never sought a human father for her daughter.

AJ’s only response was to cry, even as her mother had held her but didn’t cry at all.

“I’m sorry, sweetie, I’m so sorry,” she had said, smoothing her hair. “This is probably too much, too soon, at your age --”

“No, Mom.” AJ had shaken her head emphatically. “At my age was when this happened to you. I need to know this. I need to know.” She had wiped her tears on her shirt sleeves. “I need to know everything.”

Her mother paused for only the briefest of moments, whispered, “Don’t be afraid,” and sent for the very first time.

She received her mother’s tumultuous childhood and family growing up, the priest and her uncle, the divorce and death, the madness and rebirth.

Then her mother sent the dreams – dreams that were the past life of Ariel – and her quest to find and save her uncle. But the quest, as it seemed fated to be, also became a quest to find and save Ariel. At the end, when the echoing voices of her mother’s and Ariel’s farewell had faded into silence, AJ again had only one question: “Do you love him, Mom?”

Her mother had simply closed her eyes and hugged AJ, who had felt her mother win the fight over emotionally-charged tears, even as her mother bloomed in blue like an unfurling indigo rose. “Yes.”

“Is that – I mean --”

“Allowed? I don’t know. But I’m not Mara, he’s not Miranda, and you’re fully human. In loving Ed --” she had smiled at his nickname – “I may as well love a rainbow.”

“But aren’t you lonely, Mom?” she had asked.

“What? Me, lonely? Between dealing with over a hundred needy students, a gaggle of sweet but stressed-out co-workers and bosses, and raising a soon-to-be teenager, who has time to be lonely?”

“Mom, you know what I mean.”

Her mother had tapped her heart. “I am content, AJ. You can see my color. I am content right now.” But she had smiled further. “Ask me again when I’m retired and you’ve grown up.”

Ages twelve to sixteen had sped by with the focus of any overachieving homeschooler. Finally taking full-time college classes couldn't come fast enough for AJ. But then having a celibate mother suddenly became problematic when AJ's uniquely driven personality became attractive to some of her male classmates.

“Mom, I swear, I don't even try to look good,” AJ had once said when she was seventeen after a sweet but shy classmate had gathered enough courage to ask her out for coffee.

Her mother had only laughed at her. “AJ, you're smart, honest, funny, generous, beautiful – makeup and flashy clothes not required. Do what you believe is right because that's the only practical advice I can give. Dating-wise --”

“You're useless.”

“I'm useless.”

“Aarrgh!”

“Well... at least you'll be able to see his true emotional, psychological, and spiritual state, despite whatever words come out of his mouth. It'll keep him honest.”

AJ had laughed. “Mom. He's eighteen. Boys at eighteen are all confused shades of blue and red, all angsty and angry and horny. It'll be a miracle if I don't laugh at them or want to give them a cookie. It's sad how guys try to cover it all up.”

“Well... I guess feeling sorry for them is a good start?”

“Mom. No.” AJ had shaken her head. “I love you, Mom. But you're useless.”

The sweet but shy classmate didn't last – “I scared him with my brain,” AJ had declared with a shrug. No one asked her out while she finished high school and her Associate's at the local community college where she had been since she was a baby. But when she transferred into the nearby state research university, some of her male classmates would ask her out.

However, any guy who had the chance to date her soon found that she had no need for them. AJ had chosen to live at home, even with the unexpectedly fortunate windfall of her grandfather's death benefits when she was eighteen, as she preferred her mother's academic and ascetic habits over the social butterflies of campus life. So hanging out at her place was out of the question.

Hanging out, however, was far from AJ's interests. That same windfall, instead of giving AJ the luxury to take classes at a leisurely pace, only motivated her to accelerate her studies, taking advantage of the university's Bachelor's to PhD track, as if doing otherwise would be a waste of her grandfather's gift. So having a long-term, deeply involved relationship was also out of the question.

But being one of only a handful of female grad students in the Math department did have its perks, as her classmates were suddenly not teenagers or early twenty-somethings but men closer to thirty than twenty. Their invisible colors were more defined, more focused, than male students her age. In those five years, AJ had seriously dated only two men, both of them older grad students in the Math department who had respected AJ’s situation, then had graduated and moved on, with no strings nor hurt feelings.

One of them had been shocked when he found out the woman he was dating wasn’t twenty-four but was only nineteen.

“What would you like to drink? The wines here are pretty good, from what I hear,” he had asked at the restaurant after they had watched an indie film.

“Oh, no – coffee’s fine, thanks.”

“Not a wine drinker? They have beer, too --”

“No, it’s not that. I’m not old enough to buy alcohol yet.”

He stared at her over his glasses. “You’re kidding – right?”

“How old do you think I am?”

“I’d guess – twenty-four?”

AJ had shaken her head.

“Twenty-three? Twenty-two?”

Another head shake.

“Twenty?” He had stared wider at AJ’s head shake. “Nineteen?”

“Ding ding ding.” AJ had smiled, seeing her date’s color explode in purplish-red alarm. “I was a wise baby.”

To his credit, he had burst out laughing at that point. “Okay – coffee it is.”

A year later David Babson was gone – graduated with his Master’s and off to Stanford for his doctorate, and not once could he buy AJ a glass of wine, a pint of beer, or a shot of hard liquor, although he had insisted the night before he left, “Next time we meet, I’m buying you a drink.”

The next one had the same personality as David, except that Liam was able to get her a drink – a shot of tequila – when she turned twenty-one. But a couple of weeks later, he also had graduated with his doctorate and moved on, to an assistant professorship at the University of Colorado.

That was two years ago. Like David and Liam, she, too, would be graduating and moving on.

And so was her mother.

Seeing what her post-retirement life could be like, her mother had pursued a nursing degree around her last two years of active teaching and had actually achieved it by Christmas – the Christmas of AJ’s final university year. In celebration, they had left the Christmas decorations up until well past January, right into March, until AJ received her own cause for celebration – the successful defense of her dissertation and acceptance into Caltech.

On a cool, early spring day, AJ and her mother were finally putting away Christmas. A clothespin reindeer with a painted nose, peeling. Stained glass snowflakes, chipped with sharp edges. Metallic glass spheres which left silvery sprinkles onto AJ’s fingers. Wooden nativity set with some shepherds missing a sheep. Each piece AJ carefully wrapped in crinkly tissue paper, yellowed like a spinster’s wedding dress, and eased into time-softened cardboard boxes as her mother deconstructed the fake Douglas pine tree and rolled up the holiday lights.

The family decorations, tree, and lights – artifacts of Christmas as old as AJ – her mother was keeping. The other stuff – cheap, kitschy knickknacks, accumulated over years of Secret Santas and tokens of student appreciation – were in boxes marked “To Donate.”

“Well, that’s done,” her mother said. “Next – clothes.”

After washing two weeks’ worth of laundry, AJ and her mother sat in the living room while an old Guaraldi CD played on, listening to piano piped over speakers as they made towers of clean clothes from their folding. One group of towers was to keep. The other group was to donate, along with the other clothes that were already in boxes marked “To Donate.”

Spring Break had always meant spring cleaning. But this was spring cleaning of a different sort: they were lightening their load, reducing their footprint.

As the “To Donate” pile seemed to get bigger and bigger, AJ paused from her folding and looked around, as if to take in the old but reliable townhome that had housed her grandmother, her uncle, her mother, an ancient cat, and herself, for all of those years and decades.

“I’m gonna miss this, Mom.”

“Me, too, sweetie. Me, too.”

“I hope the new tenants appreciate this place as much as we do.”

“Oh, they will. Lilian Adebayo was a student of mine, back before you were born. It was funny, having her supervise my clinical because she kept trying to call me ‘Professor Fitzpatrick,’ as ‘Zoey’ just seemed too disrespectful to her, even though I hadn’t been her professor in over twenty years. She’ll have her two grandchildren with her, so this will be a good place to raise them.”

“How old are her grandkids?”

“Four and six.”

AJ smiled at that. “They’ll love the stairs.” She set an old T-shirt on top of the “To Keep” pile. “When are they moving in?”

“A week after you move to California and I get sent to Somalia.”

“That’s where they’re sending you?” AJ asked, nodding towards the opened Doctors without Borders letter on the coffee table.

“Yup.”

“Huh – not much opportunity for you to start dating again?”

Her mother gave a snort of laughter. “AJ, what the --”

“Well, you did say ‘Ask me again when I’m retired and you’ve grown up,’ as I recall.”

“Okay. Right.” She smiled and shrugged. “Yes, not much opportunity. Not that I’m actually looking for a social life. Dating doesn’t seem to suit me.”

“Helping other people is,” AJ observed, seeing her mother’s bemused green.

“Helping other people is,” her mother agreed.

“Mom, you should’ve been a nun.”

Her mother cackled. “You’re not the first person who’s said that.” She set an old pair of capri pants in the “To Donate” pile. “Nah. I like my independence. Also, my experiences and beliefs don’t exactly jive with the Catholic Church. Anyways, ‘Nurse Zoey’ sounds a lot better than ‘Sister Zoey.’”

“Oh, I dunno – ‘Sister Zoey, Rogue Nun’ has a nice ring to it. And, besides, you’d get a new name, like ‘Sister Beppo’ or ‘Sister Benedictus.’”

“Now you’re just being silly.”

“Which you’ll miss when you’re in Somalia, Mom.”

Her mother teared up and smiled. “Which I’ll miss when you’re in California, AJ.”

#

AJ felt a wave of movement in her row, and she stood up and shuffled into the center aisle, like a communicant queuing up before the communion table. Only then did she notice that she had totally missed the rest of the keynote speaker, the valedictory address, and all of the ceremonial preliminaries. Approaching the stage and the stairway to the stage, she glanced at the velveteen bands on her puffy doctoral robes’ sleeves, felt the heavy golden velveteen hood draped over her arm, and tingled with barely contained nervousness and excitement, of the new beginning ahead of her.

“Ariel James Fitzpatrick.”

Loud applause greeted her as she walked across that blindingly hot stage. She handed her hood to an administrator, who placed it over her tam-o'-shantered head, grabbed her diploma cover, and shook the university president's hand. The applause grew louder as someone briefly announced her accomplishments – youngest PhD graduate, acceptance into Caltech – but she only paid attention to only one particular applause, to one particular voice.

That's my girl, her mother sent.

#

When Zoey was constantly on her feet because the influx of patients was like a tsunami of crying, broken bodies, when she had to hop and spin and weave to avoid crashing into other members of the overworked, understaffed, and unpaid medical team, when she had to go by muscle memory and intuition to prioritize who needed saving now, who could wait a little longer, and who were too late to do anything about –

“Stable, fille, stable,” Zoey murmured in her broken French, being none-too-gentle as she held a young girl's arm still enough to jab an IV and start the hydration solution.

– on those days, Zoey had no time to think about her age.

Only afterwards, after gulping down a dinner of whatever local fare was available – rice, beans, vegetables stewed in some meat-flavored gruel, and blessedly clean, potable water – after dragging herself to bed to steal a few hours of sleep, did Zoey have the luxury to feel every ache, twinge, and pain that assaulted her sixty-five year old body.

In the beginning, Zoey usually wondered if she had made the right decision, choosing this dangerous, albeit fulfilling, life of service instead of the stable, reliable life of post-retirement. Among her meager belongings was AJ's wedding invitation, a wedding in which she couldn't attend because she was still in Somalia. “Of all things, he really wanted to finally buy me that drink, Mom” was AJ's explanation of who her son-in-law was when she was able to get a reliable video link to the states. Tucked next to the invitation was a small photo of AJ and her babies – twin boy and girl, Zachary Edmund and Amanda Jane, born exactly nine months after the wedding, when Zoey was somewhere in the Congo. She was only able to see them via video link, in which AJ reprimanded, “Mom, don't you dare feel guilty.”

“I'm not feeling guilty.”

“You're a terrible liar, even halfway across the planet. Be happy where you are, whether here or there. Remember? That's what you used to say to me growing up.”

“When did you get to be so wise?”

“When I became a mom – just like you,” AJ replied. “Everything’s good here. As for you – show ‘em who’s boss.”

That conversation was two or three countries ago. She couldn’t keep track anymore, only focusing on the current where and when in front of her. And her current where and when was her bed at two in the morning.

In the little make-shift barracks, she heard the other nurses come and go, rotating work and sleep shifts to lessen the effects of very little sleep and food while giving non-stop care. A woman next to her climbed into her berth without even taking off her shoes and fell instantly to sleep.

So exhausted that her body felt beaten, Zoey felt herself joining her, in sleeping like the dead. The sticky summer night, the soft snores, the off-putting smells of unwashed female bodies and petrochemical fumes, the distant sound of sporadic gunfire – all of these began to recede as Zoey’s mind drifted towards the waiting arms of dreamless sleep.

Then the sound and percussive wave of an explosion located near enough to rattle the barracks and brighten the night sky slammed everyone into hyperawareness.

Zoey groaned, “Oh, sweet Jesus,” before she rolled out of bed, as this wasn’t the first time an explosion cut short her sleep period.

She left the barracks, seeing black smoke boiling above buildings about a mile away, the flames starting to creep and climb and lick into the dark sky. She hopped on the nearest transport back to the hospital, as its emergency room would soon be overfilled with the injured and the dying. The truck carrying the sleep-deprived nurses followed the safe route to the hospital, but she still felt small and unprotected, speeding through this besieged city.

Her head still pounding with a sleep deprivation induced headache, Zoey peered out the rickety truck’s exposed back, into the inky darkness of the narrow streets, and frowned when she thought, *That can’t be.*

Gleaming like an oil-slick reflecting light, she saw a narrow trail of dark ooze behind them, marking the exact route the truck was following. Suddenly realizing what it was, she fell away from her seat as if struck and, against the protests of her fellow nurses, rushed to the front, banging at the closed cab window dividing the passengers from the driver. “Turn back!” she yelled, her voice high with fear and desperation.

“What the --” the clearly annoyed driver began, the truck swerving slightly as he was distracted by the crazy nurse behind him.

Neither she, the other nurses, nor the driver saw the bomb explode in the parked car as they passed by it.

The truck flipped, rolled, and then rested on its shattered side, throwing the driver and the passengers outward and away like boneless ragdolls as its gas tank, leaking fuel, finally exploded, sending further debris and shrapnel in all directions.

Oh God oh God oh God, Zoey’s mind screamed, as the explosion tore away most of her face and shattered her body as it twitched and convulsed in shock as it bled out. Blind, deaf, in pain, she felt the blood gurgling within her lungs and into her throat as an overwhelming fear seized her, of dying and of being utterly powerless to prevent it from happening.

No no no no no, she fought, her will to live fed by the desire not to die this way, a victim of an impersonal killing machine, far away from home, leaving behind AJ and grandchildren that she never had a chance to hold. Drowning in blood and regret, she wrestled with the fear that she had been selfish in her last choice.

Then her dying brain threw out bright and haphazard images –

“Be happy where you are,” AJ’s fuzzy video image declared.

“Astute this one is,” Ed said, smiling.

If I’m the bravest man you know, it’s because of you, was her brother’s sending.

“Because of his blindness, he was able to have time for us children,” said a younger Lilian.

“Be not afraid to forgive,” said a soft oboe, the voice of a woman of God.

Vaya con Dios, mija, whispered her boss from many decades ago.

“Bye, Daddy,” whispered her much younger self, as she held onto her father’s hug, in a busy island airport.

Her mind filled with the community of family and friends, Zoey then saw, not with the destroyed eyes of her body but with the special seeing that her father had, her brother had, her daughter had – that she had. Her ruined face turned upward, she could see the fallen, lackeys of Lightbearer descending from the sky like blue-black carrion crows or vultures, towards the dying humans below, scavenging for lost souls. She could feel and smell their sulfurous approach to her location, attracted by the carnage wrought by the IED. Helpless, she could even hear them land and softly pick through the humans, searching for living ones among the dead.

“I can save you,” she heard one of them say not too far away, his – it sounded male – voice honey-sweet and soothing. “I can save you from death. You are still young – so much life yet to live! Just ask for my help -- invite me in – and I can take away your pain, and you will live.”

She heard a woman’s moan, filled with fear and suffering. Without understanding how, she knew that the woman was in danger, of letting the fallen angel in. If she succumbed to his temptation, she would end with her soul immediately being taken to Hell with her death. Or, if he regenerated her with his still-angelic energy, she would become possessed with the parasitic demon, who would keep her alive just enough to feed off of her life force and influence her actions as he remained on Earth, savoring his time until she died, whereupon he would win her soul as his war prize and valued resource in Hell. Zoey’s racing mind stilled, focused on one desperate thought, *What can I do?*

Let go, Zoey, she heard a distant sending.

Zoey’s attention tore away from the woman and demon, straining to see beyond the material world as she fought to stay alive.

Zoey – sweetie – let go.

Zoey’s dying heart pounded even more quickly as she recognized the voice. *Daddy?*

Her father’s voice was echoey yet clearly heard in her mind – a voice she hadn’t heard in over fifty years. *Let go, like you told Jamie to let go.*

But, Daddy –

Trust me, Zoey.

I do – but I don’t know if I’m ready.

You’re more ready than I ever was, sweetie – more than you know.

But – I don’t know if I can.

Across the far distances, she felt his smile. *You’re nearly there. Just wait.*

Zoey shuddered.

I love you, Zoey. It’s time to come home. Be not afraid to die.

Zoey shuddered one last time. Then she stopped straining; then she stopped fighting. *Okay.* With great difficulty, she stilled her breath and her limbs. Embracing the pain and the sensation of drowning in her own blood, she soon felt herself slipping away, relaxing into the waiting arms of her death.

For the briefest of moments, a sharp cry of grief from above could be heard.

Then the soul of Zoey Fitzpatrick – looking much younger than her sixty-five year old self had been – emerged from her destroyed body like a shriveled butterfly out of its broken chrysalis, as words from her brother, her mother, and especially her father poured down, filling her soul:

Arise through the strength of heaven:

through the light of the sun, the brilliance of moon,

the splendor of fire, the speed of lightning,

*the swiftness of wind, the depth of the sea,
the stability of earth, the firmness of stone.
Through the strength of the love of cherubim
in obedience of angels, arise
in the service of archangels.¹*

Zoey stood tall and still. Then her eternal eyes, which had been closed in her rebirth, opened. The light of Heaven within herself expanded outward in a blinding wave, catching Lightbearer’s lackeys, including the one tempting the dying woman, unawares. They screeched, finding their tempting images as soothing winged men clothed in black stripped away, revealing their skeletal, vaguely reptilian, demonic forms. They recoiled and retreated before the protective shield of the light of Heaven, fearful yet enraged at the loss of their prey.

Zoey looked around her, the terran world now as unreal as the brilliance of Heaven seemed unreal to her when she was embodied. She saw the fallen angels – *these are demons*, she thought matter-of-factly -- draw back, just outside the protective bubble of her force shield, which covered an area that encompassed her driver and her fellow nurses, all mortal casualties of the IED that destroyed their truck. One by one she saw her colleagues die under her watchful protection and then witnessed their souls wobbly emerge from their ruined bodies. They looked confused, lost, and scared. Then she heard another explosive charge a half mile away and saw the demons pacing just outside her shield smile in hungry expectation.

But then their smiles froze as they heard what Zoey could now hear.

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth.

The bell-like singing – for it was singing – was all around her but was also, somehow, in her. She saw them stare upwards in alarm. Suddenly, they began to run away and then take off, for they were only strong in comparison to embattled human souls, suffering and astray, as opposed to the direct onslaught of the Heavenly host, the faithful angelic army.

Pleni sunt caeli et terra Gloria tua. Hosanna in excelsis.

The unfallen angels, clothed in their raiment of silver-white, shimmered into the material world, intercepting the fleeing demons in mid-air. They wrestled and wheeled across the dark, smoke-filled sky, the angels of light making sure that these fallen angels of darkness would remember their latest failed sojourn to Earth.

¹ Adapted from “Lorica of St. Patrick.”

Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.

As soon as they could break away from the angels’ grasp, the demons dissipated in inky clouds as they retreated, whether to appear somewhere else in that war-torn city or fall back to Hell, the angels didn’t know. However, no longer in aerial combat, some angels remained in the sky, in surveillance and patrol, while some touched down here and there to assist the dying, protecting and then guiding their souls. She saw one of them touch down before her.

*Hosanna in excelsis.*²

Not-quite forty-year old Zoey Fitzpatrick saw the brilliant creature before her, regarding her, his face impassioned with triumph and joy.

“Hello, Ed,” she said aloud.

The angel gave a soft smile and responded verbally, “Still think you’re not a saint?”

In reply, she pulled him close. He didn’t move away, his arms holding her. “Nah,” she said. She reached up and kissed him, and the sensation of kissing her angel was unlike anything she had ever felt before.

Same here, my Beatrice, he sent. All too soon, he pulled back and asked, “Are you okay?”

Smiling at him, Zoey briefly touched his face. “Yes, I am. The dying, however, hurt like a bitch.” She peered into his care-worn eyes. “Was that you – that cry when I died?”

He nodded. “Yes. I didn’t know you were going to die until I saw it.”

“But I was going to be okay,” Zoey pointed out. “It’s pretty clear that I’ve been part of the Communion of Saints since Jamie’s death.”

“It’s still a horrific way to die, Zoey – especially since I was too late to prevent it.” He shook his head. “Even the angels wept when the man Yeshua died, in spite of our knowing that he’d be okay.”

“Ah, Ed,” Zoey replied tenderly. Then she glanced behind her, at the scared souls staring agog. “You’re on Charon duty, aren’t you,” she observed.

“Yes.”

“What can I do?”

² From the Roman Latin Mass:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

He smiled. “You can remain standing there and keep the shield up. You never know if one of Lightbearer’s lackeys gets creative and gets past our patrol.” He made a twisting motion with his right hand, and a doorway-sized portal shimmered into existence within the protective bubble of Zoey’s position.

Zoey peered at it with great interest. “That looks like a wormhole.”

“It’s because it is. It leads to the edge of Sacred Space, where Alpha Omega is waiting for their sorting.”

“Sorting – between Heaven and Hell?”

“No. Those who die while still in the hell of their own choosing have already chosen to be Hell-bound. If we or someone else don’t arrive in time to give them one final chance, to choose otherwise before their bodily death, they would fall as easily into Hell as Lightbearer and his army did.” He nodded towards the souls of Zoey’s former colleagues. “The sorting of souls who die free of Hell’s thrall is between the Purgatorial Sea or straight to the Garden Paradise.” He waved for the souls to come forward, but they only stared at him.

“It’s okay,” Zoey reassured. “You’re safe now. You’re going to a good place.”

“Are we – are we really dead?” the driver said, staring at his hands that were no longer gnarled with arthritis.

“Yes.”

“I’ll – I’ll need some time to get used to that.”

Zoey smiled. “No worries. You’ll have all eternity now.”

The driver and the other souls stared at her, but they believed her reassurances. They each stepped into the light of the portal, with only faith as their guide, as Ariel remained behind, waiting for the last one of the group to enter.

Zoey looked around her, at the light of Heaven shining forth and coalescing around her. “Uh – how can I turn this off?”

Ariel grinned, chuckling. “Technically, it doesn’t turn off. But you can dial it down, pull it back within yourself.”

“How?”

“Just will it.”

“You mean, ‘I’d like this shield to fold back in me now, please’ – oh.” Zoey looked down at herself. “That was easy.”

He laughed again. “God, I missed you.” He turned around at the sound of gunfire and another explosion. “This will be a busy night.”

“Do I go now – to Heaven – or am I allowed to stay and help?”

“It’s your choice. You’re in the Communion of Saints, as you say, just like your parents and your brother. On Earth as it is in Heaven, you’ll be supporting the angelic army either way.”

“Cool.” She sensed the clamoring cries of human souls. “Let’s get to work.”

Ariel made another twisting motion, and the portal shimmered away. “Okay –”

Zoey briefly kissed her angel again.

Zoey –

One more for the road.

He smiled softly in reply and then looked up, taking her hand in his, like a groom and his bride for their first dance.

Hand-in-hand, the angel and his Beatrice took off high into the fire-torn sky, the light of Heaven a shimmery trail behind them.

#

AJ stood up from her long kneel, her knees numb, and blew out the candle from the Holy Family shrine that sat tucked away in a corner in the family den.

Thanks, Grandpa.

You’re welcome. Take care of each other. Then her grandfather’s voice receded into the general radiation of the universe.

Before returning to bed, AJ checked on the babies – little one-year old Janey and Eddie, peacefully asleep in their one crib, as they refused to sleep in separate cribs. Smiling softly, she padded gently into her bedroom and slipped back into bed, her head resting against the nape of her husband’s neck.

“AJ?” David mumbled in his sleep.

“It’s all good, love,” she whispered.