

Ye Watchers
and
Ye Holy Ones
Retcon Edition

RUFEL F. RAMOS

Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones, Retcon Edition

Written and published by Rufel F. Ramos

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: The following is a work of fiction. All people, places, and events are purely products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual people, places, or events is entirely coincidental.

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DEDICATION

For my sister Wendy.

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salamat.

1 TO THESE DARK STEPS

Zoey Fitzpatrick had written off Lilian Adebayo when she disappeared from class after the first four days into the short summer session. Two weeks later, she saw Lilian's name in an administrative email as one of the students to drop her British Literature class.

She thought nothing of it – nearly fifteen years of teaching had given Zoey a healthy, thick skin – until she saw Lilian in her office doorway, a quiet woman from Nigeria who had not said one word in discussion in the brief time she was in class. At first she didn't recognize her but then recalled the email and then her face.

“Yes, Lilian?” Zoey asked, all the while wondering why she was there.

“Professor Fitzpatrick,” Lilian declared in her soft, lilting voice, “I just wanted to explain why I had to drop your class.”

“Oh, no, that's all right --”

“No,” her now-former student interrupted in earnest. “I do not want you to think poorly of me. I really wanted to take this class and finish it. But I had to return to my country.” She paused.

Zoey waited.

“My grandfather was dying, and I wanted to see him one last time.”

“Ah,” Zoey responded, trying to sound sympathetic, even though she thought, *The dying grandparent excuse*.

As if reading her thoughts, Lilian said, “I tried to follow the syllabus and keep up with the readings while away. And I must thank you for this work that you had assigned, *Samson Agonistes*.”

“Oh?” Zoey asked, taken aback.

Then, before Lilian faced what was clearly skepticism on Zoey’s part, she straightened her shoulders like her schoolgirl days in the British school, and she recited, her eyes concentrating on Zoey,

“A little onward lend they guiding hand
To these dark steps, a little further on;
For yonder bank hath choice of Sun or shade,
There I am wont to sit, when any chance
Relieve me from my task of servile toil,
Daily in the common Prison else enjoin’d me,
Where I a Prisoner chain’d, scarce freely draw
The air imprison’d also, close and damp,
Unwholesome draught: but here I feel amends,
The breath of Heav’n fresh-blowing, pure and sweet,
With day-spring born; here leave me to respire.”¹

Zoey stared back, as this was the first time any student of hers took the time to memorize anything from the readings, especially a student who no longer had need to memorize anything at all for her.

¹ Milton, John. *Samson Agonistes*. Lines 1-11.

“I must thank you, Professor,” Lilian continued, carefully choosing her words, “because, when my grandfather died one week after I returned back to my village, I was tasked to give his eulogy, and I had your reading to give, for I had read it on the long flight there. That part was easy to remember because it reminded me of my grandfather. He was blinded in a war long ago in my country, and for years he felt useless to his family and his people because of his blindness. But precisely because of his blindness, he was able to have time for us children. I remember him as a wise man, sitting under his favorite tree, telling us children stories of the old ways, before the English came.” She smiled sadly. “So, Professor, it is the words of a dead, blind Englishman that reminded me of the nobility of my grandfather. And it is the words of that blind Milton that bade my grandfather goodbye.”

“I – I’m so sorry for your loss, Lilian.”

Lilian dipped her head slightly. “Thank you. I am sorry I could not finish your class – I hear good things about you on campus – but family, family must come first.”

“Of course. Yes.”

“Will you be teaching the same class in the fall?”

“What? Oh – yes, yes I will.”

“Then I will see if I can take it again, if that is okay with you, if it fits my work schedule.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Professor.” Lilian dipped her head one more time and then walked away from the doorway.

Zoey stared at the empty doorway, suddenly realizing that Lilian would have been her best student. “Family. Right. Family.”

When that British Literature class ended – a class marred with too many absences and lack of discussion because the handful of student who did show up hadn't done the reading -- Zoey's summer break officially began. Yet she continued to come to El Centro College, to toil away in her little office, organizing papers, making adjustments to her curriculum, researching methods to make her classes better, and writing recommendation letters because, unlike Lilian, she had no family.

“You're still here?” was the universal response from anyone who saw her on campus, from the administrative assistant, to the dean, to fellow faculty members who were actually teaching the second summer session.

Even after nearly crashing into a homeless man on the sidewalk outside of the main college building, Zoey continued to come on campus in the name of next semester's class preparation.

“Do you have any special plans for the summer?” one of the new adjunct instructors had asked, making small-talk over the workroom coffee machine as it was brewing.

“Not really.” Zoey stared at the coffee machine, willing it to brew faster.

“No significant other?”

“No.”

“Kids?” her new co-worker persisted.

“No.”

“Parents? Siblings? Family?”

“Only if you count my cat, and she's pretty low-maintenance.”

“Hobbies?”

“Does reading literature for my classes count?”

Her co-worker, a perky young woman with blond highlights and an eyebrow stud, shook her head. “You’re like a nun in the Church of Academia.”

Zoey only shrugged. “I’m cool with that.”

She shook her head again. “You’re full-time. If I were you, I’d enjoy my summer vacation.”

Later that night, Zoey thought about her words as she got ready for bed. She thought about Lilian and her lilting voice reciting the words of Milton with bittersweet confidence. With her cat curled up next to her, she reread that passage of *Samson Agonistes* and let an old, familiar sadness wash over her.

“Ah well,” she said to her empty room, her empty home.

She set down her book, switched off the end table lamp, and fell asleep.

Not too soon after, the dreams came again.

2 THE MIND IS ITS OWN PLACE

He awoke with a start before the first signal sounded. Blindly, eyes still gummy with sleep, he slid off his bunk, his bare feet slapping the floor, shift position once, and arch as he kneeled to grab his gear underneath his bunk.

In the rare privacy of his own space, feeling the follicles of his skin rising in goose bumps in the cool air, he began to pull on the first of many layers of his gear. First was the skinsuit, light and soft. Next was the polymerized oversuit, a one-piece uniform that shimmered with a pale, iridescent white. Once suited, he left his private quarters.

Personal privacy ended as he headed down the short corridor to the briefing room. Others silently joined him. Once there, they heard their commanding officer review their current progress of their mission, finishing the intricate details of the newly created spacetime that burned brightly in a special containment room on the edge of timeless space. The briefing, as always, was blessedly short, and the small team of Celestial Engineers reported to their assigned stations in the containment room.

He stood before the small but rapidly expanding bubble of spacetime, tweaking its rate of particle acceleration. Too slow, and the bubble would collapse upon itself. Too fast, and it would diffuse into a homogenous smear. Once he achieved the requisite rate, following Central's specs that Alpha Omega had given his team, he paused as the other members of his cohort put into motion the next stage of the process.

In his small pause, he noticed the ring of sentries along the perimeter of the containment room. As far as he could tell, their only task was to stand guard, although against who or what, he didn't know. They all stood, their eyes forward and still as statues, except for one of them, a creature who had taken on a female gender. She looked at the white-hot, blazing bubble in puzzlement.

"Something the matter?" he asked.

She turned to him, somewhat startled. "Oh – nothing." She glanced furtively at the other Sentry guards, but they appeared not to notice her outburst.

"It's not nothing if you're bothered by something."

"Well --" She shrugged. "I know I don't need to know, since I haven't been briefed --"

"Yes?"

"But what is that supposed to be?"

He raised his brows, wondering if he was allowed to tell her. But she was part of the Sentry unit and so was already witnessing the event. Also, her curiosity surprised him, as sentries and engineers usually had nothing to do with each other, their duties being wholly different. "It's a new world."

“That thing?”

“Wait – and you’ll see.”

The initial expansion completed, the haphazard quantum particles began to coalesce, forming larger particles – subatomic and then atomic. Then he stepped back into the process, tweaking the background noise for any coding errors so that the movement of particles followed its choreographed pattern as they began to dance around each other.

“What’s that sound?”

“That? Oh that – we call it ‘the music of the spheres.’”

Her face opened into a surprised smile. “It’s beautiful.”

Taken aback by her response, he replied, “There’s more.”

The fabric of spacetime still bright with radiation, the particles began to form clouds of matter, in accordance to gravitational coding, and these newly formed nebulae began to wheel across the fabric, pulling in more of the brightness until, at their very centers, they began to glow with titanic fusion, forming quasars and galaxies. Following rigidly the specs set forth by Central but executed by Alpha Omega through the Celestial Engineers, the galaxies spun and crashed and spun again, each time forming denser spots of matter in the waves of spacetime with each successive explosive fusion.

One particular oval smear of a galaxy had wispy spiraling arms, one of which spun, like gears within gears, a little accretion disk of heavy, gaseous elements. He pointed out the disk fading into little pinpoints rotating around themselves while also rotating around their central star.

“They’re tiny,” she said, frowning as she strained to see.

“Hold on.” He conferred first with his commanding officer and then the Sentry unit’s CO. When he returned to her position, he said, “You want to see this up close?”

“We can?”

“We have permission, yes.”

He and she dipped forward and then slipped into the fabric of spacetime. Adjusting their relative spatial dimensions along the way, they flew around the newly formed planets of the star Sol, until they came upon its third planet, convulsing in its birth pangs, its moon newly formed after being nearly sheared in half by a hapless asteroid. They hovered in outer orbit, witnessing the Earth cool and then the rains start. Soon the next phase of the coding began, as the waters began to churn not with gas but single-celled algae and phytoplankton, transforming the poisonous air into an atmosphere habitable to oxygen-breathing life. Meanwhile, the land flowed, hardened, and buckled, seizing with every tectonic slide and crash.

“How *interesting*,” she murmured. Spontaneously, she flew over the waters as she witnessed the evolutionary process of life, from sea-based plants and animals to land-based ones, the many millennia of asexual and sexual reproduction, of selection and survival.

He followed at a discrete distance, finding himself as interested in her as the new world forming around him. They arrived at the navel of the world – the terran portal where Earth met Heaven – at the center of a beautiful, lush garden. Hovering just over the dark green surface, he asked, “Would you like to feel the Earth?”

“How?”

In answer, he concentrated, switching his energy in a brilliant show

of light and heat, which dissipated as he set down on the Earth's surface, his bare feet as solid as the grass underneath him.

She stared at his naked embodied form. "How did you --"

"Energy transfer into matter. Just like how we embodied Central's specs."

She shook her head. "You Celestial Engineers always get to know the good stuff?"

"Look – it's easy." He held out his hand at the hovering creature before him.

She grimaced at the flesh before her, unsure of what to expect. "Does it feel – weird?"

"What – are you scared?"

She pulled herself tall and straight. "Of course not." She took hold of his hand.

With his touch triggering her nascent ability, her form switched to matter, and he saw her embodied form abruptly drop onto the soft, verdant ground, breathing fast and hard. "Jeez – are you okay?" he asked, kneeling down before her.

She looked up, her violet eyes staring straight into his dark blue ones. "Wow. Oh wow."

He stared at her eyes, his mind clamoring with new emotions. "Are you hurt?"

"N-no," she replied, shakily. With her free hand, she patted down her face, her arms, her chest, her belly. Then, unexpectedly, she patted his face, as if to make sure he was there. "That was... amazing." She stood up, her long, blue-black hair falling almost to her waist. "Everything's been amazing." She breathed in deeply, her chest rising

and falling. “Thank you for showing me this new world.”

He continued to stare at her. “You’re welcome...”

“Miranda.”

“You’re welcome – Miranda.” He looked down and noticed he was still holding her hand.

She looked around. “What’s next?”

“What?” He released her hand. “Well – there’s humanity’s creation. But Alpha Omega personally wanted to oversee that process, so we’ll have to wait here --” He stopped, noticing that she started to frown as her head leaned to one side. “What’s wrong?”

“Switch your comm. To band 2.”

He did, and then he heard clearly through his mind, “All personnel report back to stations. All personnel report back to stations. This is a Code Crimson. I repeat – this is a Code Crimson. This is not a drill.”

#

He saw the explosion all the way from tactical, the soldiers flying up like so many ragdolls.

With the bellowing orders “Fall back! Fall back!” in his comm, nearly deafening him to the outside sounds of battle, he sped from tactical, through the opposing valley of retreating forces.

The sky was on fire. He stared, agog. How was it possible? How was it allowable?

Someone grabbed him. “Sir! What are you doing?! Remain at your position, sir!”

He fought to break free. “Miranda! She was squad leader at Beta point! Is she – is she --”

“Medi-vac’d to point seven-niner, sir! Behind suppression fire, sir!”

Then the subordinate flew off, rushing to take his new position ahead of the new line.

The sky was bright with explosives as artillery fire and short-range ordinance tore through the brightness. “Take cover!” screamed his comm as another explosion churned the ground and set the air on fire.

He had felt like a coward, ensconced in the relative safety of the tactical tent, while his beloved –

“What are you doing here?” he heard her demand as he stumbled into the field hospital tent, his eyes crazed as they roved over the moaning wounded.

“Miranda! Oh thank God, you’re okay!” At her side, he saw her bright face, sullied with dirt and sweat and blood from a nasty gash on her head. “Wait – you’re hurt...”

Her hand caught his hand before it could touch the wound. “Yes. Hurts like crazy. But thanks to Michael yesterday, we now know what’ll happen. Watch.”

Under his eyes, the deep gash that ran from the crown of her head to her ear slowly sealed up, leaving a dark, angry line. Then, the line grew lighter and brighter, leaving a faint, silvery scar. Healed but dirty, she swung her legs off the cot and sat up straight. They were now eye to eye.

“You know what Michael did – nearly cleaved their leader *in half*. But intelligence reports say that after he was evacuated, he didn’t die. It took him a long time to regenerate, but he made a full recovery by nightfall – unfortunately.”

He stared at her, just happy that she was okay.

She recognized that look. “Hold it, loverboy. Do your job. You’re

needed in tactical.”

“I’m not a soldier! I’m a composer, a choreographer, an engineer. My job --”

“Your job is to do whatever Central wants you to do. And what He wants you to do is figure out how to zig when those rebels zag. We’re at war. What did you expect?”

He frowned. “You’re going back.”

Miranda snorted in exasperation and then cradled his face between her hands. “Listen. We. Cannot. Die. We can get hurt. We can get wounded. But we’ll always heal. So there is no way – no way – that you can lose me. Understand?”

He was still frowning. “Wait. We can’t die.”

“Right.”

“That means *they* can’t die.”

“True.”

“So how --”

“How will this war end?” She smiled. “God only knows.”

She moved to stand up, and he stood up with her. The others who had recovered fully were already leaving the tent, while the gravely injured stayed in their cots, waiting for the healing process to finish. As they reached outside, Miranda pointed up, at the large, flying forms crossing the sky, their payloads heavy with mountains.

“Ah!” an appreciative Miranda remarked. Then she tilted her head to the side, listening to her comm. A wider smile spread across her face. “Go back to tactical,” she said. She gave him a brief kiss and then turned away from him.

“What?” he called out across the widening space between himself

and Miranda, the space quickly filling with a river of soldiers.

“I need to report to Michael. And you’re needed in tactical. Go! You’ll see!” The river swallowed her up, and he raced towards the tactical tent.

“Sir,” a subordinate greeted, and he gave a small nod, still unused to the formal military niceties. Standing before the tactic’s table, he saw in realtime the air response to the rebels’ artillery attack, taking out the military targets with each successive air drop. The enemy attempted to respond in kind, but their air onslaught was shot down in mid-air, their payload dropping short of their targets, churning up the strip of land separating the enemy forces and themselves.

“We’re equally matched,” he murmured, “so how are we --” and then he received word from the main War Room. “What?”

“Alpha Omega, sir.”

He couldn’t believe what he was seeing from tactics, so he, as well as his fellow tacticians, stepped out of the tent.

To see the flagship *Chariot* blot out the sky.

Below in the valley were seemingly endless waves upon waves of soldiers, bristling with arms, on the march. Between them and *Chariot’s* firepower, they brought the war to the rebels' position. Even at tactical he could see the rebel army fleeing – running, flying, racing, screaming – before they were mowed under. When it looked as if they could go no further, barely seen at the far horizon, a slit in the sky appeared and then widened, revealing a darkness totally unknown to himself and those around him.

All he could say, to nobody in particular, was “I didn’t know we had an exit from Heaven.”

The rebels surged backwards, horrified of this great unknown, but the known forces behind them guaranteed pain, humiliation, and worse. So with a tsunami of screams, they surged through that dark doorway until the *Chariot* and her forces reached it, it closed and sealed itself shut, and the *Chariot* and her foot soldiers continued on as if it were never there.

In his comm, he heard Miranda's voice. "Gotta admit: Junior sure has style."

He dropped down onto the ground, still staring at where the dark doorway had been.

#

Even though they didn't have gender the way the humans did, they still took on gender – just as if they were play-acting or putting on costumes. So the being who thought itself as "he" chuckled at the being who thought itself as "she." He chuckled at her, at her alarmed face, as she turned her head away from the garden scene below.

"Don't feel embarrassed for him," he declared, waving his hand before the view screen. "Imagine, to be embarrassed by a human's question about sex. Look how red he's turned!" He gestured below. "And look how red *you've* turned!" He patted her on the knee, which made her feel even more embarrassed.

"Well... those are personal things. Why does he need to ask such personal things? He was very philosophical just a moment ago."

"Oh, come on! The boy is a pure innocent, just newly married. *Everything's* going to be personal for him, and who better to ask than those who are more experienced in these things, that is, us?"

She shifted. "Still... it's not as if he can take anything from what

we say. He and the woman are embodied. That's a big leap."

"I think they'll figure out a way," he said, a smile evident in his words. "And they're not little children. He's a man, and she's a woman. True, an innocent man and an innocent woman. But man and woman, nevertheless, and they halfway figured it out already."

"It's still different – of course it must be different. Having bodies – it must be an awful limitation."

"Now *that*, my dear, doesn't seem to *them*. Look."

"No."

"Oh, come on, you're not getting all squeamish on me, are you? You nearly witnessed their creation, after all, and we look just like them when we're embodied. Also, we'll probably be sent there someday – new policy of providence and all."

"You know something that I don't?"

"Don't change the subject,"

"I'm not. Really, you think we'll be sent, just like Raphael down there?"

"Sure. That's part of our jobs now, isn't it?"

"Well... I'd rather stay here."

He looked sharply away from the scene below to him. "Don't you say that. You sound like Lightbearer over there," and he nodded his head angrily towards a far distance.

"No no no! I mean, errrrmm...." She turned an even brighter red. "Well, *you're* here... and all..."

The angry cloud over his face dissipated, and light shone through. "Ah – Miranda." He reached over and tapped off the feed to Raphael's conversation with Adam. Before she could protest – because she really

was a timid creature when it came to him – he reached out and pulled her onto his bunk. Even though made for one, two could make do if they really tried.

Soon, the two forms were one, he a shining whiteness, she blushing red even more such that the effect was like a deep vermilion shot through with delicious sparks.

After a moment, she said, “And if I go below like Raphael --”

“Then I follow.”

#

He hadn’t meant for that much time to pass, and he hoped – beyond all reason – that he was not too late when he finally was able to slip away from Heaven.

The garden was still beautiful.

He intended immediately to seek out Miranda as soon as he arrived on Earth, but he couldn’t help but divert his arrival point to the long-forgotten place of humanity’s birth, appearing at the headwaters of the river of the Tree of Life.

His substance shimmering a little as he got used to the alien Earth atmosphere and climate, he walked through the silent garden, empty of animals that fell when their stewards fell. Although abandoned, the garden was never overgrown, the footpaths clear and smooth as the day they were created. Every fruiting tree still held their bounty – ripe but not rotten, waiting to be plucked by hungry hands.

When he came to the forbidden tree, he saw that it was nothing extraordinary – just a fruit tree heavy with round, ruby orbs. He sat down underneath the close branches of that tree, smelling its sticky sweet fragrance.

Nothing extraordinary except for that easy edict, as a parent would say to a restless child: Don't touch. Leave it. Much easier than a parent who had loved a favorite grown son and then replaced that son with another, saying, "He is my only begotten Son. Serve Him." How could a creature *not* be tempted by jealousy, by revenge?

He shook his head from this reverie. "Don't go there," he said out loud. He stood up, giving the tree's trunk an assessing slap. A red orb dropped from one of the branches. He caught it easily, turned it over in his hand, and then suddenly threw it as far as he could.

He didn't need a piece of fruit to know the difference between good and evil.

"Too easy. They had it too easy. And they failed," he murmured. Walking back to the center of the garden, he looked up at the many-branching Tree of Life. Unlike the other trees, the Tree of Life had different kinds of fruit, a diversity beyond counting. But the fruit all had the same smell, the ambrosial, other-worldly fragrance of Heaven.

"Not yet."

Following the river outward, he arrived at the now unguarded gate of Eden. The arrival of the cherubim, after over a millennium of vigilance, had alarmed him when he was in Heaven, that a great change was about to happen on Earth. After news of the Reboot spread throughout Heaven, he slipped away, unable to wait.

He pushed open the gate and saw the river split into four rivers, flowing out into an inhospitable world. Knowing that he didn't have much time, he chose one of the rivers on a hunch and took flight, his hopes focused on one thought.

Miranda.

He flew over rocky desert; high, brown mountains; rolling dunes of fiery sand. He flew until he saw the outskirts of a primitive city – run-down shantytown shacks of the very poor, and then great fields of farmland, irrigated by its life-giving neighboring river, besides which were great corrals of domesticated cattle, goats, and sheep. Passing over the high city walls, he saw the crowded warren of buildings, buildings stacked upon buildings, shimmering in the heat of the summer season. In the center of this crowded maze was the tallest building, its many floors terraced with balconies decorated with reclining benches, overhanging awnings, and cooling vines.

On the rooftop garden, overseeing all, was Miranda.

He alighted before her. If she was surprised, she didn't show it. But he was surprised, for Miranda's material form was not the spiritual form she had in Heaven, the last time he saw her over a millennium ago.

She had taken on the material form of a man.

"Go away," she said, her voice a sharp baritone.

"Miranda, listen --"

"Don't call me 'Miranda.' I haven't been Miranda in centuries. Where were you when I was deployed here with the Watchers after those two idiots fell? Where were you while we were forced to protect these immature creatures from themselves? It's like watching ants – building, fighting, dying, building, fighting, dying – so where was Heaven? Where were *you*?"

He stood, dumbstruck. "You sound... you sound..."

"Like Lightbearer? Like hell I do! I don't want to rule Heaven. I – *we* – wanted to go home. But since we were stuck here, we tried to help

those broken humans the best we could.”

“By giving knowledge humanity wasn’t ready for? By injecting the gene pool with non-human DNA? You call *that* improvement?”

“Well, what would *you* call it, Mister High-and-Mighty?”

“I call it playing God!”

Miranda’s eyes flinched, as if she had been slapped. “Go away. Now.” She turned to walk away.

He suddenly felt desperate as he remembered why he was there. “There’s going to be a Reboot.”

She stopped. “You’re lying.”

His entire body slumped, as he realized that Miranda was lost, lost and gone away, for how could she possibly say that? “Angels can’t lie.”

She gave him a withering look.

“All right. All right – I don’t care if you believe me or not. But a Reboot’s coming, and all of this” – he angrily swept his arms out – “will be wiped, to start all over. I thought I could save you, but I see that I was wrong.”

“I don’t need saving,” she sneered. “I --”

“Love, is someone up there?”

Both fallen and unfallen angels turned towards a doorway, in which stood a young woman holding a very large, pale baby. Before she could see him, the unfallen angel de-materialized, now looking like one of the shimmers of heat rising from the exposed rooftop garden.

“No, Mara, no – just talking to myself.” The tall, handsome king held out his arms for his queen and young son, ignoring the shimmer that rose forlornly from his great city.

I’m sorry, Miranda... for not following you, he sent, but the king

hardened his heart and refused to hear the angel's message.

He took a long and slow flight path to Eden, surveying the cities dotting the Earth here and there, the members of humanity toiling and feuding under the watchful eyes of their powerful rulers, seen and unseen. If there were Watchers and other fallen ones, they seemed to ignore him, as their rapacious attention was drawn to the doomed people below. Only in one place did he find the bright light of Heaven among all of humanity – a small family consisting of an old man, his wife, his three sons, and their respective wives. As the men folk in the family were undergoing construction of a gigantic ship beyond the outskirts of a small city, and as the womenfolk tended to their men folk, their neighbors jeered at them for their lunacy, for building such a thing in the middle of a desert.

One of the womenfolk – a young woman already heavy with child – curiously glanced up, as if she could see him pass above. In alarm, he flew higher into the atmosphere until she had faded into the background of the rocky desert.

He arrived shortly at the garden – through the unguarded garden gates (for who, afterwards, would know where to find Eden?), following the river to the Tree of Life, which was the gateway to Heaven.

But as he stretched his form upwards, he felt blocked. He tried again, but he could not enter the gateway. Stunned, he stepped back, and the Tree of Life seemed to fade before him, transparent and beyond his reach.

“Dammit,” he swore, realizing his mistake.

By his own free will, without giving word or gaining permission, he

had left Heaven. By his own free will, he had the audacity to try to save a fallen angel through his meager powers alone. By his own free will, he had damned himself.

Before the inaccessible Tree of Life, he cried bitterly for what seemed like a long time. Then he stood, sought out the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and engorged himself on its fruit until – if he had been able – he would've thrown up. Like Adam and Eve before him, he left the garden, closing the gates behind him.

He waited for God's Judgment.

#

We. Cannot. Die.

As he drifted, a disembodied spirit throughout the eons on Earth, he tried not to feel bitter that his immortality – a blessing when he was unfallen – became a curse in his fallen state.

With the rise of human civilization again after the Reboot, he could see the proxy war of Lightbearer's army and Heaven's army resume amongst the humans. Sometimes, he witnessed Lightbearer's lackey possessing wholly a human soul, subtly to influence human historical events or even obviously to terrorize weak human beings.

In rare but dramatic occasions, a few would even take on material form, masquerading as some extraordinary human. They were like the fallen Watchers of old, who fashioned themselves bodies to pass themselves off as human. But unlike those former Watchers, whose goal was to improve mankind before mankind's acceptable time, the goal of these fallen angels was only predatory, a wolf in sheep's clothing, to wreak havoc amongst humans. A fallen who would chose that route of earthly existence would need to feed off a susceptible

human soul as an energy source, for such mimicry required a power source to keep the fallen angel from shifting back into energy. Hence, he would overhear the increasingly frightened whispered rumors of incubi, succubae, and even vampires, prowling the land, and all he could do was witness their sad, powerless ignorance.

Oh, you poor humans.

For he knew that the ending was always the same for these malicious spirits, whether possessing humans, terrorizing humans, feeding off humans, or needling humans in their subconscious states: once separated from their bodies in death, Lightbearer's lackeys would claim as war prizes the souls originally created for Heaven.

Even in his fallen state, Lightbearer and his lackeys disgusted him, and he refused to throw his lot with them, avoiding other fallen angels and their work on Earth as much as possible. Fortunately, they seemed not to care, seeing him as an inferior sort – unwanted not only by Heaven but also Hell, since he fell not through glorious rebellion against Heaven but through a stupid, absent-minded mistake.

Cut off from Heaven, he was as ignorant of cosmic events as the humans were. But unlike the humans, whose inalienable bodies could sustain their life, he had no natural source of energy, that is, his connection with Heaven. He was as insubstantial as air and light, a weak and starving intelligence buffeted by slow time.

It was almost enough to drive him insane.

He sometimes saw a few of the former Watchers try to stay on Earth post-Reboot, while refusing to do the Lightbearer's work, by residing in trees, rivers and seas, and even animals. Like parasites, they would weave themselves into living matter and feed off the trees'

photosynthesis, the waters' kinetic energy, and the animals' digestion. At first, the ex-Watchers' spiritual state would still be aware and active, energized by their hosts and even worshipped by certain civilizations as nature and animal gods. But the longer they resided there, the less aware they became of their former state as angels, until they became dumb and silent, as close to self-annihilated as an immortal spirit could be.

Witnessing that self-annihilation frightened him enough to remain drifting. But even he grew tired of his eternal unmoored state, and he discovered a compromise when he floated past a beggar, a filthy man with a mind half-destroyed by mental illness and malnutrition. He was not much older than thirty, but he looked like a battered old man, hair matted and gray, dressed in thrown-away rags. Here was an embodied human soul whose mind was already filled with disjointed, clamoring voices, none of them demonic.

What harm could one more voice do?

With one intake of breath, the beggar inhaled the fallen angel and immediately flew into convulsions as the spirit at first struggled, feeling suffocated and claustrophobic, as if he were buried alive. Then the man's soul retaliated. Since the man's soul – as tormented as it was by his human-made demons – was still Heaven-bound, it recognized him as a foreign substance, rejecting him as a body would reject a transplanted organ. But he slipped, weaved, and settled amongst the disjointed brain chemicals and the various material parasites infesting the man, and the man's soul eventually left him alone.

He was only along for the ride – a mute, still passenger on a very long journey, for however long this man's life would be. However,

although filtered through the man's madness, he was able to share the man's albeit constrained experiences of the world around him. The sense data helped him keep anchored in this space and time, as he learned what the world of man was for that human and what it would later become.

In possessing this mad beggar, he was able to keep his own sanity.

Where am I?

From the traffic of domestic slaves running errands for their masters, and the all too few who would pity the beggar and drop pieces of food into his grimy, claw-like hands, he learned that he was in Ur. His existence was the beggar's existence. He would sleep in a back alley somewhere, in the hard-packed dirt surrounded by mud-clay walls, then awake, urinate or defecate only a little ways from where he slept, shamle to a public corner, and beg for food and drink until the sun went down. Then he would shamle to a back alley – sometimes the same place, sometimes not – and sleep off the effects of barely surviving.

He remained in Ur until the beggar died from his various diseases. When the beggar's soul left his body, the fallen angel found that he also easily slipped out of the body, as easily as breath. Where that soul went he didn't know, for it said not a word to him, not even acknowledging that they had even shared the same body all of those years.

His next host was a young boy, but he was also suffering from many voices as a result from his mental illness. This time, he waited until the boy was asleep, when he slipped in amongst the nightmares that had been tormenting the boy. A son of a rich merchant, he was

sent to Damascus, on the advice of a priest who believed that the source of the boy's mental illness was a demon possession.

Not quite, holy man.

A seer in Damascus sacrificed a goat, peered into its liver, burned it and its meat with various resins and herbs as a burnt offering to the gods, and forced the boy to inhale the reeking smoke. The only effect it had was a boy who smelled terrible and retched into the burnt offering, to the horror of the seer and the unfortunate servant whose job it was to bring the boy back, cured.

Uncured, the merchant's son returned to Ur, and the servant was whipped for his failure. Afterwards, the boy spent his days indoors, rocking in a corner, while the spirit within him listened to the gossip of the servant women around him. When the boy eventually died from a fever that had swept through the city, he flew clear of the house, drifted a little bit, appreciating the sky and sun that the boy hadn't seen in months.

Then he settled into the age-addled mind of a snowy-haired and snowy-bearded shepherd, who was traveling with his family to Jerusalem. Unfortunately, once in Jerusalem, the old shepherd found himself in the middle of a turf war amongst enraged, armored men, bristling with spears and horses. Instead of just stealing his family's flocks of sheep, they massacred all the men folk in the family first, and then they stole the women for themselves, in addition to the sheep.

Wasn't this supposed to be stopped by the Reboot?, the fallen angel sighed as he drifted above the butchered bodies of his previous host and the host's family.

In spite of this setback, he decided to remain in Jerusalem, as there

were plenty of psychologically damaged human beings that he could harmlessly possess. With each passing possession, he lost track of how long he was in Jerusalem, until, one day, he saw something impossible.

He was in yet another deranged but harmless beggar – this time, suffering from syphilis-induced madness. While begging on yet another public corner, he noticed an increase in traffic and activity along the main street in front of him, as people crowded in front and along someone walking down the street.

That can't be... can it?

He saw a man, still young even as he approached early middle-age, obviously a popular rabbi and teacher, as seen by his followers. But the light of Heaven shining from him was not the reflected light often seen in truly holy men. Instead, *he* was the source of that light.

Alpha Omega.

This was not possession that he was witnessing. Central did not possess. This was a miracle, a miracle that, if he hadn't been in humans for as long as he had been, he would've remembered that he had known was coming, ever since humanity's loss of Eden. He had been briefed on it, before his own fall from grace. But now, he didn't quite know what to do in the face of this. Should he stay and watch? Would He recognize him? *Stupid, of course He would.* What would happen if He did? Would He try to cast him out of his host, like any other exorcism? What would He do to him if He did?

For the first time in his fallen life on Earth, he took control of his host and fled from this miraculous Man of God.

He didn't know if He would follow. Looking behind him, he half expected to be blasted out of the human's body. Oddly enough, he

almost wanted to be blasted out of the human's body, as he felt that deep ache of loss of Heaven, of being cut off from that light. For a brief moment, having the touch of Heaven – even as a form of punishment – was something he desired. But that didn't stop him from running, and the miracle standing in the crowded streets of Jerusalem did not stop him, for reasons he didn't and couldn't know.

A few days later, he felt a tearing in his essence, and even his mad host wasn't so mad as not to realize that a heinous and unspeakable crime had been committed. Eyes wide with fear, he stood with the rest of the gawking people as they watched the public execution of three men. In the center was the miraculous Man of God, and the fallen angel within him struggled to understand why He didn't save Himself that day.

When he saw the light of Heaven sputter and die, as a flame flickers and then is snuffed out, leaving only a piece of meat for the ravens to pick at, he again took over his human host, forcing him to run away into an isolated, grubby alleyway, leaving the stinking hilltop of crosses and rotting bodies behind. There, in the privacy of darkness, the fallen angel screamed in grief and loss and with such hate against mankind that he ripped out of his host's body, as a slick baby is ripped from its mother's womb, killing the poor beggar in the process.

Horrified at what he had done, he did not possess another human for a very long time. After a time, he drifted across the dark Mediterranean Sea to Rome when, again exhausted and weakened from being without moorings, he sought a populace with enough mad people in it. There, he settled into the dark mental crevices of a slow-witted, minor soldier in the Roman army, whose leaders were

following a mad emperor. For the next few years, he saw behind the frightened and confused man's eyes murders committed in the name of Caesar or the Republic, and when he died from dysentery in far-flung and barbaric Londonium, in Britannia, the trees lining the River Thames were starting to look appealing to the human-weary spirit.

Then a long, continuous line of poor, sick, illiterate rural peasants and village beggars housed him, each host dying either through disease, casualty of war, or simply exhaustion, as the life expectancy of each human being at that time and place seemed not to go beyond age forty. Tiring of the narrow-minded beggars and peasants who seemed to dull his intelligence with each possession, he settled upon a harmless schizophrenic who was serving on a sailing ship heading for the New World, to the Port of Charleston. There, he witnessed the slave trade, a business as old as prostitution and murder, and he suddenly felt soiled and corrupted, being in the employment of slave traders. As soon as his host fell asleep, he left him, settling on short-lived but relatively innocent old humans suffering from dementia, of which there were plenty in supply.

It was in Charleston that he witnessed another massive war, feeling helpless as the city was laid siege, blockaded, and bombarded. One of his hosts actually died when his house was set afire when one of the bombardments struck a nearby building housing munitions and the resulting explosion spread fire throughout the city. Being burned to death was the most painful way he had ever left his host, and he primarily stayed within the trees near the tail end of the war, as the battles continued to wage on, feeding the ground with more blood, urine, and feces than he would ever care to witness. For him, risking

self-annihilation in the trees was preferable to having his human hosts be ripped away from him, over and over again and at random.

After the war, he wobbly departed an old oak and slipped into the brain-damaged child of a former Confederate soldier who used to be a farmer before the war. In desperation, to save his large family of six children and his own shattered sanity, the former soldier was returning to that life. With his family in tow, he traveled west, settling in Memphis, Tennessee, when the money to travel further west ran out. His young child spent his days lolling on the porch of the family house, staring at the dust motes dancing in the air. After witnessing much horror, the fallen angel within the child was grateful for this simple life, and was even grateful that the child grew into a simple-minded young man, a gentle giant who could do simple chores, like dig holes and pull ropes, which his more able older brothers patiently taught him how to do. When his brothers grew up and left the homestead, he followed them, traveling further west, where there was more work. The brothers finally settled in the growing town of Dallas, where he and his brothers did hard but simple manual labor. When he died of an accidental drowning after a particularly bad spring-time flash flood, the weary spirit was sad to see him go, but he was certain that the man's soul was Heaven-bound.

Between the crazy, the brain-damaged, and the age-demented, he found a cornucopia of human souls living in relative freedom from violent war and political strife. So the ancient spirit dug in, like a tick finding a perpetually renewable source of blood. It was there, at the tail end of the twentieth century, that he found a middle-aged man, homeless and crazy.

When he settled into the sleeping form and then woke up the next day, he discovered to his amazement that the spirit driving the man's body was not the man's soul, but himself. In searching for the man's soul, he found instead a dark, encapsulated space, a prison of the man's making. He marveled at it, unsure of what to make of it, for he had never seen such a thing before and didn't even know that humans could create such a thing within themselves. But, for the first time in his earthly exile, he was in full possession of a body, not because he had wrested control, but because its owner had left it open for others to take.

And so he took.

#

He opened his eyes and saw a dirty, gray slab above him.

Where am I? he thought. *When am I?*

After fighting a brief wave of vertigo and nausea, he regained his bearings and, with care and deliberation, shifted his body such that he was now facedown on the concrete lip on which he had been asleep. His bent arms in and clenched hands tight against his chest, he breathed deeply booze, pungent body odor, sharp exhaust fume smells, and then pulled his knees in, as his hands unclenched and arms straightened out until he was in a low kneel, careful not to hit his head against the concrete slab above him. He shifted his legs over the concrete lip and stared dully at the pre-dawn empty interstate highway below.

He was itchy, stinky, and greasy. He knew he needed to eat, but he had no appetite as his stomach hurt with a dull, deep ache that, over the past few weeks, had grown increasingly stronger and never left him.

He stared at the gray lanes below until the sleepy highway started to wake up with morning traffic. Pushing aside the soiled rags that served as his pillow, he scooted down the concrete lip until the underside of the bridge (his “roof”) met grassy hill. Then he scrambled up that hill, his grubby fingers reaching deep into the scrubby grass and dirt so that he wouldn’t roll off the hill to the concrete shoulder and access road below.

Standing at the bridge overpass, he saw two then three other men emerge from their sleeping berths, scrambling up their respective areas of hill like arthritic cockroaches. Before they reached the bridge, he set off, shrugging the grimy, stained trench coat over his thin shoulders. He ignored the shelters and soup kitchens – too much God-talk. Following a well-worn path, he trekked north, walking along the light rail tracks to the West End area of the city.

Like the highways, downtown was starting to wake up as well. More people arrived for work, for school, or for leisure, filling up the skyscraped streets, the light rail stations, and the high-priced parking lots. This crowding he preferred, for only in crowds could he disappear as everyone ignored each other, focused as they were in their own itineraries and agendas.

He followed the flow of pedestrians and then sharply veered left, disappearing briefly behind an illegally parked van and into the loading dock area of the city’s downtown college.

With practiced eyes, he checked for campus police and any other member of the college as he headed for two large dumpsters. Early morning was always best – no campus police, and last evening’s cafeteria refuse would still be there, high enough in the pile for easy

pickings.

Fifteen minutes' worth of excavation and inspection yielded expired but unopened bags of corn chips, a couple of dented cans of diet cola, an empty water bottle, and a paperback book. He stuffed them in the deep pockets of his trench coat, checked again for anyone, and half-ran, half-walked out of the loading dock area, just in time to nearly run into a woman who was distracted by the ID badge she was putting over her head.

"Wh-ahhh!" she gave a little yelp as he cut left onto the street, narrowly avoiding a collision with a work truck laden with broken windshields.

Light-headed and sweating, he ran back into the safety of waiting light rail patrons. Taking advantage of an empty bench seat as they boarded, he tore through two bags of chips, chasing them down with warm diet soda, before the nausea of low blood sugar and hunger hit him. He tossed the refuse into a nearby trash bin, rubbing off the chip dust as best he could in a small attempt of personal hygiene, and left before the rail police noticed him sully the touristy part of town by his presence.

His stomach aching badly, he followed the rail to the Amtrak station, a cavernous place that car-hungry Dallas drivers rarely used. There, he made use of the public restroom, a task he always found infinitely disgusting but, since the advent of modern plumbing, bearable. As best he could, he washed his fuzzy mouth, his skeletal and beard-tangled face, his long, matted dark hair, and his calloused hands. He drank greedily the water and filled his water bottle.

His morning toilette done, he sat down in the waiting area of the

empty station, but only to regain his breath and strength that he had expended to get to this part of his day.

Outside the station was busy with light rail patrons who never entered the train station building, so he blended in as best he could again, aided by people refusing to look at him or even acknowledging his existence. Still feeling weak, in spite of the food, water, and brief rest, he boarded one of the light rail cars, standing next to the closed sliding door behind him. At the second stop – and nary a conductor to be seen – he stepped off, walked a short way, and arrived at an unlikely small oasis of tall trees, flowing water, somber bells, and solitude.

Thanks-Giving Square was the closest he could ever come to a sacred space in this body's lifetime.

Sitting down before a gigantic gold ring walkway, he pulled out the book that he had fished out of the dumpster: Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. He opened the book at a random page and read the first lines he saw:

O, wonder!

How many goodly creatures are there here!

How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world

That has such people in't!²

He closed the book, set it down, and buried his face in his hands.

God, he thought, *you have a sick sense of humor*.

The three bells above the ring sounded the top of the hour, shaking off his thoughts. Returning the book into his coat, he stood up and

² Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Act V, scene 1, lines 181-184.

walked slowly down the center pathway, the liquid sounds of falling, flowing, and splashing water on the left and right of the pathway. He paused before the bone-white, ammonite-spiraling building ahead of him.

Why did I come here? His usual routine was to head towards the central library building, ramble through its many stories, and get lost in the stacks until closing time. Then he would wander until dusk, avoiding police, other poor wanderers like him, and criminals – mostly young men – who would assault a homeless person for sport. At dusk, he would scrounge for more food and drink, retreat to the sleeping spaces under the bridge that served as his “home,” and fitfully fall asleep like the restless dead.

Instead, he found himself drawn towards the spiraling chapel of Thanks-Giving Square. For now he could no longer ignore the signs his body had been giving for the past weeks and months.

It could be today, he thought, which brought neither fear nor joy – just a numb thud, like a limb falling asleep. For the first time since taking possession of this crazy, homeless man’s body, he crossed the high bridge that connected the water garden to the high chapel doorway, towards the sancta sanctorum of this little man-made oasis.

He saw a dark, tall room with ten small chairs. One stone table, a white marble cube, was raised on a red marble circle. Spiraling stained glass rose high, high above him. He sat in one of the small chairs; he felt his heart stop.

Now, he thought, waiting for his five-year sojourn in this body to end.

But he was mistaken, for the heart continued to beat, albeit wildly,

with no rhythm. The body's organs and systems were shutting down, the body thrashing before the stone altar, but the body didn't die.

For the crazy homeless soul, encapsulated and buried deeply within this dying body, did not leave.

He sighed with exasperation. This sometimes happened. It violated his sense of decorum, to leave while the human soul was still in the dying body, but he'd done it before, in Charleston and Jerusalem. So he stretched his spiritual form upwards, to slip off the body the way an actor slips off his costume.

But he was blocked. He tried again, but he could not escape.

Trapped in a dying body with a comatose soul, he thrashed like a bound living human, buried alive in a coffin. In a panic he thought, *The mind is its own place, and in itself make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.*³ He gave up his thrashing and pulled inward, his spirit forming a fetal ball in despair. God's Judgment, it seemed, had come for him at last. Then the waves of pain from the other spirit, that human soul, began to unfurl outward, like a dark flower opening its jagged petals, its sickly-sweet scent emanating to form this new Hell.

#

Gasping, Zoey Fitzpatrick sat up from her deep sleep, her eyes wide and wild and awake.

"Jamie!"

She shivered as she got her bearings, her eyes sweeping her surroundings, forcing the last wisps of her nightmare to evaporate in the warm light of morning. She shook her head.

³ Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Book I, lines 254-255.

“Damn. I need coffee.”

3 FLOATING REDUNDANT

“Jamie, Jamie, look!” Twelve-year old Zoey Fitzpatrick stopped her bike and pointed at the side of the gravel path, down the hill.

Her ten-year old brother stopped his bike. He saw a deserted, partially collapsed Quonset hut which the nearby jungle had begun to reclaim. Another path leading to the hut was nearly obliterated with high weeds.

“They say that was once the old church, but now it’s haunted,” Zoey declared.

“Who’s they?”

“The kids at school.”

“Huh.”

“C’mon, let’s check it out.”

“No.”

“Why?”

He looked again at the old church and then looked away. “Don’t you see it?”

“Jamie...”

“It’s all covered in black. It’s not a good place. Let’s go somewhere else.”

“Jamie...”

“It’s oozing, Zoey.”

“Jamie...”

“I know, I know. I’m not supposed to talk like that.” He crossed his arms, his thin face sullen.

“We just moved here, Jamie. We’re new, nobody knows us. We need to fit in.”

“*You* do. I don’t.”

“Jamie --”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Look, I’m not you, okay? I don’t need friends. But promise me you won’t go there, okay?” He nodded his head angrily down the hill.

“Seriously?”

“Have I ever lied to you?”

Zoey’s blue eyes met her brother’s dark eyes. “All right. It’s probably time for dinner, anyways.”

#

“Meow.”

Not-quite forty-year old Zoey Fitzpatrick looked up from her morning cup of coffee, eye to eye with the golden eyes of her calico cat.

“Sorry, Ozzy-girl. Does kitty want breakfast?” Zoey went to the pantry and scooped out a portion of kibble, the sound of which had her cat springing from the kitchen counter to her food and water below.

“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings: / Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” Zoey recited, her voice low and booming.⁴ She knelt down and scratched Ozzy between the ears, appreciating her cat’s momentary distraction from old memories of her past.

“Why am I remembering this?” she asked her cat. “I don’t want to remember this.” For that first memory was like a train car, linked to another memory, to another, barreling down out of control as she, like Pearl Pureheart, was tied to the tracks, watching the train getting closer and closer with no Mighty Mouse to save her.

It was Saturday, and Zoey had no business to feel melancholy on a Saturday. She surveyed her surroundings, taking in the familiar walls and furniture of her childhood – and now grownup – townhome apartment. Ozzy fed, coffee and cereal bars on hand, still in her pj’s, she had a morning of syllabi preparation for the impending fall, a mid-morning of a movie or two with a big plate of homemade queso and nachos, a post-lunch cat-nap, and a bit of retail therapy for music and books (one could never have enough music and books), all before dinner, which may or may not be shepherd’s pie.

By the time Zoey had left her favorite bookstore, having found an actual 1912 grammar school Latin primer, an illustrated copy of William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and a couple of Beatles LPs, shepherd’s pie and an ale – even in the early August heat – still sounded powerfully good.

After dropping off her purchases, gulping down another quick cup of coffee, and feeding a particularly peevish Ozzy, Zoey managed to

⁴ Shelley, Percy Bysshe. “Ozymandias.” Lines 10-11.

grab the commuter train just before the last whistle, grateful that, what with working downtown, she needn't mess with finicky ticket machines as long as she didn't lose her transit pass.

The train she boarded was a double-decker, so she climbed up the narrow stairway and quickly claimed a window seat with a table, as an automated female voice perkily announced, "The next station is – Medical/Market Center." As the train lurched forward and then picked up speed, she pulled out the slim volume of Blake, randomly opened it, and read what was there.

O Rose, thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.⁵

Zoey looked up, as the memory came.

#

Zoey was running and running, trying desperately not to cry.

Promise not to tell, she heard his voice in her head. *It's our special secret.*

She ran and ran and ran from that lonely little church, up the gravel path, where she nearly slipped and fell. Ran and ran to the nearest slip of beach and water, and she stripped off her little sundress and sandals and went into the sea, to wash it off, to wash it all away.

⁵ Blake, William. "The Sick Rose."

It's a game that grownups play, the voice echoed in her head.

“No!” she cried out, finally out loud, even though she had kept that NO inside the whole time, wanting to fit in, wanting to belong. “No no no no!” she cried out, kicking with each no.

The little bit of blood, diluted in that vast ocean, swirled and then swept clear. Zoey cried until her teeth began to chatter, as the sun went down and the wind picked up. Emerging from the ocean, the salt water still streaming off her body as her feet became coated with sand, she pulled on her sundress and sandals. Painfully, she walked back to the gravel path and the hill, and, nearly blind in the deepening dark, she found her bike and walked home.

Her mother, seeing her through the kitchen door, began to yell, “Zoey call --”

But the command was sharply interrupted with Jamie’s screams.

Jamie, rooted to the kitchen floor, pointed at his sister, shrieking, “Mama, she’s oozing, Zoey’s oozing black, she’s covered in it!”

Alarmed, her mother was trying to calm down her brother. “Jamie, Jamie, it’s okay --”

As Zoey stumbled through the door, Jamie jumped as if shocked, fell down hard on the floor, and scrambled backwards away from his sister. “Can’t you see, she’s covered in evil evil evil --”

“Zoey! Call an ambulance! Zoey!” her mother yelled as she grabbed after Jamie, trying to control his flailing arms and legs.

Zoey felt like Lot’s wife, turned into a pillar of salt.

“Zoey!”

#

“This station is – Medical/Market Center.”

Zoey's eyes came back into focus, as more people boarded the train, heading for a fun Saturday evening in the city of Dallas.

"The next station is – Victory Station."

Zoey's eyes stared dully at the vast medical district slipping past her window as the next memory arrived, which was always attached to the previous one.

#

Zoey's parents were fighting.

"They don't have the facilities here, Zack. Don't you want Jamie to get better?"

"Amy, of course I do! You're just not giving the treatments a chance --"

"Oh please! It's been two months, and he's no better off than he was when he broke down in the kitchen. He's ten years old and a paranoid schizophrenic, Zack. You think this tiny island will cure him? Do you?"

CPO Zachary Fitzpatrick threw his hands up in frustration. "You *know* we can't move. We're stationed here for two more years."

"You mean *you* are."

"What are you saying?"

Zoey, who had been trying to keep quiet for all of these months, finally could not keep the sound of pain from her voice as she staggered into the kitchen. "Mom – Dad – I'm sorry." Then she collapsed onto the kitchen floor.

When she woke up, she was in a hospital bed, in a private room, IV tubes running from her arm. A nurse arrived to check on her, her face looking at her with infinite pity.

“Where am I?”

“The base hospital, dear.”

“Where are my parents?”

“They’ll be here soon. They’ve visited you every day since you were admitted.”

“How long have I been here?”

“It’ll be a week as of today.”

Zoey stared at the two needles buried securely into her vein. “Why am I here?”

The nurse struggled a little, her face shifting with tiny, tight muscle movements. “Father Tony Macinas.”

Zoey recoiled at the name and, in spite of herself, she began to cry.

The nurse pulled a side chair and sat down. “You’re – what – twelve years old? But I’m sorry to say you’re no longer a child. Your parents may not tell you this and they may not want others to tell you what I’m about to say, but you need to know.” She looked at the closed door and at her watch. “You had an acute case of PID – pelvic inflammatory disease. That means all of your girl parts – all of them – became infected. You must’ve kept the symptoms either hidden or didn’t feel them until it was too late because the PID did horrific damage. You could’ve died, your fever was that high.”

Zoey’s body shook as she tried to understand what the woman was saying.

“Your case of PID was caused by one or two STDs – sexually transmitted diseases – chlamydia or gonorrhea. You tested positive for both. When you were delirious with fever, you spoke about this... man.”

“W-what did I say?”

“Enough to know that he’s the reason you’re in this hospital bed and *you are not to blame.*”

Zoey’s cries turned into deep, gasping, ragged sobs.

The nurse glanced at her watch and the closed door. “What I’m about to say will be very hard for you, but you need to know. First, the damage to your body has likely made you infertile – that means you likely won’t be able to have any kids. Second, this island is small, so everyone eventually hears everything. This man Macinas – he was a young priest at one of the local churches, right? Two days ago his body was found, floating near Orote Point. Police have ruled it an accidental drowning.”

At the sound of the doorknob clicking open, the nurse stood up, pushing aside the chair, and checked the tape of Zoey’s IV needles. She left as Zoey’s parents entered the little, sterile room.

Forcing herself to stop the tears, Zoey stared at her hands as her mother cried and embraced her, and her father stood and said -- nothing.

#

“This station is – Victory Station.”

Zoey looked at the large group of boisterous children making their way down the stairway, their parents following behind them. She glanced out her window and saw an electronic marquee advertising that the circus had come to town and that the first show was in an hour from now. She smiled at that, and then she smiled wistfully at a woman just a little younger than herself, a laughing toddler girl riding on her mother’s shoulders. Behind them was the last parent, a man – also just

a little younger than Zoey – bedecked with a backpack and diaper bag, smiling as he carried a collapsed umbrella stroller and followed the mother and child.

She breathed deeply as the unexpected ache of loss hit her heart and lungs.

“The next station is – Dallas Union Station.”

#

Zoey, who had fallen asleep at the kitchen table, woke up to the sound of the apartment door opening, the familiar jingle and rattle of keys and low squeak of hinges needing oiling.

“Hi, Mom,” Zoey called out, yawning and rubbing her eyes.

Her mother kicked off her worn sneakers, peeled off her socks, and, barefoot, padded into the kitchen, blinking at the bright ceiling lights. “You awake? It’s nearly midnight.” She set down her purse and the two bags of groceries that she had picked up after work.

Zoey sprung up to put away the groceries. “Did you have dinner yet?”

“Yeah, I got a burger before I went to the store.”

“Another burger? That’s not very healthy, Mom.”

Her mother gave a dismissive snort. “I deal with ‘healthy’ for twelve hours, young lady. A burger dinner won’t kill me. But I could go for a cup of coffee.” She sat down heavily before the table.

“Decaf coffee?”

“Okay – *decaf* coffee.” She yawned and stretched, the zoo animals on her nurse’s scrubs momentarily unwrinkling with her stretch.

The groceries put away, Zoey microwaved a mug of water, stirred in some decaf instant, and added a couple of splashes of low-fat milk.

“Thanks,” her mother murmured, her glasses steaming over the hot coffee. “Now, tell me why you’re not asleep in bed.”

“It’s this.” Zoey patted the clasp envelope in front of her. She opened it and pulled out a stiff, heavy-stock sheet of paper. Flipping it over, she pushed it towards her mother.

Her mother paused in mid-sip and set down her mug. “It’s your high school diploma.”

“Yes.”

“You graduated this year?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re only sixteen.”

“Mom, I finished all the requirements early. I took on extra classes for the usual year, and I took summer classes. There’s nothing for me to take. I’m done.”

Her mother picked up the diploma, her eyes sweeping over the fancy lettering, the official signatures, and her full name: Zoey Jane Fitzpatrick. After a heavy pause, she declared, “Zoey, I’m so proud of you.”

Zoey let out a relieved sigh. “You’re not mad that I didn’t tell you that I was graduating early? You’re not mad that I skipped the ceremony?”

“No, no, sweetie,” her mother assured. “But why so fast? No chance for clubs, for friends, no senior year --”

Now it was Zoey’s turn to give a dismissive snort. “I may be sixteen, Mom, but I’m not a kid. *They’re* the kids. Partying, snarky comments, cheating on assignments, and all that whining. I got tired of feeling sorry for all of my teachers – except for those who saw their

job as part babysitter, part prison guard, part party buddy. Yechhh. I have better things to do.”

“Like what?”

“Like getting a job and helping you out.”

“Zoey, you are too young --”

“Mom. I’m not too young to know that you’re working yourself to death. I’m not too young to know that Jamie’s treatment program is expensive and that Dad’s alimony and child support barely pays for it.” Zoey’s jaws clenched, letting the familiar anger spark, then settle down. “I’m not too young to know that Dad’s payments arrive later and later, but the bills still need to get paid. Mom, you’ve been worrying about me and Jamie all of this time; won’t you let me take some of that worry away?”

She hadn’t meant to make her mother cry, but there she was – quiet tears sliding slowly down her tired face. “I’m sorry!” She stood up and went to the other side of the table, hugging her mother.

Her mother sniffled and then laughed, “Ah, you’ve made me snotty,” which, as she intended, made Zoey laugh, too. She held up the diploma. “Suitable for framing.”

“Mom?”

“Mmmm-hmmm?”

“Do you think Jamie will ever get better to go to school? To graduate?”

Her mother set down Zoey’s diploma. “I don’t know, sweetie. But I’d like to see that.”

#

“This is – Dallas Union Station,” declared the melodious female

voice.

“Oh Mom,” Zoey said softly, seeing Union Station getting closer from her window. “I’m glad you didn’t live to see what happened to Jamie.”

She stood up, stuffing her Blake book into her purse, and made her way down the stairs, off the train, and onto the waiting platforms, crowded with Saturday sightseers, local and tourist. She crossed the tracks to get to the other side of the platform, to catch the light rail line to her waiting shepherd’s pie and ale – lots of ale.

Teeming with Saturday visitors, the rail car she entered was so crowded that she only had enough room to step inside, grab a pole, and feel the doors swoosh shut behind her. Even though the loud passenger chatter drowned out the garbled announcer’s voice, Zoey didn’t need an announcement since she got off at the West End station every time she went to work, at the nearby downtown college campus. Like yesterday, when a homeless person nearly knocked her down –

The lurching of the rail car was not why Zoey nearly fell over.

I dreamed him, she suddenly realized. *I dreamed him last night.*

Instead of continuing down the red line to Mockingbird Station, she got off at West End. *This is crazy*, she thought, but she headed towards the college anyways, a swirl of the past flashing through her mind.

#

Zoey’s supervisor, dressed in the same button-up black polo shirt, khaki pants, black sneakers, and blue work apron, tapped her on the shoulder and said, “Zoey, you have a phone call in the back.”

She looked up, harried, seeing the long line of customers returning

merchandise. After Christmas was always horrible, as disgruntled people flocked back to the store with gifts either defective or unwanted. “Joe, I’m kinda busy here.”

Joe exhaled deeply, debating whether to speak in front of that long line of disgruntled customers, and then replied, “Zoey, it’s Parkland. Something’s happened to your mom.”

Zoey didn’t hear the sound of her scanning gun drop as she abandoned the cash register, leaving Joe to deal with duties that didn’t matter anymore.

“Hello?” she asked, trying not to yell at the phone.

“Is this Zoey Fitzpatrick?” a tired but professional-sounding voice responded.

“Yes.”

“Okay, this is Lisa Murphy, the charge nurse on your mom’s floor. Your mom and I work together.”

“Yes?”

“Zoey, there’s been an incident.”

“What?”

“There’s – oh, honey. Come to Parkland now. Your mom’s had a stroke, and it’s bad. ICU, room 42. Hurry.”

“Okay.” Zoey heard the buzzy sound of a dial tone as Nurse Murphy hung up. “Okay,” she whispered. She looked around, suddenly unsure of where she was, but then hit her head with the palm of her hand. “Gotta get a ride.”

She ran to her little storage locker, grabbed her bag, and rushed back to the returns counter. “Joe, I gotta go.”

“I know – you’re good here, just go.”

“But – I don’t have a car. My mom drops me off here on the way to work, then picks me up when she gets off. I don’t have a car, Joe!”

Joe, a middle-aged man with kids of his own, looked at the desperate, watering blue eyes of the eighteen year old girl in front of him. He fished out a small ring of keys from a khaki front pocket. “Take my truck.”

“Oh – Joe --”

“It’s the little white Ford Ranger, parked in front of Yard and Gardens. Blue rosary beads hanging from the rearview mirror, you can’t miss it.”

She took the keys, still warm from his pocket, and hugged him tightly.

“*Vaya con Dios, mija,*” he whispered.

Zoey tore away, running as fast as she could to Joe’s truck. Not caring whether she would be caught speeding or not, she raced to Parkland, normally a familiar place of her mom’s job, but now suddenly unfamiliar and frightening.

In ICU, room 42, she saw her mother’s little body, hooked up to machines that were breathing for her. She could tell, even at age eighteen, that her mother was already brain dead from a massive stroke. Next to the sterile hospital bed, Zoey held her mother’s listless hand. *Mom... Mom...* She looked up at the machines, at the lifeless body with wires and tubing connected to those machines. She bowed down, her forehead touching that well-worn, caring hand for the last time. *Goodbye, Mom.*

Jamie’s caregivers at his hospital didn’t want to let him go to the funeral service, but she stood her ground. “It’s our mother’s funeral,

goddammit,” she said over and over again to their bureaucratic protests, until they eventually gave in, discharging him for that day only, hopped up on antipsychotics. Holding his hand as if he were a little boy instead of the tall, sixteen-year old teen he was, she silently guided him along the small pathway to the church gravesite, where a priest gave his blessing to the cremated remains of Amanda Hernandez Fitzpatrick before the small, silent audience consisting of Zoey, Jamie, her mother’s co-workers, and Joe.

Once the last bit of dirt covered the urn containing their mother’s ashes, Zoey, who did not want a reception for the sake of her brother, endured well-meaning tears and hugs and watched the others walk away.

Jamie, still staring at their mother’s new grave, asked in a quiet voice, “What happens now?”

“Now? I take care of you.” Also staring at their mother’s grave, she felt the weight of her new responsibility – being the legal guardian of her little brother, as her mother had wished in her will.

After a long silence, Jamie softly declared, “Dad should be here.”

That old anger sparked up. “Jamie --”

“He should, Zoey.”

Trying not to clench her hands, Zoey replied, “Jamie, Dad’s been gone for six years. Why the hell would he even care?” Her eyes burned. “He doesn’t deserve to be here.”

Jamie, whose hand was still in Zoey’s, gave a small squeeze. “Zoey – don’t.”

She shook her head, never understanding why Jamie still believed that their father would ever come back -- in spite of their parents’

divorce, in spite of his broken promises to keep in touch, in spite of his obvious abandonment. “I’m sorry, Jamie.” Zoey, dry-eyed throughout the funeral, suddenly found herself crying, the tears silently spilling down and dropping onto the fresh-churned earth. With the palm of her free hand, she furiously wiped her face dry. “Let’s go home.”

After much fighting with the hospital bureaucracy, Zoey was able to secure Jamie’s discharge to her care as an outpatient in treatment since his condition was stable and he gave no outbursts that entire day of the funeral.

“But a caseworker will have to check on him since he is still a minor, Miss Fitzpatrick.”

“Okay.”

“He’s completed his GED, so he’s done with formal schooling. Do you have any plans for Jamie continuing his education?”

“Why are you asking me? He’s right here. He’s not stupid, by the way.”

Jamie coughed and then asked quietly, “Can we go now?”

His counselor squinted at Zoey and Jamie, leaned back in his chair, and answered, “Yes.”

In the parking lot, Zoey murmured, “Jesus, Jamie.”

“It’s all right, Zoey,” her brother said. “Let’s just go home.”

For Jamie, it was a return to his childhood room, in the same two-story townhome apartment that they all lived when they moved to Texas when he was ten. At first, Jamie was just happy to be home. While staying at home, he would see Zoey go to work at the big box store that had been her job since graduating from high school. Luckily,

she didn't have to work as many hours as she had done before, as their practical mother had made sure her death benefits and a small insurance policy took care of their financial needs for the time being.

Yet, Zoey had forgotten that Jamie could pick up on her worry – of how intrusive the caseworker would be in their lives, how long she could pay for his continuing treatment, how long she could pay for all of those expensive pills, which Jamie would need to take for the rest of his life. While she would always say, “It’s no problem, Jamie,” she had always been a terrible liar. Even if his ability to see her color was blunted by the powerful antipsychotics that kept him moored to the world around him, even as those drugs sedated him and made him feel like a lazy slug, she could see Jamie being bothered by his inability to take of himself or even to help her out.

“It’s not fair,” seventeen-year old Jamie once said in one of his more lucid, active moments. “It’s not fair, you being stuck with a crazy, jobless brother.”

“Hush, Jamie,” she had replied then. “You’re my little brother. It’s my job to take care of you.”

But even Zoey could see that her reassurance only made him feel worse.

Then one day, a year after their mother’s death, Zoey came home from work, only to find her brother outside, screaming at an unknown man as a young woman, whom Zoey recognized as one of her apartment complex neighbors, cowered behind him. The man, obviously aware that Jamie was some kind of crazy person, only held up his hands, saying, “I don’t know you, man – I want no trouble.”

“Jamie!” Zoey yelled from her car, distracting Jamie enough for the

man and woman to flee into the woman's apartment.

Once she got her brother, who obviously was off his meds, back inside their apartment, she hissed, "Jamie – you could've gotten beat up or – Jesus – what if they're calling the cops on you right now?"

"They won't," Jamie said, angrily, pacing the kitchen floor.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because he's a black-oozing criminal, that's how," Jamie said, wringing his hands and clutching the hair on his head. "God, if that woman doesn't leave him, she'll either be beaten up or dead, I can see it!"

Zoey sat down, feeling the weight of her responsibilities on her head. "Jamie, why didn't you take your meds?" she asked calmly.

"Because I got fucking tired of being a lazy fucking zombie, that's why!"

"Jamie --"

"This isn't working, Zoey."

"Jamie, please --"

"There's no place for me in this world, Zoey. I see that now."

"What are you saying?"

Jamie stared into the ceiling, looking for an answer. "Never mind." He angrily opened the kitchen cabinet, pulled out his five pill bottles, and shook out a capsule or tablet from each. With five little pills in his hand, he stuffed them in his mouth and choked them down dry.

"Jamie --"

He only shook his head. "I'm sorry for scaring you, Zoey. That was stupid. I promise – I won't do that again."

Zoey reached up, and her brother walked over and knelt down,

and they hugged in silence for what seemed like a very long time.

The very next day, after work, Zoey had come home to an empty apartment, with only a note in Jamie's manic scrawl, left on the kitchen table: *I'm sorry. Goodbye.*

First her father, then her mother, and now her brother. Her fingernails dug hard into her palms, drawing little half-moon arcs of blood, as she tried not to scream or cry so as not to bother the neighbors.

A year after that note, her neighbor's face and the face of her boyfriend showed up on the ten o'clock evening news, a local story of love gone bad, ending in the woman's murder and the man's suicide.

Zoey could only turn away from the TV in the break room, forcing herself not to scream or cry, because she was still at work.

"Are you okay?" asked Rania, her new supervisor, when Zoey walked out of the break room to return to her duties. Joe was long gone, promoted to a different store with better hours and more money.

"I'm fine," Zoey lied. "Just tired."

#

Zoey shook away the images of those two lost faces on the TV and then her brother's note on the kitchen table, as she stood on the sidewalk next to the college loading dock. She shivered, remembering how startled she was by the man's dark, reeking form nearly touching her, and then shocked as she recalled the sensation from behind his eyes: cutting left to avoid the woman, then weaving out and away from a truck with shattered windshields.

"But you've been dead," Zoey murmured at the bustling street. "You've been dead for twenty years."

The images and sounds of last night's dream, of a day in the life of a very strange homeless man, rushed back, paralyzing Zoey on the sidewalk, various pedestrians warily giving her a wide berth. When she had woken up this morning, where did the dream end?

She unfroze and half-ran, half-walked, to Thanks-Giving Square.

Five years ago, Zoey began having insanely vivid dreams about angels. Every dream she had were about angels and, even odder, every dream was from the first-person perspective of one specific un-named angel. She never heard his name and yet was certain that the angel did have a name. The Creation of the Universe, the War in Heaven, the Garden of Eden, the Nephilim, Noah and the Flood – these surreal events projected into her mind like film, Zoey the only person in the theatre, immersed in 3D action, trapped behind the eyes of the same main actor. Then the dreams shifted into the narratives and images of a type of Ancient Mariner – never the same person, but always the same type, living and begging and surviving through the centuries.

But last night's dream was especially vivid, for it didn't feel like a surreal movie but someone's memory in the here-and-now. When she finally recognized some of the landmarks of this photorealistic dream – especially when she saw herself through someone else's eyes –

This is crazy, Zoey thought again, entering the quiet courtyard of Thanks-Giving Square.

It was later in the day than her dream, and she knew Thanks-Giving Square would be closing soon. Trying not to get creeped out by a weird feeling of déjà vu, she marched straight down the main pathway, up the bridge walkway, and entered the chapel.

It was empty.

She laughed at herself. Of course it was empty. It was only a dream after all.

“Ma’am, we’re closing.”

In mid-laugh, Zoey turned towards the doorway, seeing a custodian arrive with keys and a vacuum cleaner. “Oh, hey – I’m sorry, this must look strange, finding a woman alone, laughing in a chapel.”

“Oh, no, ma’am. You should’ve been here yesterday.” He shook his head in amazement. “I found a street person, passed out on the floor, twitching with seizure. The whole square was lit up like Christmas, what with all the emergency crew on the scene – are you okay, ma’am?”

Zoey’s legs had given way, and she had sat down hard on the carpeted floor, her hand on one of the chapel chairs to help keep her upright. “I – yes, I’m fine.” She got her bearings again and hoisted herself up. “Where did they take him?”

“It’d be Parkland, ma’am,” the custodian replied, naming the nearby county hospital with its perpetually busy emergency room.

“Thank you.” Zoey took off running, to grab the nearest rail car back to Union Station.

In a blur of stations and a bus ride, she was at Parkland Hospital’s emergency room, stunned by the clamorous sea of waiting people. Not knowing where to start, Zoey stared plaintively until she heard a surprised voice call her by her professional name.

“Professor Fitzpatrick?”

Zoey swung her head towards the voice, surprised and relieved to see a familiar face in the ocean of strangers: British Literature, just this past summer session, the quiet woman from Nigeria with the beautiful

voice. “Lilian?”

“Are you okay?” her former student asked, looking her over with the expertise of a certified nurse’s assistant in the ER.

“No – I mean, yes. Physically yes. But I’m looking for someone who was admitted here yesterday. Ambulance from Thanks-Giving Square.”

Lilian’s face changed from concerned assessment to astonished. “Oh – *him*? You know him?”

“Yes. I think he may be my brother.”

Lilian stared at Zoey for a very long second. “Okay. Please give me a minute, Professor.” She quickly weaved her way back to the nurses’ station and conferred with a nurse on duty. Even from where Zoey was standing she could see the look of astonishment that crossed the woman’s face. Lilian returned with some paperwork. “Okay, please fill these out, since your brother was admitted as a John Doe.”

In a daze, Zoey scribbled through the paperwork and handed the forms back to Lilian, who had attended to a couple of people in the waiting area and conferred with the nurse at the nurses’ station again.

Lilian glanced at the name. “Zachary James Fitzpatrick Jr.”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” She waved down a student volunteer. “She’ll bring you to one of the nurses’ stations in ICU. They’ll be expecting you, Professor.”

“ICU?” Zoey asked, but Lilian was already back to her duties, and the volunteer motioned her forward.

“Through this door, ma’am.”

The labyrinth of smooth walls, echoing floors, rushing medical

staff, and claustrophobic elevators barely registered in Zoey's mind as she followed the pony-tailed teenage girl in clogs and Tweety Bird scrubs. What she noticed was the smell, as the sweet, metallic stink of unwashed bodies and blood in the ER dissipated the farther into the maze of Parkland she was, as the artificial odor of antiseptics, bleach, and plastic dominated.

The image of her brain-dead mother, her tiny body floating in a sea of tubes in a hospital ICU, was what the smell brought.

Arriving at their destination, Zoey's guide left with a sweet, "Bye, ma'am."

"Ms. Fitzpatrick?" one of the three nurses inquired. "So our John Doe is your brother --" she glanced at her screen "--Zachary James Fitzpatrick Jr."

"Yes. Jamie."

"Has a nurse or doctor talked with you yet?"

"No."

"Ah."

Zoey recognized the look of infinite pity. "What's wrong with him? Why is he in ICU?" She saw the nurse glance at the other two. "Look, my brother disappeared twenty years ago. I didn't know he was even alive until today. Please."

The nurse sighed. "Ms. Fitzpatrick, your brother *shouldn't* be alive."

"What?" She grabbed onto the counter.

"Cancer. Cancer, riddled all through his body, like Swiss cheese. In his bones, in his liver, in his lungs, in his pancreas, in his brain. We have no way of knowing where it originated, as it had metastasized all over. Too late to treat. Too late to do anything. It's a miracle that he's

still even breathing on his own, and it's a blessing that he's fallen into a coma, as the pain must be unbearable." The nurse sighed again. "I'm sorry."

Breathe, Zoey, breathe. "Where is he?"

"Three doors down, to your left. Room 22."

"Thank you."

At the door, she paused, and then she turned the knob and opened the door.

The image of her comatose brother, his body floating in a sea of tubes and wires, punched her chest.

Yes, it was the face she saw in her dream – the skeletal face, the tangled beard, the dark hair. But he was washed and clothed in the flimsy garb of a hospital gown, and so she could see just how painfully thin and old her thirty-eight year old little brother looked.

She stumbled to his bedside. "Jamie." She touched his forehead.

Darkness suddenly fell. And, like unsuspecting Alice, down the rabbit-hole Zoey fell.

4 ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE

He knew that the universe had changed when he could move without a wave of pain slamming him down. Instead of a formless void of darkness and despair, a ground of soil and leaves crunched underneath him as he sat up and regarded his newly-formed surroundings.

He was in a forest, and it was either pre-dawn or dusk. The low light cast everything in shades of gray, including the skin of his body. It was the body of a healthy forty-something year old man. He wasn't surprised that he had a body, and that the body was as naked and clean as the day of Adam's creation. After everything that had happened to him in his long existence, nothing surprised him. Trapped in this human's inner universe, he wondered if he could give himself clothes.

He looked down and saw his body clothed in a solid black T-shirt, simple blue jeans, and white and black sneakers. He could feel clean underwear – boxers, not briefs -- and thick athletic socks underneath the ensemble. He touched his head and face: hair cropped short, face clean-shaven.

“All the creature comforts,” he wryly commented and then noticed

his voice seemed to be swallowed by the trees.

No wind. No animal sounds. When he stood up and took a step forward, the only sound he heard was crunching leaves, muffled by the close-growing trees, their branches high and intertwined in a thick canopy. He reached out and touched the trunk of one of the trees.

“Aaah!” He jerked his hand back after feeling the uncanny warm thrum of a heartbeat. He flexed his fingers and gave his hand a quick shake. *Been in humans too long*, he thought derisively, chiding himself.

“Hello?”

He looked sharply to his right. From the gray gloom he saw a woman emerge, her feet crunching the dead leaves underfoot. He stared at her – slight build, thirty-something, olive skin, brown hair, blue eyes –and wondered what odd phantasm she represented, created from the madness of his human host.

“Are you real?” she asked.

He was taken aback. This wasn’t the expected response from a figment of a homeless man’s imagination. “Yes. Are you?”

In answer, she stepped forward, paused, and then touched his arm.

Miranda, he thought.

Jamie, she thought.

The transfer of thought was instantaneous, involuntary, and electric. He violently drew back his arm as if burned.

The woman’s blue eyes widened. “You’re *him*.”

“What?”

“The fallen angel.”

This time his whole body started, and he became afraid. “Who are you?” he demanded. “How do you know who I am?”

The woman sat down, placing her forehead in her hands. “This is impossible – absolutely impossible. But the pieces fit. They fit!” she rambled.

Being ignored, he found himself becoming more angry than fearful. He squatted in front of her. “Answer me – who are you?”

She looked up. “I refuse to believe that I am going mad. So I’m going to accept this reality as it is because Jamie needs me.”

“What are you talking about?” He couldn’t help yelling.

She moved to push him back, but he voluntarily moved out of her way, wary of her touch. “Jamie is my brother, the human you’ve been... possessing.” She stared at him. “I’ve been dreaming about your memories – I see now they’re your memories – for the past five years. I didn’t even know angels had personal memories except until I saw yours. Loving Miranda, who betrayed you. Living in crazy, harmless people.” She noted his look of shock. “I thought all fallen angels were demons. But you’re like a human – something in between.”

It was strange to hear about himself with such clarity from this woman. His gaze studied her, trying to see the light of Heaven in her, but he couldn’t tell; he had been more human than angel for far too long. “What are you – prophet? Saint? Preacher?”

She shook her head. “I’m no saint. I’m – I’m just an English professor.”

“So how --”

“Do you know anything about your hosts when you possess them?” Zoey interrupted. “Do you have access to their memories?”

He shook his head impatiently. “I could. I chose not to, as their memories were often shattered by their madness. It served no purpose

for me to know. But--”

“So you don’t know anything about my brother.”

“What? No. He was unique. He had already encapsulated himself when I arrived, already locked away his memories – his soul – as if he was expecting something like me. But--”

The woman placed her forehead in her hands again.

“What?” he demanded, irritated.

“My brother could see something like you. Perhaps not all of you,” she waved a hand at him, “but he could see the dark, invisible things – human or otherwise – ever since we were children.”

He stared at her and then shrugged at that information. “What would he do?”

“Keep a low profile. Stay safe. He’d always try to warn me. But I never believed him,” she said, her voice stricken with guilt at the end.

“So you didn’t have this ability?”

“No.”

“He would be considered a prophet, a holy man, in the early times.”

“As opposed to a paranoid schizophrenic in modern times?”

He looked around him impatiently. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“So how do I know you?” She looked at him. “I don’t know. Jamie could never show what he could see. But with you in him – I don’t know – he has... spirit energy to send? And with Jamie, uh, encapsulated as you say, what he sent to me weren’t his perceptions but yours.”

He scowled. “That’s obscene. Like standing naked in front of a mirror, not knowing it was a two-way mirror.” He closed his eyes,

crossing his arms deep into his scowl. “You know everything about me.”

“Zoey.”

“What?” He opened his eyes.

“My name is Zoey.”

“As in ‘life’.”

“Yes.”

He stared at her and then peered quizzically at the canopy-obscured imaginary sky, as if looking for an answer. “He’s dying, as you likely know. Your brother. He’s dying, but his soul won’t let go. He’s not encapsulated any more, or this forest wouldn’t be here. His soul won’t let go and won’t let *me* go. I don’t know why. But it has something to do with you, I’m certain; that’s why you’re here.”

“Why am I here?”

“My best guess – to help him die.”

She breathed deeply. She looked up at him with deep, piercing eyes and then pushed herself up, standing about a foot away from him. “Okay. That sounds right.” She clasped her arms around herself as if suddenly chilled. “I may know everything about you, but you at least know my name. What’s yours?”

He frowned at the question and took a long time to answer. “Call me Ed.”

“Like *Moby Dick*? Not your real name?”

“Astute, this one is.”

“That was unnecessarily rude.” Zoey scanned for an opening through the forest. “I assume you’re coming with me?”

“Better than sitting around here, waiting for your brother to die.”

Zoey ignored the callous tone of Ed's reply, as it reminded her of an important concern. "Am I really in Jamie? Or am I really outside, next to Jamie's hospital bed, and I'm dreaming all this?"

Ed shrugged. "God only knows. Let's move."

#

They weren't certain that the forest did or did not go on forever until they felt the ground underneath them start to slope downward in a gentle incline. The trees thinned out onto long stretches of a clay-and-sand riverbank, which dropped steeply into a wide, fast-moving river, undulating as if filled with gray, silver-tinged fish.

Zoey drew closer to the river but then suddenly drew back. The river wasn't a river of fish-filled water.

The river was a river of people.

Men, women, children. Different ages. Different ethnicities. But the gloom cast a universal silvery-gray to their color, and their eyes never wavered. They looked forward as they whipped past the river bank, a river rapid of single-minded people, as impersonal and untouchable as strangers in an overcrowded elevator.

On the other side of the river, at a distance, rose high, neon-lit buildings of a city.

Zoey glanced at Ed. "Can you fly?"

He hunched his shoulders. "No."

"Why?"

"If I knew that, don't you think I'd had figured out a way and would already be flying instead of walking?" he responded, peevish. He looked at the swift current of people before them. He stooped down, picked up a large rock, and threw it into the middle of the river.

“Hey --”

“Look.”

Like water, the current of people split before the rock hit and then converged back when the rock hit the bottom. “Have you ever walked on a crowded sidewalk? You’re busy, you have a thousand items on your to-do list. You’re on auto-pilot. So are the hundreds of people around you. What do you do if there’s an obstacle in your way – a big rock, a lost tourist, a homeless person? You go around it, without missing a step.” Ed hopped off the bank and strode through the river of people, leaving a tiny luminal space in his wake.

Zoey followed in his wake, amazed as the unseeing people swiftly parted and then converged around her, without anyone ever touching her like negative polarity magnets, repelling each other. The riverbed was wide, and Zoey took careful deliberate steps. All she heard was her heartbeat, her breath, and the low cacophony of muted footsteps rising like a hum from the riverbed. The gloom from the forest extended over here, and she couldn’t distinguish one from another in her slow crossing.

On the other side, Ed stood, waiting on the riverbank. He didn’t help her up and watched as she scrambled out of the riverbed and stood up, smoothing down her denim shirt and tan capri pants. They looked at the silent human river, a packed mass of lonely people.

“Acheron,” Zoey suddenly stated, her eyes widening in recognition.

“What?”

“That,” she nodded toward the riverbed, “is my brother’s version of Acheron. Filled not with water but the Uncommitted.”

Ed stared at the rushing people and then the city rising out of the

gloom in the near distance. “Dante’s Inferno?”

“Jamie’s Inferno,” Zoey corrected. She shook her head in disbelief. “But inverted. Aren’t we supposed to go *down* in Hell?”

Ed snorted. “You don’t have to be in a deep, dark hole to be in Hell.” He looked at the city, built high on a hill, with an imposing office tower of staggered steel and mirrors eerily lit with red neon tubing as the highest structure at its epicenter. “You talk too much.” He strode onward.

“Hrmp,” Zoey replied, following. “You --” She stopped speaking as she stepped off from the incline of the riverbank to the flat plain before her which sat at the bottom of the high hill of the city.

The plain was filled with little cardboard shanties, and front of each cluster of shanties was a low fire in little metal trash bins. Clustered around each fire stood or sat people dressed in tattered clothes – some in layers, some hardly wearing anything at all. But what stopped Zoey’s voice was the vision of little children, dotted here and there in that narrow plain, wandering around from fire to fire, crying out, “Daddy? Mommy? Where are you?”

Zoey hadn’t realized she had stopped walking until she saw Ed’s hunched, rushed form a hundred yards into that shantytown. She jogged to catch up, feeling smothered by the stifling heat of those fires and those huddled people, their backs turned against her and those little children.

“Shouldn’t we help them?” she asked as soon as she reached Ed.

“Who?” He glanced down. “They’re not real, you know. Just figments of your brother’s imagination, mixed with memories of events long dead.” He strode forward again but then realized that Zoey

wasn't following when he glanced back and saw her kneeling before one of the little images, which looked like a little boy. "Oh come *on*," he sighed in exasperation. He backtracked to her location, in time to see her hold the little boy's hand and start walking from fire to fire.

"What are you doing?" he demanded walking beside her.

"I don't care if they're just synapses firing in Jamie's brain. Here, they're people, and they feel, and this little boy is lost. I'm helping him find his daddy."

"You can't help everyone," Ed pointed out, impatient.

"Well, I'm at least helping this one."

Ed sighed but waited. He saw Zoey do what the wandering children and the fire-huddling adults did not do, which was catch their attention and look into their eyes, talking to them. The adults looked as if woken from a daze, and when Zoey didn't find the boy's father there, she moved on to the next fire.

But then Ed stood amazed as those adults didn't return to gazing at the fire but began talking to each other and then talking to the children. When Zoey finally reunited the boy with his father, that was not the only reunion, as the adults continued Zoey's action, finding lost parents for those lost children.

When Zoey returned to Ed, she left behind a wake of reunited families, holding each other close and tight, almost afraid to let go.

"What's the point of that?" Ed asked. "They're still stuck here, trapped in this plain. What's the use?"

She shook her head at his question. "Even people in cages need love, too." She continued forward, leaving Ed, who stared at her for a moment but then followed.

They hiked up a steep, thin ridge, finding that it was a levee wall as another narrow plain was on the other side. But this plain was filled with run-down buildings, a jumbled urban mix of warehouses, motels, and burglar-barred storefronts, the streetlights barely illuminating the cracked sidewalks and empty pothole-strewn streets. Initially surveying the plain, Zoey and Ed thought the buildings and streets were arranged at random. But the more they looked, the more they found it fit a particular pattern.

“It’s a maze,” Ed declared.

“Yes.” Zoey traced the various routes with her finger, following all the dead ends. The last route she traced led to one particular place. “We need to go there,” she pointed, a warehouse building luridly lit, on the other side of the plain, nestled against the foot of the hill of skyscrapers.

Ed looked at the building, seeing the garish light pulsing as if to a heavy beat even though everything was silent. “A dance club? Your brother’s vision of hell has a *dance club*?”

She shrugged and then scrambled down the levee wall, with Ed following after. They emerged from a high border of evergreen bushes to a narrow alleyway slick with water.

They walked, turning left, then right, and then left again, following their mental map of the route to the club. However, they soon reached a dead end where another passageway should be. Backtracking, they arrived at a different point from where they should have been.

“It’s like the routes are changing,” Zoey exclaimed, her voice sounding unnaturally loud in the suffocating silence.

“It’s because they are.” Ed held out his arm, stopping Zoey without

touching her, like a crosswalk guard. This time looking at where they had been, Zoey saw the passageway obscured by fog and then clear with a totally different street, going left instead of right.

She groaned in frustration. “How --”

“Wait.”

They stood still, as immobile as the concrete walls and the lonely streetlights. At first Zoey strained to see and hear something – anything – but then she pulled in her senses, hearing the blood rush in her ears like waves crashing in an undertow. Then she heard her heartbeat – thumpTHUMP thumpTHUMP – until she could feel her heartbeat pressing hard against her sternum – boomBOOM boomBOOM – and then she heard it, outside of and all around herself.

“We’re here,” Ed said, his voice loud and close to her ear.

Zoey wondered why he had to be so loud, but the heavy beat of the house music and the sweaty, claustrophobic pressure of writhing bodies answered her.

They were in the middle of the club’s dance floor.

“Ed,” Zoey started to say, but the jostling mass of dancing bodies pushed her away from Ed so that she couldn’t see him. Panicked, she glanced up, seeing a gaudy disco ball spinning and reflecting crazily the roving spotlights of red, which were the only illumination in the entire place. She saw no ceiling, obscured by the inky darkness where there were no spotlights.

On high pillars staggered around the perimeter of the dance floor were tall, narrow cages with one barely-clothed, painfully thin woman writhing upright in each one. Each caged dancer glowed eerily with the two steady spotlights pointed upwards from the bottom of each pillar.

“Ed!” she called out, trying to push her way towards the direction where she last saw him. It was like pushing against a windstorm, albeit a storm stinking of sweat, musk, and sex pheromones. Hands groping for bodies whipped around her as she pushed forward, but, even in her alarm, she noticed that the hands were not for her but for each other, as mindful of her as ants were to lampposts.

The red lights cast everything and everybody with that eerie red glow, as if the entire club was inflamed and sick. While the music and dancing feet were deafening, the people themselves were silent, as mute as the one-minded people of the River Acheron.

“Jamesy-boy!” exclaimed a high, girlish voice. “Time for a drink!”

As much as a person in a windstorm could whip around, Zoey did so, as the voice was behind her. She saw one of the dazed, caged dancers jump down from her pillar, disappearing from her line of sight. More forcefully, she elbowed her way through, emerging against a low, metal rail that was part of the boundary enclosing the dance floor like a human pen. On the other side of the rail were a narrow strip of level floor and then a few but steep series of steps leading to an open-faced mezzanine, where a long, smoky bar ran along the entire length of the wall. The wall behind the bar was filled to the ceiling with bottles of spirits of every kind imaginable, displayed like graven images in shelves lit with the same black-light red. Every bar stool was occupied, mostly with people whose backs were turned away from the crowded dance floor, focused in their task of getting drunk.

On two bar stools, in the middle of the bar, sat the dancer, evidently on a break, and a young Jamie Fitzpatrick.

“Jamie!” Zoey cried out, clambering over the rail. He looked not

much older than the eighteen-year old Jamie of Zoey's twenty-year old memory, sitting in that familiar defensive hunched-over way that he would sit, an outsider looking in, unsure whether to scowl or frown. Once at the bar, she reached out to touch his shoulder, but her hand passed right through him, as if he were air, and it landed with a hard smack against the bar counter. "What the --"

"He's a memory," Zoey heard behind her, and she looked up and around, seeing Ed standing with a similar hunched-shoulders stance. "The club is an amalgam of memories and impressions, made into concrete form, but what you're seeing now is based on an actual memory, of a 'once upon a time.' He's as tangible as an image on a screen."

Zoey pulled her hand back, through the Jamie-memory, and stood back, unsure what next to do.

"Jamesy, c'mon, don't be such a party pooper," the dancer said, pushing a shot glass of an amber liquid with one small hand while raising another to her candy-red lips. She whipped back her white-blond waist-length hair and then slammed down the empty shot glass on the counter. "Another one, Mando, and the next round for everyone on me!"

Her generous offer solicited a uniform response of cheers from the drinkers at the bar, but Jamie was undeterred, leaving his shot glass untouched. "Lexa, please listen to me." He placed his hands on the dancer's thin, bare shoulders and forced her to look at him, his dark eyes trying to connect with her watery, blood-shot blue ones, which were almost obscured by her heavy dark makeup.

For a heartbeat or two, she stared back. But then she laughed and

shook off his hands. “You’re always so serious. Can’t you have fun? I wanna have fun, Jamesy.”

Zoey had been looking at Jamie, but then she shifted her full attention to the dancer. She gave a silent gasp as she finally saw her – a pale, skeletal girl who couldn’t be any older than sixteen.

“Lexa --” Jamie began.

“This guy botherin’ you, babe?”

A large man – a man of muscle and power – emerged from the shadows and draped a possessing arm around Lexa’s bird-like shoulders.

“No, TK, no,” she laughed with that high, girlish voice that belied the fear in her too-wide, blue eyes.

“Lexa,” Jamie said again, as if the man wasn’t even there.

“Hey, when you talk, you talk to *me!*” The man exploded, reaching for something in his jacket with his free hand.

“NO!” Lexa screamed.

“NO!” Zoey cried out, throwing herself forward, unable to stop the past of twenty years ago as a young girl threw herself between the man who owned her and the boy who loved her, taking the full brunt of the .45 caliber round that had sat ready in its chamber.

The gunshot drowned out the hypnotic dance music, drowned out Zoey’s screams, until its echo resolved itself into a steady but fast heartbeat – THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP – and Zoey could see again.

The club was behind them, silent and dark.

“Get up.”

The club behind Ed lay at the bottom of a bridge, a thick fog

enveloping it and its surrounding warehouse district. Before him stretched a lonely wide bridge of asphalt and concrete, leading straight into the downtown of a dark city. He was impatient, wanting to cross that bridge, and frowned at the kneeling form next to him, which shook with every silent sob.

“Get up,” he repeated. “It’s just an old memory. No point crying about it.” He heard the sickening sound of mucus being sucked in, of Zoey wiping her eyes on her short sleeves. Then he heard her stand up.

“Will it *all* be like that?” she asked.

Ed glanced back at where the club was and then returned to peering down the curving length of the bridge, his eyes tracing a too-familiar snaky billow of dark smoke rising from the other side. “No,” he replied. “It will be worse.”

5 DARKNESS VISIBLE

Ed breathed hard, his back pressed against a graffitied blast wall. Crouched like he was, Zoey was stifling a coughing fit, brought on by the acrid smoke of burning gasoline and tear gas, which was getting thicker and thicker the closer she and Ed got to the city center, where the tallest skyscraper stood, undamaged and pristine.

“Fucking hell, your brother isn’t making it easy, is he?”

Zoey was too busy trying not to cough and retch to swear back, but she moved enough to make him recoil from her an inch or two.

When they had crossed the bridge entering the city, a bombed out shell of a car that was still on fire met them. Hearing automatic gunfire only two blocks away from their initial position, Ed and Zoey ran for the nearest cover, which was difficult as most of the buildings were made of glass and metal. Fortunately, older buildings and parking garages were solidly encased in cement, although those places could only be reached via a crazy-quilt maze of blast walls, road blocks, and opposing gangs of armed people.

Most of those armed people, to Zoey’s dismay, were only children,

young men in battered civilian survival gear, barely into their teens. Unlike the people of the river, the shantytown, and the club, they seemed to recognize Ed and Zoey as intruders and coldly decide to shoot rather than assess who they were.

The gang warfare was bad enough, but then an “official” looking occupying force – uniformed soldiers, or perhaps riot police, encased helmet to boot in red and black body armor – were engaging those armed gangs but also decided to shoot rather than assess who Zoey and Ed were. While Zoey had never experienced a hot battle zone, Ed had. But neither had experienced suicide bombers until they saw a “brown” detonate his vest before a road block of “reds” could get him.

Zoey had to bite hard on her lip until it bled, just to stop the scream that would alert the gangs and soldiers to their position, huddled behind the low, shot-through walls of a parking garage. Ed had winced, the image of the boy’s body shredded by the explosion seared into his memory, which got jumbled with the foreign memories of a handful of past human hosts who had also seen warfare, either as forced combatant or horrified witness, as well as his ancient memories of mangled angels in the first war of wars.

“Your brother ever served in the military?” he had asked then.

“I – I don’t know,” was Zoey’s shaky reply.

“Well, he either did, or he saw far too much ‘War on Terror’ news footage and has one hell of an imagination.” He had checked the overcast sky. “At least there’s no air support, and we have some cover of darkness with this dawn/ dusk light. Let’s check for an underground.”

After seeing the fourth barricaded entrance and getting heavy

gunfire as they tried to check the fifth, Ed and Zoey gave up trying to travel via the city's underground tunnels. Like rats or cockroaches, they scurried, hid, and ran from one spot to another, keeping their eyes out for hostiles as they meandered towards the city center.

Pausing at that blast wall, just one block from their main target, Zoey finally caught her breath, her lungs still burning as she rubbed her mouth on her now-grubby shirt sleeves. She had no idea how much time had passed since her arrival at the forest, as if time had any meaning in the surreal mental geography of Jamie's brain. She didn't feel sleepy, thirsty, or hungry, but she did feel pain. "Ed, what happens if I get seriously hurt in here?"

"What?" He frowned at the question as if it were a bothersome and distracting mosquito.

"What happens if I get mortally wounded? If I die in here, do I die, period?"

He chewed his lip before answering. "I don't know. So don't."

"But --"

Ed put a silencing finger to his lips, and they heard a patrol slowly but efficiently move past above them. Once he was certain they were out of line of sight, he made a now-familiar motion with his hand: *run*.

They ran. Over rubble-strewn streets, cars and trash bins on fire, the sound of the patrol suddenly realizing something was going on as laser sights started roving towards them, Zoey and Ed sprinted their last length, seeing nothing but the glass doors of the skyscraper behind a bombed-out blast wall and trampled razor wire.

Too easy, Ed thought fleetingly, until he saw a small form uncurl from that broken blast wall, a little boy wearing a too-bulky jacket with

dead eyes. In the space that it took for the bomb to activate and a sniper bullet to try to stop the activation, Ed grabbed Zoey and flew over the beginning bubble of the explosion, crashing through the skyscraper's doors in a shower of broken glass, twisted metal, and concrete.

Zoey lay in a dark, painful space, barely able to breathe, until she felt shaky arms release her and what felt like a thick quilt lift away. Rolling out, her arms cut by the broken glass, she sat up blearily and then stared at Ed.

Ed was on his knees, his arms clutching his sides, his brown wings shredded, bloody, and collapsed behind him, as he retched dry heaves, his eyes streaming.

“Ed --” she started towards him.

“Don't touch me!” He flung out an arm, palm facing out in the universal signal *stop*. “Just – wait,” he gasped.

Zoey sat and watched, amazed. His wings healed first, the blood ceasing its flow, the angry wounds sealing up, the flight feathers re-growing and lying flat and whole against the wings. Then they shimmered away as the rest of Ed's wounds sealed up, leaving bright, silvery scars on his still-grubby skin and unseen healing underneath the skin and sinews. When his breathing became less labored and even in its cadence, he straightened up, his spine and neck audibly cracking as he stood up, wincing a bit as he walked.

“God almighty!” Zoey murmured softly.

“Maybe. It certainly wasn't me.”

“What? No --”

“I know. You were swearing. It also happens to be appropriate.”

He looked her over. “Any wounds?”

“What? I --” Zoey was about to show her minor cuts and scrapes, but then she noticed that they had healed as well, underneath all the sweat and grime. “How --?”

“Residual regeneration transfer,” he interrupted. He looked around. “What is this place?”

“Huh?” For the first time since crashing through the entrance doors, Zoey looked around. “Oh God,” she cried out, seeing her surroundings. “Jamie, why?”

“I take it that this is from a memory?”

“Yes,” Zoey stated. “The worst kind.”

While the outside had been a modern office skyscraper, the inside was another place: a little gravel path barely seen in the moonlight, which led downhill to a little odd structure, partially in ruins as seen by the half-collapsed carved roof and tall weeds. Zoey looked around, half-expecting to see the ghostly image of her twelve-year old self and ten-year old Jamie on bicycles, looking at the old church. But then she remembered that that memory was not in moonlight but sunset, and she closed her eyes as she recalled the only time she was there at moonlight. When she opened them, she saw Ed’s form, small in the distance down the main road. She was about to call after him when he disappeared, but then she heard him on the opposite side, walking from the far distance towards her, until he was next to her again.

“This place only goes as far as this immediate location,” he explained. “We try to go away, we’ll return right where we started.” He looked down the gravel path.

Zoey let out a deep breath. “But – this is my memory. How would

Jamie – oh no.” She started running down the hill, towards the little deserted Quonset hut below. *Oh God please*, she thought, *oh please don't let it be what I think this is*. She only stopped running when she realized she was sliding on something, something slick and oily and black.

Following the flowing stream of oil, she saw the source of it – the whole ruined church was covered in it, and it oozed the black liquid like a wound in the earth oozing black blood.

“Don’t you see it?” she remembered Jamie’s question from the first time they saw it years ago.

There was an odd trick of the light, for she both saw the black oil and not see it, a simple dilapidated Quonset hut that had served as a temporary mission once upon a time. But she started to see the dark ooze, almost willing the darkness to be made visible because it wasn’t a simple, harmless ruin, just as the priest who took away her childhood wasn’t a simple, harmless man.

“Jamie!” she called out, but the black ooze shut out her voice. She tried to open the door to the building, but the ooze made her hands and the door slick; it was impossible to gain a sure hold on anything. Panicked, she ran along the perimeter of the ruin, looking for a broken window or a weak spot, but everything was encased in darkness, except for one shattered window, where she found a ten-year old Jamie, his face twisted in agony, staring through the window.

“Is this your brother?” Ed asked quietly. He stood behind Jamie.

“Yes – thank God!”

Ed looked at her in surprise. “You’re relieved?”

“I was afraid that it was Jamie in there.” She reached out her hand to the little boy and wasn’t surprised when her hand flowed through

him. She tried not to cry. “I didn’t know that Jamie was outside. I never knew that he had seen – until now.”

“Is that you... in there?”

“Yes.” She breathed deeply and looked inside.

It was like a silent black and white movie. Twelve-year old Zoey, as pale and still as Pearl Pureheart, thirty-year old Tony Macinas, the handsome, gregarious priest who would listen to her and read all of her silly, girlish stories and poems, which she had kept private and secret from everybody. But in that space, as he moved, he left behind him a trail of black oil, which flowed outward and along the floor, crept up the ruined walls, seeped out from the ruined roof and walls.

Zoey turned at the sound of Jamie’s choked sobs, as he ran away, running, falling, running again, until he disappeared from view. “When I came home, Jamie was already screaming in the kitchen. He had his first psychotic break that day.” She stared at her hands and arms, covered in black.

“What happened to *him*?” Ed gave a terse nod towards the window.

“Died. He drowned in the ocean as I was in a hospital bed, fighting the STDs that destroyed my uterus and fallopian tubes. As Jamie was in psychiatric treatment, hopped up on antipsychotics.”

“Suicide?”

“They said it was an accident.”

“Do you believe that?”

Zoey still stared at her hands and arms. “No.” She looked at Ed, her face blank and unreadable. “This is Jamie’s memory, not mine.” She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, the ruined church was just a quiet Quonset hut, tranquil in the moonlight, and

her skin was her own again. Noticing that odd trick of the light, she willed to see past the simulated moonlight and night sky of nearly thirty years ago, and the interior outlines of the steel and glass skyscraper faded into view.

Zoey and Ed stood in the center of the bottom of a seventy-two story skyscraper, but with no floors in between to obscure the view of the open rooftop, nearly a thousand feet above them. Where there should be broken glass, twisted metal, and cement rubble was a pristine, black marble floor, distorting the reflections of Zoey and Ed who stood upon it.

“Can you fly?” Zoey asked.

In reply, Ed wrapped his arms around Zoey’s waist. As she wrapped her arms around his neck, Zoey could feel the shifting of muscles and sinew in Ed’s shoulders, as the dark brown wings materialized, spreading outward, towering above both woman and angel.

“Are you afraid of heights?” he asked.

“Does it matter?” she replied to his chest. Up close, Zoey realized that Ed was rather tall.

He shrugged. “Thought I’d ask.” He looked up. “I don’t usually have passengers, so you might want to hold on tight.”

Before Zoey could reply, he leaped up, and the wings beat down, rapidly gaining height with each strong down stroke.

It was unlike anything Zoey had ever felt before.

In the long, upward spiral of their flight, the instantaneous and involuntary transfer of thought between Zoey and Ed, first discovered in the forest, restarted again, and they found that they didn’t have to

speak to communicate.

Why couldn't you fly before?

Zoey could feel his sigh in her mind. *Because I was stupid.*

What?

Flight needs energy, more energy than I had, since keeping my existence separate from your brother's internal hell is exhausting enough as it is.

But you flew us into this building.

Yes.

So... you have more energy now?

Yes.

How?

You.

What?

You. I should've figured it out sooner, when you touched my arm in the forest and our thoughts got transferred. You're an additional entity, an added power source in this closed system.

Zoey stiffened. *What, so I'm a battery?*

No.

Well?

You're a Beatrice.

A... what?

A Beatrice. A human who guides a fallen creature to Heaven.

Zoey sent a confused jumble of emotions and images before settling on a reply. *Bullshit.*

Ed laughed, and feeling the genuine laughter of an angel was like a warm breeze on a hard, winter night.

I told you. I'm no saint, Zoey insisted.

So you keep saying. But you're a Beatrice, whether you like it or not. Even a fallen angel like me can see that.

Zoey fell silent, and then she shivered. *It got cold.*

It's about to get colder. Ed slowed down, his wings moving just enough to keep them stationary under the exposed ceiling of the skyscraper, like a person treading water. *You read Dante. What's the center of Hell like?*

A frozen lake. With Satan in the middle. Guarded by giants. Zoey's thoughts felt cold and brittle.

Exactly. Slow and quiet on this roof. Who knows what's waiting for us up there?

Ed shifted his arms and hands so that he could hoist Zoey up by her hips and then feet as she grabbed for the lip of the rooftop opening and pulled herself up, sliding onto the rooftop. Once she cleared the space, Ed also grabbed for the lip of the opening, quickly pulling himself up as his wings folded flat against his body.

On the rooftop, bare and slick from the constant drumbeat of freezing rain, huddled a man in rags, the back of a woman squatting next to him, whispering in his ear. Neither he nor the woman realized that they were not alone, a state that Zoey was about to interrupt until Ed held her back with a gentle but restraining hand.

Wait. Listen.

Standing quietly and still, they were able to hear the woman's gentle whispers. "Aren't you tired? Why keep fighting? It's too late for me. You deserve a rest. Relax – just relax..." The man only moaned in reply, covering his head and face with his arms as he huddled even tighter. The woman stood up to circle to the other side of the man. Zoey stifled a gasp, surprised to see the young girl Lexa – but not Lexa,

for the body language spoke not of a victimized girl but a pacing predator, regarding its prey. As she squatted down again, the image of Zoey's mother sprouted before her eyes. "Your fault. Your fault. Sister damaged. Father gone. Mother dead. Your fault. Your fault. You don't deserve to live. You should never have been born. Your fault. Your fault. Your fault...." The words beat down upon the man like fists, causing him to twitch and shake.

Zoey pulled against Ed's hand, but he held firm. *Wait. Listen.*

After a torturous space of time elapsed, the woman, still squatting like a toad against the man's ear, shifted shape again, now taking on the appearance of the man's sister. "You left me with him. You didn't save me. You ruined my life. Why don't you die, already?"

"NO!" Zoey exclaimed, pulling away from Ed.

The woman, startled, jumped up, the obnoxious Zoey-image gone as her own shape revealed itself.

Even in her anger, Zoey stepped back in alarm. "Miranda!"

The other fallen angel stared at her, her pale skin stark against her iridescent blue-black wings. "How the hell did you get here? How the hell do you know me?" She suddenly saw the figure behind the human woman. "*You.*"

Ed stepped forward. "Me."

For a second, Miranda stared at Ed as she once was – a companion at arms, a friend, a lover. But her violet eyes hardened as the eons of history crashed down between them, and her eyes flicked from Ed to Zoey, to Ed again. "So – I get the brother, and you have the sister. How symmetric. But don't be greedy. He's *mine.*"

"NO!" Zoey yelled again, starting forward.

Miranda shot out to meet the woman with a back hand.

Ed darted between them, grabbing Miranda's striking hand, and pulled her in close. The rain pelting them with icy needles, he launched high into the air, the two entangled angels soon becoming distant figures against a dark, stormy sky.

Zoey rushed to the huddled man's side. "Jamie," she said, gently. "Jamie, it's me – it's Zoey."

The man whimpered, recoiling from the words. His body was covered in a growing sheen of ice.

"It's Zoey, Jamie. It's Zoey. The bad angel's gone. I'm okay. Listen to me. I'm all right." Zoey reached out, placing a protecting hand on Jamie's cowed head.

He flinched, as if expecting to be hit.

Zoey closed her eyes, ignoring the ice and the cold. *I miss you, Jamie*, she sent, and then she sent even more.

#

Zoey was sitting in the very back of the church, her head cowed as she heard and felt the parishioners move to the front of the altar to take the communion bread and wine. For many Sundays she wasn't one of them, not since the death of her mother, not since the two-year search for her brother led to nothing.

She wasn't even sure why she was here.

The church she attended every Sunday was distinctly modern: high ceilings with stained glass in the clerestory windows, cushiony seats and kneelers, echoing gray wall-to-wall tiling, and air-conditioning that worked so well that it was a shock when parishioners left the refrigerated inside for the hot, humid early summer outside. It was a

place where the sacristy's doors always seemed to be half-opened with the hustle and bustle of harried altar boys and Eucharistic ministers, marching back and forth for candles or spare hosts or more wine to set up the altar, while the rag-tag choir and band quietly rehearsed their kumbaya-type liturgical music, which the youngish priest, Father Gary, preferred as it fit his pop-culture laced, trendy homilies.

She missed the old church that used to stand there, a tiny white-steeped basilica style with a choir loft overhead, the hidden singers' music floating out like music from invisible spirits. She missed the kindly, old priest who reminded her of Saint Nicholas of the European Christmas stories and exuded tradition and safety. But like most things in the modern world, the small and personal seemed to give way to excess and supersizing, even in places of worship that felt less and less sacred with every passing year.

But it wasn't the style of worship that kept her from taking part in communion, Sunday after Sunday.

A soft, dry hand touched her arm, and she looked up. A little wizened nun smiled back at her over half-moon glasses, her dark face framed by her white and blue habit. "Be not afraid," she said in a soft oboe of a voice, "is easier to say than to do." Her smile widened, her eyes disappearing in a constellation of soft wrinkles. "But try. Be not afraid to forgive. And live."

"I --" Zoey tried to reply, but she found she couldn't as she felt the tell-tale prickling of tears, which she blinked back with great difficulty.

The old nun touched Zoey's forehead, as if in a blessing, and she moved down the pew, genuflected when she reached the center aisle, and joined the flow of believers in communion.

After that Sunday, Zoey never saw her again.

#

Miranda broke free from Ed's grip as she spun out, her wings catching air and beating him down, enraged. "You're helping her? Why? Don't you know who you are?"

He didn't answer as he deflected her blows, sliding past them but not straying too far.

Sharp-eyed, she spied the woman kneeling next to her quarry, and Miranda darted past Ed as she tried to return to the rooftop.

Ed intercepted her, and again they were fighting in close quarters, Miranda trying to beat him back, Ed trying to deflect yet restrain her.

"You think this'll put you all right with God?" she spat out. "You know the game rules – a fallen angel is forever."

"I know."

"So why are you aiding this human?" Her eyes widened. "Is she your *pet*?" she sneered.

"Miranda --"

"You can say my name, but you have no claim on me!" She again tried to make a break from this useless sparring, but he again blocked her way. "I have nothing, I owe nothing, I am nothing! Do you know what happened after than goddamn Reboot? Have you ever seen a woman and baby starve to death?"

Then, involuntarily, she sent before she could stop herself with a ragged cry, "No!"

Ed received as if stuck by a tidal wave. He stared at her. "I'm sorry."

She shook in fear and rage before sneering again. "I don't need your pity." She flew above him and hovered, her darkly beautiful wings

undulating at their maximum wingspan. “An officer in God’s army, reduced to being Lightbearer’s lackey, and for what – loving a human being. Safer to hate them.”

“Safer but not better.” He flew up so he could see her, eye-to-eye, even as the icy rain obscured his vision.

“Ah – so you *do* love this woman, eh?” she laughed with no humor.

“I don’t know.” Ed paused. “But I will always love you, Miranda.”

She screamed as she dove into him, wanting to knock him out of the sky.

He slipped past just enough to avoid full impact, but he held her in a tight grapple as they tumbled head over foot across the sky.

She broke free, circled around, and dive-bombed again.

#

The cemetery was tucked away in the outskirts of the main city, surrounded by quiet jungle held at bay by chain-link fences. Glancing at the slip of paper in her hand, twenty-five year old Zoey located the burial plot, unassuming among the simple worn headstones and low-lying weeds.

She had been saving for this, all of those years when she was a college student, working to make up the difference between tuition and financial aid. But even as a poor, full-time student on scholarships, grants, and loans, she had saved a little bit, every summer and winter break, for this.

A roundtrip ticket to her childhood home. Two days’ worth of car rental and motel lodging. A little bit of per diem for food and petty cash.

Now, in the brief summer between her graduation with both

Bachelor's and Master's degrees in English and her reporting to duty for her first full-time teaching position, she had cashed in that savings fund and – almost in an eye's blink – she was in a lonely graveyard, standing before a neglected grave marker.

She kneeled down, pulling away the weeds, so she could read the simple markings: Rev. Anthony William Macinas, SJ. 11 June 1952 – 8 August 1982. RIP.

She remembered that first time. It was raining very hard, and the tile floor of the narthex was very slick with the wet footsteps of rushing parishioners. Her mother and brother were ahead of her, already late for Mass, and Zoey was falling behind them as she struggled to tug off her dripping raincoat. She didn't even notice the altar boys, the deacon, and the priest, all queued to march down the center aisle with the crucifix and Bible aloft. In one heartbeat, she had slipped on one of the slick spots and, with a sickening sensation of losing connection with the earth, had fallen down hard backwards and then suddenly saw, felt, and heard – nothing.

When she came to, she noticed that she was lying on carpet, her head propped on multiple, folded layers of fabric that – she would later find out – were spare cassocks and vestments. She immediately saw a young man – very handsome, even as he looked alarmed – peering down her face, saying something she didn't understand. She didn't even know who he was, as she squinted against the too-bright light of a ceiling lamp and asked him, “What?”

“What's your name?”

“Huh? Uh – Zoey, Zoey Fitzpatrick.”

“What year is it?”

“Uh – 1981.”

“Do you know where you are?”

“Uh – in a church? With my mom and brother?”

He let out a sigh of relief. He looked up from her and said, “Do you need to have a doctor called?”

She heard her mother reply, “No, Father – thank you. It looks like just a little concussion. Can she rest here in the sacristy a little bit, as she recovers?”

“Of course – no problem. Whatever you need, just ask one of the lay ministers here. I’ll go check on you and Zoey after Mass.”

“I’m so sorry, for delaying the service like this.”

He shook his head and smiled. “Don’t be. God doesn’t follow clocks.”

“Thank you, Father.”

After he left, she heard Jamie next to their mother say in a low voice, “I don’t like him, Mom.”

“Jamie!”

“He’s all golden and bright on the outside, but something’s weird and shifty underneath.”

“Jamie – you need to give people a chance before you judge them like that. Especially a priest who’s being helpful. Zoey could’ve been seriously hurt. For the sake of your sister, at least. Please?”

She heard Jamie sigh. “Okay, Mom.”

That was the first time Zoey was aware of Father Tony Macinas, and he became aware of her. Jamie, of course, was right. But – as she realized with every passing year – so was her mother.

She exhaled deeply, only realizing then that she had been holding

her breath. Without anger, she laid the slip of paper on top of the grave marker and then placed a rock that she had found, where the ruined church used to be, on top of the paper.

Zoey didn't need to read what was on the paper – she had long ago memorized it once she had read it in a college freshman class.

Good-night; ensured release,
Imperishable peace,
Have these for yours,
While sea abides, and land,
And earth's foundations stand,
And human endures.
When earth's foundations flee,
Nor sky nor land nor sea
At all is found,
Content you, let them burn:
It is not your concern;
Sleep on, sleep sound.⁶

“Goodbye,” she whispered. Then she stood up and walked away.

#

Zoey? The voice was faint and far away, an echo of an echo.

Yes, Jamie, it's me. It's Zoey.

Seriously?

Have I ever lied to you?

A long pause, and then – “All right.”

Zoey opened her eyes at the sound of Jamie's voice – weaker and

⁶ Housman, A. E. “XLVIII: Parta Quies.”

huskier than the younger Jamie, but undeniably still him. Her blue eyes met her brother's dark eyes, anguished and full of tears.

“Zoey, I’m so sorry, Zoey,” he cried out. “I should’ve been braver --”

“Shhhh, Jamie.” She cradled her little brother’s head in her arms. “You’re the bravest man I know.”

“NO!” The enraged scream filled the sky as Miranda felt the icy rain turn warm and gentle, as she spied below the sister holding tightly the man whom she had been needling and seducing and tempting for years, caged by his stubborn refusal. Her rage sent her wings aflame, and she propelled this fiery blast with one massive wing beat towards the rooftop below.

Ed intercepted the blast, his wings outstretched to their fullest span, like a kingfisher in the sun, catching fire.

“You can let go, Jamie,” Zoey said, her voice breaking as her warm tears mingled with her brother’s. “Battle’s over. We’ve won. I’m happy – really I am – and I found you. I found you. You’re home. So it’s okay to let go, Jamie.” She hugged him tightly. “Let go, Jamie.”

#

This is for you, Zoey.

When Mom and Dad first moved to Guam, do you remember that typhoon that hit the island, right after they unpacked everything, which wasn't much? We helped Mom and Dad tape up the windows, still dusty from disuse, and then watch them nail cheap plywood boards over them as protection against the looming gale force winds.

The neighbors were doing exactly the same thing – remember that? – taping up those windows so that any shattered glass stayed in the frame, nailing those boards

against the windows. Everyone's battery-operated radio seemed to be tuned to the same station, with the weatherman announcing, "The front end of the storm will make landfall in one hour. Make sure your preparations are done before then. Tape and board up your windows and doors. Make sure you have plenty of flashlights, matches, candles, and emergency supplies of food, water, blankets, and medicine." All in unison, all together, all getting ready to bunker down and bear through the storm. You thought it so creepy and so scary, even though you didn't say anything.

Mom even filled out the bathtub with water just in case there wasn't any water after the storm, and you thought that was so creepy, too, having this tub filled with water, just sitting there. When we had to go to the bathroom under candlelight because the electricity had gone out, I tried not to look at the bathtub because I was scared too. Funny to think of that now.

Even before nightfall, we saw the change in the weather – the unearthly stagnant moist heat just before the storm, the high, climbing clouds, boiling upwards in the far horizon, boiling and rolling forward like a fast-moving high tide, and then a cold wind beginning, like the storm's messenger announcing its arrival.

Even though Mom and Dad said we could sleep with them for the night, you said no because you were a big girl, and I said no because I didn't want to look like a baby, too. But I couldn't sleep because I kept staring out of the tiny sliver of the bedroom window which was still exposed through the curtains, the tape, and the bit of board that for some reason didn't cover the window all the way. I saw the rain pounding the window as if someone were throwing rocks against the house. I saw the tall coconut tree in our front yard bend down nearly in half, the palm fronds whipped by the wind, which howled throughout the house like a mad ghost. As the night grew darker I saw the tree fronds turn into a dark witch, flying against the wind so she always remained in my sight, her black hair streaming behind her in net-like strips. The howling ghost became the witch's howl, crying out for blood, and

I remember feeling helpless as I lay there, in my big boy bed, trying to be brave.

And then I heard you, not out loud but in my head, as clearly as if you were right next to me, praying to God for strength, to protect you from that same witch who was calling our names in the wind, because there was nothing you could do but endure her.

I heard you, and that's why I left my big boy bed, padded over to your bedroom, and asked if I could sleep with you that night. I was scared, too, but your prayer made me brave for your sake. But I didn't want to make you feel foolish for fearing such things as witches, especially in the calm light of morning after a typhoon has passed – that's why I said the reason why I went over to you was that I was too scared to sleep alone. I was scared, but your fear scared me even more, Zoey. And both of us, holding each other as we tried to sleep, gave us just enough strength to endure that night of witches and ghosts.

If I'm the bravest man you know, it's because of you.

#

He reached up with a withered, old hand and touched her forehead, as if in a blessing. “I love you, Zoey.”

Zoey laughed into her tears as she nuzzled her forehead closer, trying to commit her brother's touch to her memory so that she would never forget. “I love you, too, Jamie.”

He smiled. “I'll tell Mom you said hi.”

And then the world exploded.

6 THE WORLD WAS ALL BEFORE THEM

The world collapsed back together with a gasp of air and clamor of screeching machines, alerting cardiac arrest and cessation of breath.

Zoey only had enough time to see her hand still on Jamie's forehead, his face already having taken on the mask of death, before the coding team arrived and, in a whirlwind of the Hippocratic Oath, started administering CPR and defibrillation. Pushed outside the little room by this activity, she wandered to the visitor's waiting area and sat down in the middle of the empty room.

The world collapsed back together in a blur of waiting briefly until the coding team called official time of death and a member of the medical staff approached Zoey with words of condolences and paperwork to fill out and sign. The world was both too fast and too slow, and she confused the nurse when she declined to see the body one last time.

"We've already said our goodbyes," Zoey explained, knowing full well that the nurse knew that Jamie was comatose when she arrived, and he never woke up one minute later, when he went into code.

Still feeling out of phase with reality, she made her way out of Parkland, toward the train station, and caught a train just before it left for downtown. As if on autopilot, she caught a light rail car, not bothering to sit down during the brief journey as the car was jammed with Saturday evening leisure folk, and stepped off at the Thanks-Giving Square station.

She knew it was a late hour, yet she trusted that the main gate would still be unlocked. The metal gate opened with no resistance, and she entered the now shadowed main pathway, walked through the gigantic gold ring “doorway” of Thanks-Giving Square, and sat down with sudden tiredness on one of the stairs on the other side.

She breathed slowly to calm her racing heart, her eyes closed, and when she opened them again, she looked to her left.

A tall, fit man with short-cropped salt-and-pepper hair – whether late thirties to early fifties would be hard to guess based on his appearance – still wearing the simple but now impeccably clean outfit of T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. And wings.

“Your wings are white,” Zoey observed.

Ed looked at her, somewhat surprised. “You can see them?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Interesting. They’re not materialized.” He shifted his shoulders. “Looks like you gained some of your brother’s ability, then. Which reminds me – your brother says hi.”

She gave a quick bark of a laugh, but then placed her hands over her face as she gave way to tears for a few minutes.

Ed waited as she regained her composure. “Why the tears?”

“Relief. Relief and release. I see you in flames, my brother dies, and

I wake up next to my brother's body, with nurses telling me that only a minute – a minute! – had passed, and you inform me that my brother says hi to me from Heaven.” She rubbed her eyes dry with the palms of her hands. “You tell *me* what's the appropriate response.” She looked at his wings again. “You *were* in Heaven, right?”

“Yes,” Ed replied, sounding awed and strangely tired. “Yes, I was.”

“So – Miranda was wrong. A fallen angel can – uh – unfall.”

“How do you know --”

“You sent. I heard most of everything between you and Miranda as you shielded Jamie and me.” She touched his hand lightly. “Thank you.”

Ed sighed. “I'm sorry about Miranda. I should've known that the reason your brother encapsulated himself was to keep Miranda imprisoned, from causing harm. I was so, so --” he waved his hands about, looking for the right word, “so adolescent in my depression that I didn't even suspect that I wasn't alone in possessing your brother.”

“Isn't that a weird coincidence – that both you and Miranda would be in Jamie at the same time?”

Ed shook his head. “In the matters of Heaven and Earth, there are no coincidences.” He peered at the sky above them, still a bright blue in the late summer evening. “I thought I was your guide to Jamie, and your role was to guide Jamie to death. Never in a million millennia would I believe that a human woman would guide a mediocre fallen angel like me back to Heaven.”

“How?”

“By giving me a chance to be just as brave as the bravest man you know.” Ed smiled at Zoey's stunned look. “I wasn't the only one who

was sending.”

“I – I just,” Zoey stammered.

“Another thing you should know,” Ed interrupted, suddenly serious. “Between Miranda and me, our added energy may likely have accelerated the progression of your brother’s cancer. And for that, I am sorry.”

Zoey shook her head. “Jamie is at peace now. What is there to be sorry for?”

Ed closed his eyes, as if in deep thought. When he opened them again, he said, “One other thing your brother said.” He paused. “You need to forgive your father.”

Zoey only stared at him at first. “Is he dead?”

“No. He’s very much alive.”

Zoey surprised herself by wincing at that news, at that old ache that, in spite of Jamie’s salvation, was still there.

Ed noticed her discomfort. “And that’s why you need to forgive him.”

She shook her head, but this time in anger. “Ed, you don’t understand --”

“Oh, yes, I do. More so than you think.”

Zoey stared at him again. “You know something that I don’t know,” she declared.

Ed smiled softly. “Yes. And I’m not allowed to tell you – yet.”

“Well – that’s not fair.”

He replied, “I’m not allowed to tell you – but I *am* allowed to help you figure it out yourself.”

Zoey frowned quizzically at him. “How?”

“First, trust me. And don’t move.”

Ed stood up, moved out of Zoey’s line of sight, and sat down on the step immediately behind her, his long legs bent and on either side of her. She heard Ed’s wings materialize as they unfolded and reached up high, like angelic antennae. Ed brought his hands around and rested them just barely a millimeter above her lower abdomen.

“What --?”

“Shhh. Angel at work.”

Zoey sat still, trying not to breathe too much, when a slow warmth started spreading from the area immediately under Ed’s hands, to her pelvis and even her lower back. After a moment or two, she stifled a small gasp as she felt a tiny cramping on one side, just below her belly button.

Ed moved his hands away as he stood up and then resumed his position, sitting next to Zoey, as his wings folded and shimmered out of sight. He had a slick sheen of sweat across his forehead.

Zoey stared at her lower abdomen. “Did you,” she began. She paused as she lightly placed her hands protectively over the area below her belly button. “Did you do what I think you just did?”

“What do you think I just did?”

“Uh – repaired the damage to my reproductive system and got me pregnant?” Her voice rose to an odd falsetto at the last word.

“First part, yes. In about, oh, a hundred years, modern medicine should be able to perfect quantum nanosurgery to smooth out micro scarring like yours and help stimulate cellular and tissue regeneration. It’s just humans will still need technology to do it.” He smiled a little as he paused. “As for the second part, yes and no.”

Zoey opened her mouth to speak but closed it, waiting for his response.

“I’m not Miranda,” he explained. “There’s no ‘me’ in that baby – she’ll be human, not nephil.”

“Baby?” Zoey repeated, stunned. “She?”

“Same technique as repairing and regeneration of you; I induced parthenogenesis from one of your eggs. Spliced a bit from one of your stem cells from the marrow bones, so she won’t be a full clone of you. Biologically, you’ll be giving birth to your non-identical sister, although, what with the age difference she’d likely call you ‘Mom,’ so – ooof!”

Zoey had lunged left and hugged Ed as tightly as she could as she cried out, “Oh my God, Ed, *thank you!*”

At first Ed sat still, stunned. But then he laughed, and that feeling of warmth that Zoey had felt when she first flew with him was part of that angelic laugh. He hugged her back, and when Zoey pulled back, he was only a little bit surprised that he didn’t want to let her go, but he did.

They settled back into their seating positions, with six inches of space between them.

Zoey sat, her hands protective over her belly. After a heavy silence, frowning a little, she asked, “I don’t mean to sound ungrateful – oh my God, Ed, this is beyond my wildest hopes -- but --”

“Was I ordered to give you a baby,” he interrupted, finishing Zoey’s question.

“Well?”

“No.” He glanced down, at the small hands covering a belly that,

in nine months' time, would be huge on Zoey's small frame. "You are my Beatrice, and I wanted to give you a gift. I can't give you back what you lost in the past, but I can at least give you a part of your future. She is my gift to you."

"So how," Zoey paused, struggling to find the words. "How will she help me figure out what you're not allowed to tell me – about my father?"

He smiled. "You'll know when it's time." He looked pointedly at Zoey until she looked at him, eye-to-eye. "Until then -- can you at least try to forgive your father?"

She sighed deeply. "For you – and Jamie -- I'll try."

"Good girl."

Zoey snorted. "Watch what you're saying, Mr. Ed. This girl's a *woman*, and she's gonna be a *mommy*." She shook her head, almost in disbelief. Her eyes moved towards his wings. "So – what's next for you?"

"Me?" He slightly shifted his shoulders, the wings wavering in slight motion. "Report back to Central, get my orders, and do what needs to be done."

"What you did before – composer, choreographer, engineer – would you be doing that?"

"That?" He shrugged. "Planetary creation and orbital alignment, what's poetically called 'music of the spheres.' There's no need for those occupational specialties once the original system's been set up. The laws of nature pretty much take over."

"You were part of God's creation crew."

"You can say that."

“Wow.” Zoey smiled. “You’re *really* old.”

“Ha ha.”

“What about Miranda?”

“She was always a soldier.” Ed paused. His silence ran so long that Zoey was about to apologize, but he finally declared, “I’ve tracked her in Hell. How long she’ll stay there, brooding over her failures, or when she’ll return to Earth, I don’t know. But I’ll be keeping an eye on her, no matter what I’ll be doing.” He glanced up, seeing the growing dark orange-shot sky as the sun began to set.

“Do you think – since she went after Jamie and now she knows who I am, that Miranda will go after me?” Zoey suddenly became afraid, her hands clenching into fists. “Go after the baby?”

“Zoey.” Ed shifted from the steps, kneeled in front of Zoey, and held her clenched hands protectively in his. “Zoey, you are much stronger than Miranda. More than you’ll ever know. And that little girl, the daughter of a Beatrice, will be even stronger than you. Still, *I promise you*, you will never have to worry about Miranda. Just live your life and raise that little girl. Be happy and be at peace. That’s all you need to do.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.” He glanced up, seeing the dark orange sky grow into a clear blue-black as the sun dipped below the far horizon.

“You need to go,” Zoey observed.

“Yes.” He gently released his hands from Zoey’s and stood up. “Your daughter won’t have a father – but she’ll have a celestial guardian, when she needs one. And I’ll try to visit you, if I can.”

“If allowed,” Zoey added, trying not to sound sad.

He smiled, bittersweet. “If allowed.” He walked over to the gold ring and stood in the middle, facing her.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“What’s your name?”

Zoey instantly received in her mind’s eye ridiculous images of a cartoon mermaid with a seashell bra, which quickly dissolved to images of a world-weary old Jewish man, which quickly faded as she felt words form around a becalmed cloud of light, *I drink the air before me, and return / Or ere your pulse twice beat.*⁷

“Goodbye, Zoey,” the angel said aloud as he took flight and then shimmered out of the material world.

“Goodbye... Ariel.”

#

Just turned ten-year old Ariel James Fitzpatrick burst into the townhouse apartment, her jeans and shirt ripped, her knees and elbows badly abraded and bleeding. She left her bike as it was, flung aside on the front stoop.

“MomMomMom!” she called out.

“In the kitchen, AJ,” not-quite fifty-year old Zoey Fitzpatrick answered. She nearly dropped the pot of spaghetti noodles when she saw her daughter, but had the wherewithal to put it back on the range before she rushed to her, kneeling down to get a closer look. “Are you okay? Anything broken? What happened?” she asked in quick succession, lightly placing her hands on the various hurts that she saw.

⁷ Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Act V, scene I, lines 102-103.

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” AJ replied, sucking in her breath when Zoey touched a particularly tender and sore spot. “Just banged up when I flew off my bike, but that’s not the weird part!” She stared at Zoey. “Mom, I – you’re *not* gonna believe this!” She started shaking.

Zoey stood up and walked her daughter to a kitchen chair to sit down. Then she opened one of the kitchen drawers and got out a first aid kit, which she placed on the kitchen table. After wetting down a paper towel, she pulled another chair closer to AJ and started tending to her various scrapes and hurts. “Try me.”

AJ took a deep breath, then began. “I was just riding my new bike, see, just around the neighborhood, and I end up at the park.”

“Something happened at the park?” Zoey asked, alarmed.

“No, nothing happened at the park – I just biked around the lake for awhile. But then I’m coming back home really fast, about to cross Grand, when I hear this voice say ‘STOP.’ And it’s like it’s above me, but it’s also like inside me – it just says ‘STOP.’ But I’m going too fast to stop, and that’s when the bike just crashed into NOTHING. Nothing was there, Mom, I swear – the bike just stopped, and I end up flipping over the bike, skidding on the sidewalk. And I’m thinking, ‘What the hell’ – oops, sorry, Mom – and that’s when I see it.”

“See what?”

“The car crash. An SUV ran a red and plowed into this huge truck, and it was a HUGE mess, all smashed metal and rubber, fluids and smoke – and I would’ve been in the middle of it if the voice hadn’t said ‘STOP’ and then stopped my bike.”

“Stopped your bike,” Zoey repeated slowly, finishing the cleaning and bandaging of AJ’s scrapes.

“And... and for a split second I see... this guy... in the sky.” AJ’s dark eyes – the same eyes as Zoey’s brother and mother – were wide and scared. “Crazy, huh.”

Zoey’s blue eyes looked into AJ’s dark ones. “No, not crazy.”

“So... you believe me?”

She smiled and held AJ’s hands, mother to daughter. “Oh yes. Very much so yes.” She gave her a quick hug. “Wash up – dinner’s almost ready. And while we eat, I’ll tell you a little story that’ll sound even crazier than yours.”

AJ gave her a funny look before heading to the bathroom.

Zoey closed her eyes. *Thank you*, she sent.

The reply was echoey and faint, as if the messenger was already very far away. *You’re welcome. I wish I could visit, but I was just passing through.*

Was it Miranda?

No. Just random chance. As I promised, you don’t have to worry about Miranda.

Okay. Zoey paused. *AJ saw you.*

Yes.

Were you materialized?

No.

Ab. Zoey felt a mild sense of panic, which she settled down by breathing deeply. *And I thought the big talk about sex was going to be stressful.*

His laugh was faint but clear. *You’ll do fine.* Then the dimensional distance grew greater, and she barely heard his next sending.

How’s the forgiveness going?

She sighed. *It’s going.*

Ab, Zoey. Well, I’ll try to visit you, if I can.

If allowed, she added, smiling softly and sadly.

But he was already gone.

7 THE WATERS UNDER HEAVEN

“Why do you keep trying to go back?” a former Watcher taunted the brooding Miranda as she stared intently into a spy-pool, its surface slick and reflective like toxic mercury. “You know, no matter what you do, Lightbearer only favors the Original Third who sided with him in The War. We’ll always be outcasts, even in Hell.”

“I don’t give a damn for Lightbearer,” Miranda shot back. “This has nothing to do with him.”

The ex-Watcher sneered, “You don’t have the ability to tempt, Miranda. Remember your last attempt – the man was schizophrenic, dying of cancer, and was double-possessed by you and Ariel. But not only did you lose him to his sister, you enabled the redemption of Ariel!”

Miranda grabbed the ex-Watcher and threw him against the outer wall of the vast prison fortress called Pandemonium, two leagues away from the fiery sand banks of a lava river where she had sat to brood and plan alone.

She knew that returning to Earth was madness, as her role – as

were all the Watcher angels who fell after Lightbearer and his army, the Original Third, fell – were relegated to menial guard duty in the infernal prison, while it was the Original Third who were assigned guerilla missions of wreaking havoc in the souls of mankind, in a proxy war with Heaven itself. Her home was Hell now.

But her hate, which served as the entryway to Hell, also served as her exit as her hatred against the Architect of the Reboot was as strong, if not stronger, as Lightbearer’s hatred against the Father of the Son. She burned with the desire to hurt the Architect who had hurt her, even when every attempt to do so, in the eons after the Reboot, only kept open the gaping wound of her double loss – the loss of Heaven, but especially the loss of her Earth-bound family.

It was the latter that kept Miranda separate from the other fallen angels, even separate from her fellow ex-Watchers. Every rare opportunity that she could leave Pandemonium for the spy-pool shore she took, looking for another way back to Earth.

She frowned into the spy-pool, for the other fallen angel, although in service to Lightbearer, spoke closer to the truth about her most recent failure than she would admit. She watched and waited, willing herself to remain patient even though she knew, if she didn’t return to Pandemonium soon, someone would arrive to get her – after all, she was as much prisoner of Hell as guard.

Then an image of a drowning man floated to the surface of the spy-pool, and she smiled mirthlessly.

Yes.

She tilted forwards, the force of her hate overwhelming Lightbearer’s bonds of Hell, and disappeared into the spy-pool.

#

The hard rain came down like bullets, exploding out of the lightning charged night sky. It battered the ink-dark sea, its waters roiling and crashing, creating mountains of water that, in an eye blink, would collapse and churn.

In one breathless moment, the mountains of water collapsed upon a little boat, churning the debris like a tornado in the ocean. Kicking and grabbing for a piece of debris – anything to hold on to – was an old sailor who had been trying to live just one more time the sailor’s life.

As a wave crashed upon his head, sending him deep underwater before he could get a full breath of air, he knew that he may die the sailor’s death.

He fought to reach the surface, his tired arms and legs working frantically. But another wave crashed down, and it reached down deep, well below the surface, knocking the old sailor around like a fly. He could feel his lungs burning, screaming for air, as he began to feel dizzy, in the darkness of his failing eyesight seeing firecracker afterimages of light. Exhausted, on the verge of consciousness, he thought sadly, *Amy, Zoey, Jamie, I’m sorry.*

#

Even though he was still very drunk, Seaman Recruit Zack Fitzpatrick could spot a pretty woman when he saw one, even in a midnight trip to a civilian hospital’s emergency room.

“Hey there,” he said, trying to sound smooth and casual – which was difficult as his mouth felt ten times its size, what with having been punched in the face in a not-so-well executed bar fight.

The young nurse who was attending him only rolled her dark eyes, not even bothering to reply.

“Hey – easy!” He sucked in his breath as she prodded an investigative gauzed forefinger at his mouth.

She laughed at that. “When the booze wears off, it’ll really hurt – lots.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“No problem, sailor boy.”

“How’d you know I’m a sailor?” He glanced at his jeans and T-shirt.

She laughed even harder at that. “Your haircut isn’t exactly in fashion. And we’re the nearest hospital to the nearest bar to the base. It ain’t rocket science.”

“Is that a fact?” he replied, trying to smile slyly but failing miserably, saying, “Ow.”

“Sailor boy --”

“Zack.”

“What?”

“My name’s Zack.”

“Okay. Fine. Zack, you’ll be fine. No broken bones, no weird clotting. But you look like hell, and you’re not even my type. So stop with the flirting, okay?”

He stared at her, still feeling very drunk but still seeing her clearly. She seemed to glow with a warm green, even though it seemed spiky with irritation and tiredness. “You’re beautiful.”

“Oh Jesus --”

“No, really. Really.”

She squinted at him, and then sighed. “Right.”

“Seriously. I --”

Then one of the ER doctors on duty swung by to check on him and confer with the nurse and, sooner than he’d prefer, Zack was cleared to go, along with the two buddies he was with.

But before they left, he heard a name, but didn’t quite catch it. “What?” He looked up and saw the pretty nurse as she just passed him.

“Amy Hernandez.” She slipped into another patient’s room.

“Hey – fast work, Z-man,” one of his buddies declared as the other one laughed.

Zack frowned. “Shut up, guys.”

Several weeks later, Zack found himself in his dress whites, recently dismissed from his graduation rites, slipping away from his buddies and their families, back to the civilian hospital’s ER unit. There, he looked blankly, as the memory of that night was hazy through the booze except for the pretty nurse and her name.

“Excuse me, but I’m looking for Amy Hernandez,” he asked at what looked like an information desk.

The woman behind the desk gave him an appraising look. “And who may I ask is inquiring?”

“Uh --” He struggled to explain himself and decided to tell the truth. “She treated me when I was here a few weeks ago. I was an ass, but she was kind and told me her name. My name is Zack Fitzpatrick, and I just wanted to say thanks before I left.”

“Huh.” She decided to believe him. “She’s on her lunch break – cafeteria. Here.” She pointed at a map.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

After carefully negotiating the maze of corridors, Zack arrived at the cafeteria – mostly empty as it was 3PM. The look on Amy’s face when she saw Zack approach her table was unreadable until she opened her mouth. “You clean up good.”

He laughed nervously. “I didn’t forget you.”

“Obviously.” She pointed at an empty chair across the table and saw him sit down. She glanced at his sleeve. “E-3. Well, well, ambitious are we.” She smiled at his surprise. “Nearest hospital to the nearest bar to the base, remember?”

“Oh – right.” He suddenly felt awkward. “Okay, look. I just wanted to thank you for putting up with me back then, and to say I’m sorry.”

“Well. Will wonders never cease.”

“Huh?”

“You’re the first man who’s ever apologized to me for being a chauvinist pig. Even the doctors won’t do that.” She looked at him anew. “Okay, I’ve decided that you’re not a creepy stalker.”

“Oh, gee, thanks.”

“So, Mr. Zack --”

“Zack Fitzpatrick.”

“So, Mr. Zack Fitzpatrick, where do we go from here?”

“Uh --” He suddenly went blank, so he said the first thing that came to his mind. “Can you be my pen pal?”

The cafeteria lunch lady who had been eavesdropping burst out laughing.

To Zack’s great relief, Amy wasn’t. “Sure,” she said, shrugging. “What harm can it do?”

One year and three duty stations later, when Amy met Zack at the

altar, her wedding dress as white as the groom's uniform, he leaned in and whispered, "Do this count as harm?"

She laughed in reply.

Zack loved being a sailor and a husband, but nothing prepared him for being a father. His own father left him and his mom when he was young, and he didn't even have a father-in-law as a role model, as both Amy's parents died with she was a teenager.

So when he held his firstborn, his baby daughter Zoey, for the first time, he felt a prickly sensation between his eyes and the back of his neck which, joined together, made him want to laugh and cry at the same time. *Oh my God*, he thought as he bore this attack of overwhelming love, *what did I get myself into?*

Two years later, when he held his son Jamie for the first time, the attack of love was so strong that he felt like his heart would explode, and that strange sensation of being all-powerful yet absolutely scared shitless hit him on top of everything else.

Being away nine to eleven months out of the year from Amy and the kids didn't help in getting used to these powerful paternal feelings, and when he came home on leave, he'd always be shocked and saddened by how big his kids were getting, by how many milestones he had missed, even as he would hide those emotions by being "fun Dad."

But he couldn't hide them from Amy, and one Christmas, after the kids had opened their gifts and gone to take a well-earned nap, she pulled him aside in their bedroom and said, "Zack, stop it."

"Stop what?"

"Stop feeling guilty."

He opened his mouth to protest but then closed it, for that was exactly what he had been feeling ever since the kids were born.

“Zack, I married a sailor, and I knew then what that meant. Zoey and Jamie were born in a Navy family, and that’s all they’ve ever known. That means, you married a woman who’s strong enough to be a Navy wife, and you have kids who miss you when you’re gone but know their daddy is a hero, protecting them, their mommy, and their home. So --” she pulled him to her level so that he could be eye-to-eye to her, “stop mourning the nine or ten or whatever months you’ve lost with us and start living with us *here* and *now*. You hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” She lay down on their bed, smiling. “Now, let’s not waste a good nap.”

He laughed, but quietly so as not to wake the kids. “Yes, ma’am.”

And, for awhile, everything was perfect.

And then, suddenly, it was not.

On another leave, when six-year old Jamie and eight-year old Zoey were down for the night, Zack sat heavily before the kitchen table, staring at the rivulets of condensation of his half-drunk beer bottle as Amy’s voice cut in and out of his concentration.

“—the second phone call from his school this month,” Amy said. “Something’s not right with Jamie, Zack. They think it’s autism, but when he’s at home with Zoey and me, he’s fine. But away from us, he’s silent and won’t really interact with people. His teacher says he’s obviously a smart kid, but kindergarten is also a lot about social skills, and he’s not doing them.”

“Is he hitting any kids?”

“Well, no.”

“Is he yelling or screaming or disrespecting his teachers?”

“Well – no.”

“Then I don’t see the problem.”

“Zack. Stop staring at your damn beer and listen to me.”

He looked up at his wife, who was so frustrated that she was near tears.

“Our son isn’t a bad kid – but he’s not a typical kindergartner either. It’s like he’s suddenly angry at people, Zack.”

He exhaled deeply. “You’re right. You’re right.” He took a long drink from his bottle. “I’ll talk to him tomorrow.”

The next day, when Amy and Zoey went on base to do some shopping at the exchange, Zack took his son out for a walk in the nearby woods. The season was starting to turn, and their feet crunched on newly fallen leaves as Jamie watched out for acorns and squirrels.

Zack watched his son, still a little guy in sneakers, jeans, and a flannel shirt and looking so much like Amy, with his dark hair and piercing dark eyes. But the creeping fear that he felt last night had remained, as he prayed that his son did not take after him on the inside.

“Hey, Jamie?”

“Yes, Daddy?”

Zack’s heart beat hard, as his son’s reply pulled him back to that hospital room when he first held Jamie and felt the dual attack of overwhelming love and fear. “Jamie,” he said, and he was now squatting down in front of his son so he could see his son’s face, “what color do you see in me?”

Jamie stared at him in surprise but then started to cry in relief.

“You’re blue and green, Daddy. You’re always blue and green.”

Without a word, he hugged his son, letting him cry until he had calmed down. Zack forced himself not to shed tears, even though he knew that Jamie would be able to feel and see them in his deepening blue. After a minute or two, when the little boy’s tears turned into sniffles, Zack pulled away. “You’re blue and green, too, Jamie.”

His little boy stared at him. “You see it, too?”

“I do.”

“But – but my teacher says I’m being funny, I’m making it up. The kids in class tell me I’m making it up, too.” He frowned. “I hate them.”

“Jamie, don’t say that.” Zack looked into his son’s angry, dark eyes. “Don’t hate them just because they can’t see what you can see. Most people don’t believe what they can’t see.”

“That’s what Zoey says.”

“Does she?” Zack asked, surprised. “Well, your sister’s right.”

“But Zoey doesn’t believe it, either.”

“Jamie --”

“She doesn’t! She’s not mean, like the other kids at school, but she doesn’t believe it’s real.”

“Well, son, she can’t see people’s colors. Neither can your mom. Most people can’t.”

“So why can I do? Why can you do, Daddy?”

Zack shrugged. “Same reason why Zoey has my blue eyes and you have your mom’s brown ones. It’s a family thing. But it’s super special, so it shows up in only a few people.” He paused, making sure his son was looking straight at his eyes. “And Jamie – being mad at people who can’t see people’s colors is like being mad at people who can’t see

at all.”

“That’s being mean?”

“That’s being mean.”

Jamie’s eyebrows furrowed, deep in concentration. “What do I do, Daddy?”

“You’ll see the color, but just don’t pay attention to it, like the color of people’s hair or the color of their skin. Everyone has a color that’s always there but, after a while, it just becomes a part of who they are, but only just a part. You don’t really know a person unless you talk to them, work with them --”

“Play with them?” Jamie interrupted.

“Yes, Jamie. Play with them. At least try.”

Jamie shrugged. “Okay, Daddy.”

“Good boy.” Zack pointed at a tree. “Look, there’s a squirrel.”

Happy for the distraction, Jamie ran after it, looking up as the squirrel scurried up the trunk and into a particularly gnarled branch of an old, golden-leaved oak. “Daddy, does Mommy know you can see people’s colors?” he asked carefully.

“No, son.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I’d gotten so good at not mentioning it to people before I met your mom that I didn’t think to mention it, even to her.”

“Because you didn’t want to hear Mommy say she didn’t believe you?”

Zack sighed deeply. *Out of the mouths of babes*, he thought. “Yes, Jamie. That’s probably why.”

“It hurts my feelings when people don’t believe me.”

“I know, son.” Zack, who had walked over to the squirrel’s tree, tousled his son’s hair affectionately, like a young puppy. “I know.”

Nine months after that talk in the woods, Zack and his family left behind those woods for yet another duty station on the other side of the country. One year later back to the East Coast, but this time in Virginia. Then a year in Texas, near Amy’s hometown of Dallas.

With every move, Zack was grateful for a supportive Navy wife who had put her own career on hold, for a son who no longer had the schoolyard reputation of “weird” and “creepy” but simply “shy” and “quiet,” and for a daughter who was doing her best as the oldest child and big sister. He was grateful that he didn’t have to worry about the home front as he advanced to higher ranks, better pay grades, and more challenging responsibilities.

The next move to the Western Pacific came with his promotion to Chief Petty Officer. Barely six months later, he got a phone call from a frantic Amy. “Come home. Jamie’s had a psychotic break.”

Zack could only stare at the phone’s receiver, the heavy hum of the ship all around him, as his ears roared with the rush of blood pumping through an equally frantic heart.

The next two months were a mindless blur of psychiatrists and psychotherapists, of arguments over what was best for Jamie. *I should tell her, I should tell her*, Zack’s mind pounded its message, but not even Jamie’s diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia could bring him to reveal to Amy what he and Jamie shared, for he refused to see what Jamie had clearly seen – Zoey’s green and yellow, blotted out with corrosive gray and shot with oozing black.

With years of practice behind him, Zack turned a blind eye, willfully

forcing Zoey's color to fade away from his vision in order to focus his full attention to Jamie's treatment. But in yet another argument with Amy, Zoey herself ripped away those blinders.

"Mom – Dad – I'm sorry," she whimpered.

As she collapsed onto the kitchen floor, Zack stared in shock, seeing the inky blackness pour out of Zoey's abdomen like hemorrhaging blood.

"Zack! ZACK! Jesus, Zack, HELP ME!"

Amy's barking orders broke through his paralysis, and he rushed to aid his wife get their daughter into the car and to the base hospital.

With his little girl hooked up in ICU, Zack and Amy would sit vigil in the evenings after visiting Jamie in the inpatient psychiatric wing of the hospital complex. With two children sick, Zack sat helpless, until one stormy evening, Zoey, delirious with fever, whispered, "No, Father Tony, don't."

Zack's head jerked up from his hands as he heard Zoey's words, Amy's gasp, and the nurse on duty dropping her clipboard.

"Who the hell is Father Tony?" Zack demanded from his wife.

"Macinas. Father Tony Macinas – Our Lady of the Hills Church – our church," Amy stammered, and she watched Zack leap out of his seat. "Zack, what are you going to do?"

"Nothing." He marched out of the hospital room, out of the hospital complex.

It was raining hard, but he drove without caution, careening towards the church and the rectory next to it. The church and rectory stood dark and empty as he pulled into the parking lot. But before he stopped the car, he saw a trail of inky darkness heading out of the

rectory, down the parking lot, and out to the road.

Zack swung the car around and followed the trail, which even the wind and rain could not wash away. It led him to a lonely bit of beach, where he parked and got out in order to follow the trail onto the sand.

There, barely seen in the deepening gloom of the evening and the incoming typhoon, was a man wading into the stormy surf.

Zack stood still, watching the man wade farther out as it became clear what he was trying to do. But the farther the man waded, the more the waves pushed him back to shore, as if the waters themselves rejected him. Then it looked as if the man was changing his mind as he stopped wading in waist-deep water, and Zack found himself running down the sand, into the water, to make the man do what he himself could or could not do.

Up close, even in the dark of the evening and storm, Zack could see the man, a fellow only a year or two younger than he was, in swim trunks, sobbing as his color – primarily a dark, depressive blue – fought with the inky blackness that suffocated him. The man suddenly saw him, and he immediately recognized who Zack was. As if Zack brought the impetus the man needed, the man slowly but deliberately nodded and then fought his way into deeper waters until Zack could no longer see the man among the violent waves crashing towards him and the island shore.

Suddenly aware of his own bodily danger, Zack rushed back to the island, in time to see the dark trail fade and disappear. Running and stumbling back to the safety of the car, he drove away as the storm scrubbed clean all evidence of both men's appearances on that lonely beach.

As he drove home, Zack's body gave way to violent shakes, and the car weaved jerkily in the dark rain. At the empty house, he stripped off his wet clothes in the kitchen, threw them in the dryer, mopped himself and then the wet floor with a towel, threw that in the dryer, and turned the dryer on. Gooseflesh rising on his naked body, Zack tried to breathe deeply as his thoughts screamed across his mind.

He's dead. I wanted to kill him, but he killed himself first. No, he changed his mind, but then he saw me. Did I make him kill himself, or did I help him kill himself? I wanted to kill him, but he killed himself first – so why the hell do I feel guilty?

“Dammit,” Zack said out loud, his voice an odd mixture of anger and fear. He checked his clothes – they were cool to the touch, but they were mostly dry, so he put them back on.

He got wet again in running to the car and, once back at the hospital, running from the car to the hospital's entrance, but nothing like wading into the ocean.

Only Amy was in the room with Zoey, who was still unconscious. She looked at Zack as he resumed his seat next to her. “Where were you?” she asked, so quietly that Zack almost didn't hear her.

“Just clearing my head.” The lie slid out easily before Zack had a chance to stop it.

She nodded and then rested her head against the edge of Zoey's bed. Her body shuddered once and then went still.

“Amy, there's a couch over there – why don't you get some sleep? You're exhausted.”

Her head gave a small shake. “No. Not sleepy. Too much shit going through my head.” Her fists clenched in her lap. “Why Zoey? Why?”

Why didn't I see it? Why couldn't I protect her? Isn't that my damn job? And Jamie – why Jamie, the sweetest and smartest little boy in the world? Why him?" She turned her head, her anguished eyes looking at nothing. "What the *fuck* kind of world allows a so-called man of God to rape my little girl and allows an incurable mental illness to beat down a little boy? Why? Why? *Why?*"

By the last word, Amy had stood up, in near hysterics, and Zack could only hold her as she beat his chest and cried angry, bitter tears, all the while the dark hole where his guilt was grew deeper and larger with her every fist beat, with every raging tear.

The next day, during the clear day after the storm had passed, news spread of the priest's body found washed up around the rocky outcroppings of Orote Point, which the police ruled as an accidental drowning. When she heard the news, Amy only looked at Zack but asked no questions, as Zack only stared into space and remained silent.

Two days later, when Zoey finally awoke from her coma, Zack still remained a silent witness, watching Zoey – still grayish from her ordeal but now weeping a familiar shade of dark blue – staring at her hands as Amy – her joy a shining golden green – cried and embraced her.

He put up no protest when Amy declared that she had found a reputable pediatric psychotherapy program in her hometown of Dallas and that she and the kids would be relocating there. He filled out and signed the necessary paperwork to ensure a smooth transition for the move to Texas for his family, and for his own move to single-member housing on base as he served out his current two-year stay.

In the airport, Jamie was quiet, zoned out on antipsychotics, while Zoey was also quiet, brooding to herself. Only Amy put up a brave

face, smiling madly as she said, “I’ll write often – you write, too.”

“Okay.”

“Come home when you can.”

“Okay.”

“Zack?”

“What?”

She glanced at the kids, but they seemed to be in their own world. She stared straight into Zack’s eyes. “This isn’t home.”

“What?”

“This isn’t home anymore. Over there is home. *Our* home. Not just me and the kids, but your home, too. When you can, come home. And when you can, come home forever. We’ll be waiting.” She squeezed Zack’s hands. “I’ll be waiting.”

“Amy --”

“Stop feeling guilty.”

He opened his mouth to answer but then closed it.

“You’re a good husband. You’re a good father.” Her stare became more intense. “You’re a good man. Stop feeling guilty just because you’re only human. Stop it.”

“Amy --” He paused again. “Amy, I’ll try.”

“Okay, then.” She released his hands and wrapped her arms around his neck. Not caring that their kids and complete strangers could see, she stood on tiptoe to give a long, farewell kiss.

For Zack, it was a kiss that reminded him of their first kiss, that reminded him of those stolen opportunities when he would be on leave and the kids were asleep, that reminded him of why he fell in love with Amy in the first place.

When he pulled back, he found his face wet with tears – not Amy’s, but his own. He turned from Amy towards the kids and hugged them, too, not caring if they hugged him back with the same intensity as he.

But they did. Zoey hugged him tightly and said, “Bye, Daddy,” with such fear in her eyes that Zack almost changed his mind – that he would go with them, too, somehow – but he pushed the thought away. Little Jamie, drugged as he was for the trip, strained to see Zack’s color, as Zack could tell from Jamie’s stare, as intense as Amy’s was.

“It’s okay, Jamie,” Zack said, hugging him tightly.

“Are you sad, Daddy?” Jamie asked dreamily. “Is your color sad?”

Zack closed his eyes and hugged Jamie even tighter. “Yes, Jamie,” he whispered. “Yes and yes.”

The call for boarding came, and Zack watched his family leave the waiting area and disappear into the long jet way to the waiting passenger plane below. He remained as he was as the jet way moved out of the way, the plane rolled back, and it taxied and then ran along the concrete pathways of the airport runways. He placed his hand on the wall-to-wall glass as he saw Pan-Am flight 33 take off and ascend into the sky, the white and blue craft all too quickly disappearing into the cloud bank, disappearing from Zack Fitzpatrick’s life.

He closed his eyes again, his forehead resting against the glass, which felt cold to the touch.

Zack hadn’t meant to miss Thanksgiving and Christmas. He hadn’t meant to neglect writing back to Amy’s letters, her letters about a new life in a civilian world filled with a return to nursing, to helping her kids heal, to being lonely, to missing him. He hadn’t meant to run farther and farther away from a return to a home that Amy would insist was

his home, too, by accepting one far-flung deployment and then another one and then another. He hadn't meant to do any of those things, but he did. He kept himself so busy with his military career that he had no empty spaces in his life to be bothered with "why."

Consequently, two and a half years after he witnessed his family leave his life, he was both surprised and resigned to receive Amy's request for a divorce. He did not contest it, agreeing to everything that Amy and her lawyer wanted from him and, in one surreal moment three months later, he read about the official death of his marriage from his copy of the official divorce decree, arriving on a beautiful, sunny day along the coastline of the Mediterranean Sea.

Slowly, deliberately, he ripped apart the decree into postage-stamp sized pieces and then threw the resulting confetti into the waters below.

Four years later, when Zoey's letter found him to say that Amy was dead, he ripped apart that document, too, this time feeding the cold north Atlantic.

Amy, his mind cried, even as his face remained as cold and still as the icy November air. *Amy*. Then the image of the man nodding his assent and then disappearing under the stormy waters flashed through his mind's eye and, for the first time, he understood what Tony Macinas felt that day.

I'm sorry, Amy. I can't stop feeling guilty.

#

Exhausted, on the edge of consciousness, the old sailor thought sadly, *Amy, Amy, I'm so sorry, Amy. I'm so sorry.*

Another wave crashed down like an exploding depth charge,

slamming the old man deeper into the roiling waters. This time, he stilled his limbs. This time, he stilled his breath. This time, he let the vast sea take him to wherever it would take him. He was slipping away.

Catching him unaware, Miranda slipped in.

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
Intelligential 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.’”⁸

“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=mc²,” Ed interrupted, holding up his hand. ““Corporeal to

⁸ Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Book V, lines 407-413.

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 *übertmenschen*."

"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.⁹ 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.”

⁹ Genesis 9:13-14.

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.

“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 sent 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 sent.

9 THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH

The beautiful pale creature was stark against the cloud-free, sunlit sky, its iridescent blue-black wings shimmering as it glided on thermals and then gaining altitude with heavy wing beats, searching – desperately searching – for land.

The wine-dark sea stretched infinite, embracing the world in a vast waste of deep water. The tallest mountain peak the creature could just barely perceive a full five fathoms down, which meant the valleys, the plains, the villages, the cities –

The creature's wings shook with rage, but they steadied, careful of who were in its arms.

A girl, just barely a woman, impossibly small and impossibly thin, slept fitfully against the creature's robed chest. Swaddled tightly against her chest was an impossibly thin baby boy, his head looking grotesquely huge in contrast to his small, listless body.

Looking down at both of them, the creature's face – at times looking female, at other times looking perfectly androgynous – settled on the strong, square jaw line of a young man entering into his latter

twenties, his skin still smooth but his eyes beginning to sink with tired despair, which only enraged him more.

Keep the girl and baby alive. Keep the body materialized. Keep flying. He cannibalized his own self, to feed his wife and son via energy transfer. But he also needed to conserve energy for himself, to keep his wife and son aloft from their watery grave below. Save them from drowning, save them from starving, save them from drowning – he could feel the matter of his own existence straining, wanting to wink out into shimmer and light.

Forty days of rain, a hundred fifty days of flood, no end in sight, and he raged against his impotence, his inability to save the humans that he saw as his people, his inability to save his own wife and son. His rage was chaotic, an all-points-bulletin sending of screaming and cursing and crying to nobody and everybody, knowing full well that nobody with power was listening.

That damn ark, he swore, his mind filled with the image of the titanic ship shining bright with the reflected light of Heaven, which expanded out in a force field so potent that he could not break through, lest he crush his frail cargo against it. *That goddamn ark* –

A small, brown hand reached up, touching his chin lightly before settling on where his heartbeat would be. *Hush, love.*

He started. In all the time he had known her, not once did she communicate this way. *You can... send?*

Is this what this is? He felt her smile in her sending. *Yes, I can send.*

For how long?

For always.

Why didn't you do it earlier?

He felt her shrug. *There was no need, then.*

There's need now?

Her sigh rippled through him. *I can no longer talk. And* – she added quickly, feeling his sudden panic – *you need to know something before I die.*

He began to protest, but she only pressed her tiny hand into his chest as she sent her long-held memories.

#

The smell of lavender and sweet water, and a gourd rattle so red that it glistened. The plump, doughy skin of a woman still soft from childbirth and postpartum. The slow tears falling silently and gently around soft kisses on forehead, baby cheeks, and tiny, fat hands and feet.

Over time, the tears would lessen and lessen, the skin would shrink and firm, and the rattle would be put away, but Mara's Tanta always smelled of lavender and sweet water as she would slip into Mara's nursery between her palace duties, relieve the nurse, and rock her in her lap, humming a song, telling a fairy story, or reading a rare book. She taught Mara – against all custom – to speak and read, and with language the little girl's earliest memories stayed with her as she would re-tell Tanta's visits to her aloof but gentle nurse when Tanta wasn't around.

Sometimes the nurse would bring Mara to the palace gardens, where the little girl would “help” Tanta plant some medicinal plants of Tanta's native homeland. In those excursions, Mara would play in the dirt while Tanta smiled and laughed, calling Mara “my little river,” for she would babble and run around the garden, as vibrant and alive as the great river which fed life into the kingdom's large city and its

growing people, greedy for food and land.

For four years Mara wanted to call her guardian “Mama,” but she always insisted on “Tanta” – she was Aunt, not Mother. In her fifth year, Mara realized that Tanta’s lap was getting smaller and smaller because her belly was getting bigger and bigger. Then one day, exactly a half year before her sixth birthday, Tanta did not relieve the nurse, which angered Mara. She threw a tantrum, and the nurse scolded, “Hush, Mara!”

“I want Tanta!”

The usually gentle nurse gave her a little shake. “You must never call Queen Anica that again. She’s a real mother now. Prince Halim Pyr-Ra’d was born last night, and it is time that you remember who you are.”

“You can’t talk to me that way!”

The nurse, her eyes glittering, gave the little girl a harder shake. “You may be the daughter of King Ra’d, but remember that you are only the illegitimate daughter of a dead concubine. It is only the generosity and weakness of a queen who had lost her newborn son when you were born – a birth which cost you your weak-bodied mother – that has kept you here at all, as spoiled and pampered as a pet peacock.” The nurse let go of Mara’s arms, seeing the little girl stumble backwards and sit down hard on the lushly carpeted floor of the nursery that was no longer hers. “Remember who you are,” her nurse declared, her aloof tone cold and frightening to the newly displaced child.

That night she slept in a simple, little room in the female servants’ wing of the palace. A different woman was assigned as her caregiver,

as her nurse now served the new prince and the convalescing queen. As Mara was too young to do any proper work but too old to be allowed to play all day, the caregiver would bring her to the gardens to learn the craft of the gardeners and then, when the day would wane into night, bring her indoors to learn weaving and sewing with the other servant women of the palace.

The next three years were a blur of monotony and silence as Mara learned to close her heart as she opened her eyes and ears. She observed the exhaustive, thankless work of the servants. She learned about the role of her mother – to produce a son – when Queen Anica was feared to be barren. She learned about her mother’s cremation and scattering of her ashes in the river. She learned about her father’s decision to have another concubine because of Queen Anica’s inability to bear children – a decision never enacted once her pregnancy became official. She learned about her father’s continuous conflicts, battles, and negotiations in far-flung lands, in the perpetual pursuit of expanding and securing his kingdom.

All these things Mara learned by keeping silent while hearing the non-stop murmur and private chatter of servants’ gossip. All these things Mara was warned ahead by her ability to see the odd colors and shapes of intent and emotion of the people around her, once she stilled her own thoughts and emotions and laid her mind as open as a basket catching rain water.

When Queen Anica came to visit her with the little prince, nine-year old Mara already knew she was coming, from the gossip and the color of servants radiating bright yellow – a happy, expectant color.

She arrived in the common room of the servant women’s wing, the

three-year old prince, in robes of royal purple, holding onto the queen's hand, looking timidly at the group of servants before him and turning his face into the soft, warm folds of his mother's dress.

Mara tried not to look at the queen and ended up staring at the little boy, who saw her and cried, "Go away!"

Mara felt all eyes on her, but the queen only said, "Hush, Halim, don't be rude." She presented the prince before her. "Mara, this is my son Halim. Halim, say hello to Mara, your sister."

The servants stared agog as Mara's heart skipped. She looked at the scared little boy and then at the queen.

"Hello," the little boy said, still clinging to his mother's side.

"Hello," Mara replied automatically, her voice sounding distant and not her own.

The queen looked at the servants and gave a small nod, indicating a need for some space, and they drifted away a little, affording her and the two children a little bit of privacy.

"My little river. I'm so sorry. Your father – well, let's say he didn't understand why you needed me. In many ways I am just as powerless as you. But you've grown, yes? You're no longer my little river?"

Mara heard her kneel down to her level. When she looked up, the queen looked blurry. The queen put her arms around Mara, even as her son clung to her dress. Yes, she still smelled of lavender and sweet water.

"I miss you, Tanta," Mara whispered.

As if to recapture lost time, Tanta would send for Mara when she and Halim were visiting the gardens, about once a week. It was there that Mara taught Halim how to climb the belajoun tree, and it was there

that Tanta taught the two children the names and uses of the plants, like the hazel herb, which was useful for fevers and pain. But then Mara again noticed Tanta's growing belly. When she hugged Tanta goodbye for what would be the last time, she could feel, underneath the happy yellow color of Tanta's pregnancy, a dull, ugly gray that scared her. The weekly visits to the garden ended and the entire palace seemed to hold its breath.

One day she heard a young boy's voice. "Mara, it's Mama."

Her heart racing at his words, Mara looked up from her book, a gift from Tanta. Halim's face was still, as if he were trying hard not to cry. She left her book to follow Halim to wherever he would lead.

But he did not lead her far, for at the entrance of the common room was Halim's nurse, who used to be Mara's old nurse. She looked angry but tried to make her anger look like concern. "Your Highness, we really need to come away – your father --"

"Not without Mara."

"Prince Halim, what has this girl to do with your father needing you by his side?"

"Nothing. But Mama was her mama, too, and she'll be by *my* side. I command it."

The nurse sighed at his words. "Your father will not be pleased."

"But Mama will be, and it's Mama I care about, not Papa."

Mara could see the woman debating within herself, on whether she felt like arguing with a stubborn little boy and then physically having to remove him from the women's wing like a sack of food or a young animal or just giving in to his demand so that she could escort him away quietly. But the king's might was on her side, and Halim had

already learned what everyone else knew – only the king had power. “No, Prince Halim, it is your father’s command that you – and only you – stand by your father’s side. And we don’t have time for this, Your Highness; one minute arguing with me here means one minute less you have with your mother.”

Halim’s face stilled even more – it became a mask that looked awful upon a person as young as he. It was a mask that Mara was fully used to upon herself but not on the shy, sincere face of Halim. He turned to Mara and let the mask slip a little as he whispered, “I’m sorry.” Then he left quickly, with the nurse immediately behind him, closing the common room doors.

Only when the palace bell tolled three hours later, at an unusual time where there were no routine activities, did Mara know – for she knew – that Tanta was dead.

She was dead. And Mara never even got the chance to say goodbye.

With a stifled cry, Mara sprang up from her bed and ran, tears threatening to fall, all the way to the gardens, as dark and abandoned as a graveyard. She stumbled to the belajoun tree of her childhood play and, sitting underneath with her knees drawn against her face, she allowed herself the freedom to cry.

For her mother, long dead and burned and thrown away.

For the little boy, who died when he was born.

For the little boy, who just lost his mother.

For the tiny baby, who died with its mother, still in the womb.

For her Tanta, the only mother she had ever known.

For herself, who was as bound and trapped as they.

After a time, the wild sobbing gave way to quiet, gentle tears. She

wiped her eyes with the palms of her hands and looked up at the sky. Through the spreading branches of the belajoun, she saw the black sky thick with stars. She stood up, her arms wrapped around herself from a sudden chill of the desert night air, and left her place of solitude for the empty loneliness of her room.

The funeral of the next day was a blur of wailing people, thick incense of the priests, and the slow procession towards the royal burial grounds. King Ra'd led the procession, a large, imposing man with hard, black eyes, the heavy, black mourning robes just barely brushing against the dirt and sand. He had commanded that Prince Halim join him, but, in a rare instance of rebellion, the prince only agreed if his sister was with him. Unexpectedly, the king accepted this term, and Mara – the king's superfluous offspring – found herself holding Halim's hand tightly and staring at the dirtied hem of her father's mourning robes as they marched to the queen's burial place.

Mara closed her eyes, not wanting to see the linen-and-silk wrapped body, and she felt Halim's face buried in her own simple mourning robes, his tears flowing into the cloth as Mara simply held his hand, breathing in the dry, dusty air and the thick incense of myrrh and cedar.

Is it over yet, Mara?

Mara felt the sobbing behind the words. *No, not yet. But soon. Stay strong, Halim.*

I'm trying, Mara. It's hard. He rubbed his eyes against Mara's robes like the seven-year old child that he was. *I miss her.*

I miss her, too. Mara opened her eyes to see their father set the last stone against the entrance to Tanta's burial crypt.

The formal one-year mourning period began that day. By year's

end, the world Tanta left behind would be falling apart.

First came the fever that swept throughout the kingdom like fire, sickening so many and killing enough of the sick that the people beseeched both king and priests for salvation, as the hazel herbs were exhausted and the funerary pyres were fed non-stop, the dark smoke blackening the sky.

Then came news of an invading army conquering the neighboring lands bordering King Ra'd's domain and, like a predator stalking its weak prey, crossing into the far hinterlands of the kingdom.

The frenzy of fear and despair nearly drove Mara to madness as she was powerless to do anything except witness the catastrophe around her. When Halim took sick with the fever, it took the bodily restraint of the palace guards to keep Mara from him, as her old nurse scolded, "Do you want to get the fever, too? The healers are with him – all we can do is wait and pray to the gods."

When the priests assured the king that defeating the invaders would end the epidemic, the palace came alive with the activity of impending war, and Mara could no longer keep silent. In the vacant time between the changing of the guards, Mara slipped into the council chamber, where her father spent most of his time when he was in the palace.

There she stopped, stunned to see King Ra'd in full armor, in deep consultation with his most senior of generals. She realized then that he had fully intended to lead the charge, to meet the invaders on the field of battle.

"What – no!"

King Ra'd looked at her and, in an even voice, said, "Mara, go back to the women's quarters."

Mara shook her head. “How can you consider going out there, how can you – you have generals, you have soldiers, Father. How can you risk your own life --”

“This is no concern of yours. Leave us.” He turned his attention back to his generals.

“NO!” Her voice rang out in the closeness of the chamber. In spite of herself, she stamped her foot in frustration. “You listen to me. You have a son who is sick, you have a palace – a people – who need you *here*, who need your strength and guidance *here*, and you’re just going to leave us so that you can go out and play soldier?”

Her father’s eyes widened. His generals discretely left the chamber, leaving father and daughter alone for the very first time in their lives.

Mara stood, rooted to the spot. She saw her father strode to where she was, intimidating and shaking in anger as he towered over her. She held her breath, expecting to be struck, and was surprised that her father noticed that that was what she was doing.

He stepped back as if catching himself, as if remembering something important. “You can’t understand.”

Mara looked at him. For the first and last time, she truly saw her father.

Behind the hardened leather and iron, behind the armor and the pomp of his kingly station, was a prematurely old man, his spirit weeping in suffocating black and the deepest blue. In one thunderstruck moment, she saw a man who had never struck his wife, never struck his children, never even struck his concubine, who was – after all – only a slave. She saw a man who never had the peace to grieve over his wife’s death and so was in the throes of grief now – and

was actually already grieving for his son. She saw a man battling grief and despair, who was afraid that he was losing that battle.

She saw a man who needed to fight physically in order to continue fighting that inner battle. She saw all of that, and then she understood.

“I’m – I’m sorry, Father,” Mara said quietly.

For the first and last time, she saw her father cry. He stood still and silent as slow tears traveled the rough contours of his face, looking so much like Halim that it made her heart ache. She realized, then, that he was as bound and trapped as she was – bound by duty and responsibility to a life that was chosen for him, well before he was ever born.

With great effort he stopped his tears, wiping his eyes dry with the palms of his hands in a motion that was identical to how Mara would dry her own tears.

In one motion, before he could protest, Mara hugged her father – a tiny, fourteen-year old girl embracing a hulking bear of a man. King Ra’d at first remained still but then returned the embrace, his face anguished as he forced himself not to weep with sadness and love.

“Goodbye, Father.” Mara broke away from the embrace and stood apart from him at a respectful distance,

“Goodbye, Mara,” was her father’s last words to her, and she left the chamber, ignoring the generals standing just outside the doors and looking at her curiously.

When the army departed the city, she could see them snaking away across the great plain, to the far valley in the distance. She stood upon the rooftop garden of the palace – the highest place in the kingdom – until the horsemen and infantrymen and archers and the man who led

them all disappeared into the dusky gloom of distance and sunset.

Six months after the army's departure, the insatiable fever consumed Halim, and it was Mara who led the procession to the royal crypt; it was she who set the last stone in the entrance.

Five months after Halim's death, news reached the palace that the king had fallen in battle, that the kingdom had fallen to the invaders, who were coming to the royal city – whether to claim it or destroy it, no one was certain. When the survivors limped back home, carrying what few bodies they could salvage for proper funerary rites – including the tightly shrouded body of King Ra'd – the people discovered that the invaders' leader was coming to claim the throne.

On a cold, wintry day, Mara placed her father to rest next to her Tanta and her brother. The next day, for the first time in two years, she removed and put away her black mourning robes. She refused the assistance of the handmaidens, preferring to bathe in solitude and silence.

Floating in a blood-warm pool smelling of lavender and sweet water, Mara thought of her mother, of the woman who never saw this room, the bathing chamber of the generations of the queens of the House of Bril. She felt the smooth, carved stone surface of her bath and breathed in the thick smoke of cedar, lavender, and rose, rising from the vessels of incense hanging above her. With careful and efficient movements, she scrubbed herself smooth, combed through her long, dark hair with fingers wrinkled as an old woman's, and rinsed herself thoroughly before leaving the water.

She slipped on the oversized drying robe of a woman much larger than she and rubbed her hair dry with a thick swath of woven belajoun

fibers. Once dried, she removed the robe and, removing the stopper of a thick glass bottle, anointed her body with a thin, resin-smelling oil, even rubbing it into her hair. Only after did she put on the white underclothes left neatly for her by the handmaidens. She slipped on a thin, light green shift and then continued with the various robes, vestments, and sashes until the carefully laid-out royal clothes were on her body. Without aid of a mirror, she combed her hair taut into a single twist secured with a golden comb, eschewed the kohl and various face paints favored by high-born women, and stepped out of the comforting dark of the bath chamber into the cold, wintry day of her wedding day.

In the great Hall of Kings, as she walked in a procession towards the dais of two empty thrones, she saw her betrothed for the first time and paused for one heartbeat.

The man, still in the armor that he had arrived in earlier that day, was young – perhaps only ten years older than she was. In spite of his young age, however, he was as tall and muscular as one would expect from the commanding officer of an army that had been on the field of battle for months and years.

But it wasn't that that struck her still – not even his impossibly pale skin that shown in sharp relief to his iridescent black hair. What she saw, underneath the armor, the skin, the muscle, was a burning, flaming color of rage – a red so thick that it was almost black – but, underneath even that were a suffocating black and the darkest blue so deep and vivid that even the red could not hide it. It was that black and blue – almost like day-old, angry bruises – that were the color of the man's wings.

It was the color and the wings, and Mara instinctively knew that no one but herself could see them. She saw the man waiting for her, and she could see that this man – who was more than just a man – was a tortured being, in as much fear and grief and loss as her father had been only a mere six months ago that now felt like a lifetime ago.

The man who was her enemy, who killed her father in battle, was just like her father. For that, she could pity him.

For that, perhaps she could forgive him.

And for that, perhaps she could love him.

She prayed not to the gods but to her mother, to her father, to Halim, to Tanta, to give her strength and courage. After one heartbeat, she continued down that path she had not chosen but accepted, into the waiting arms of her enemy.

Her ears buzzing with wild thoughts, she did not hear the old, sacred words of the matrimonial rite from the oldest priests of her people. She barely saw the witnesses of her handmaidens, the surviving members of her father's royal ministers and military generals, and the motley group of generals of her soon-to-be husband. She only saw the man, who was not a man, and felt him place the sheer veil over her head and face, claiming her as his wife.

With his rule legitimized, the new king sent his wife back to the royal quarters.

“He didn't even say a word to her,” one of the handmaidens whispered to another, thinking that their new queen couldn't hear her.

But Mara heard.

Unlike the priests' prediction, it was the invaders who ended the fever, with their foreign herbs and odd decoctions of fermented grains

and green-black mold. Mara would be a married woman for seven days before she saw her husband again, busy as he was coordinating the training of the kingdom's healers in the ways of his army healers, and then ensuring that every sickened person received treatment.

The relief felt throughout the palace was palpable, as Mara heard the gossip turn from fear and despair to hope and gratitude. Ra'd may have been their king, but he had been a distant, martial ruler, leaving the day-to-day governing to his ministers. The new king Malech, accustomed to commanding an army on the move, kept the ministers but oversaw their actions and, when all signs pointed to the fever lifting, he came to the palace's bedchamber a week after his short and spare wedding.

Mara wore what she had always worn to sleep – a simple shift of softened belajoun fibers, queen or no queen. She sat staring at a lone candle, to still her thoughts, as she received official notice earlier that day that the king would be with her that night. She stared at the bright, spare flame, trying to fit what she knew about sex with what she knew about an invisibly-winged man.

Although still a virgin, Mara was not ignorant about a wife's – or a concubine's – duties to her man. Between Tanta, her old nurse, and the various gossipy women in the servants' quarters, Mara knew about the process of baby-making. She even saw the human male's parts, when she helped Tanta clean Halim when he was little and had accidentally urinated all over himself while sitting in the dirt. Also, when she was still seen as the illegitimate daughter of a slave, she was sometimes sent to the outer fields, to conscript a farmer's daughter into palace service. Depending on the season, she would see the mating

of sheep, goats, or cattle. While strenuous for the male, the female always looked cross or bored.

Mara smiled at that thought for, of course, humans were different.

But her husband wasn't exactly human.

She started when the great door to the bedchamber opened, and he entered, holding a single oil lamp. She quickly returned to the candle as she heard him undress in silence. After a short while, she said, "Thank you for saving my people."

He remained silent, but she could feel him observing her.

"Your people's healers have been miraculous --"

"Mara." His deep baritone was soft and gentle. "You needn't be afraid of me."

She looked away from the candle and saw him, but, like their wedding day, it was not his nakedness that startled her but his impossible wings, which still flashed with fiery blue and black, even in the dark bed chamber. Yet she could feel in her marrow bones that he didn't know that she could see his color and his wings, and this realization gave her strength. "I don't fear you," she replied.

"You don't?" He looked surprised.

Mara stood up and, in answer, slipped off her shift and stepped towards him until she was only six inches away. She tilted her head up so she could see his face and, for the first time, saw that his eyes were an unearthly violet.

He swept her up and carried her to bed.

Mara could feel her husband's body, feverish and muscular, a man comfortable in skin, bones, sinew, and blood. But she could also feel the explosive cacophony of transforming energy, as he swept and flew

and dove in and around her, as a great osprey tears through the sky and then plunges towards the sea, the up rush of wind, the piercing pressure. As they were now one, she could share in his sensations, in this otherworldly existence, and whether he noticed or not, she couldn't tell and didn't care, as she shared in the breathless dive, gasping for breath, and then soundlessly screamed as they pulled up from the dive, the great talons cutting through the waters, he into and through her, diving and swimming in her body, which arched and ran slick with sweat. After a time, the wind and seas calmed and Mara came back to herself, and they were just two young people, holding each other gently in a room lit with a low candle and an oil lamp with a dying flame.

When she awoke in the morning, she was alone.

For several days, it would be as it was that first night, always with the next morning with Mara alone in their nuptial bed. She wondered sadly about that, until one night she woke up after only a couple of hours of sleep. She saw her husband just about to fall asleep, and as she watched, not moving, she saw him disappear in a visible shimmer of air and light.

Three months later, and after Mara had endured increasing nausea and tiredness, the healers made official her pregnancy, and she felt terror at those words.

“Why?” her husband asked her, after she shared her fears.

“Because both Tanta and my mother died in childbirth.” She looked down at her increasing belly. “And I’m even smaller than either of them.”

He gave a merry laugh and, standing behind her, wrapped his arms

around her, resting his hands on her hands, which were protectively on her belly. “You’ll never have to worry about that.”

On a warm day that promised days of cooler weather, Mara gave birth to her son, Prince Halim Pyr-Malech, on the very bed that he was conceived. While a healer and midwife were there, as expected, her husband – against her people’s ancient traditions – was also by her side, propping her up, squeezing her hand, and fervently whispering when to breathe, when to push, when to resist. Unbeknownst to anyone – including her husband – Mara could also feel the flow of energy from him, deadening the pain, increasing the pliability of her body so that it wouldn’t tear and rip. When her husband held his son – a large, pale baby with a hearty cry – for the very first time, he whispered, “It is good,” and then sobbed heavily.

The healer and midwife assumed his tears were from joy and relief, but Mara, even in her exhaustion, could see the blue color – the color of grief and sadness – expand and swallow what little sparks of yellow he had been feeling throughout the ordeal. When he laid their son on her belly, and when she gave the newborn her breast to suck, the boundless joy she felt was mixed with the sadness that she could not transfer even a little portion of the happiness that she felt to the being who was both husband yet stranger still.

After a period of healing, when both queen and prince became stronger, the king and queen presented their son to the whole kingdom, the oldest priest holding the swaddled prince aloft as they stood upon the rooftop garden of the palace, the multitude cheering below. After the official presentation, the priest returned to the temple, and the royal family turned away from their public audience, retreating

from the balcony towards the center of the rooftop garden.

“Coming inside?” asked Mara as she about to go back to the nursery.

“In a bit,” her husband replied. “I just need a little space to think.” But he looked distracted, his face troubled as he peered at the sky.

After she had attended to the needs of her son in the nursery, she suddenly felt compelled to return to the rooftop garden. As she approached the doorway of the garden, she stopped as she heard two voices: her husband’s and another male voice.

“You’re lying,” she heard her husband say, but his voice was icy and cruel, entirely unlike her husband’s.

Silence, then – “Angels can’t lie,” said the other voice.

Mara’s eyes widened.

“All right, all right. I don’t care if you believe me or not. But a Reboot’s coming, and all of this will be wiped, to start all over. I thought I could save you, but I see I was wrong.” The sadness in the stranger’s voice was the sadness she always felt in her husband, even as he believed that he had it hidden so well.

“I don’t need saving,” she heard the oddly cruel voice of her husband. “I --”

Mara decided to speak. “Love, is someone up there?” She pushed open the door, just in time to see the faint outlines of an older winged man, weeping the darkest blue from his brown wings, disappear into shimmer and light and rise above the rooftop. She dared not follow this angel with her eyes, instead concentrating on her husband, who burned bright with the red color.

“No, Mara, no – just talking to myself,” her husband sweetly lied,

opening his arms towards his wife and child.

As he held her and kissed their son's head, Mara heard distinctly in her heart, *I'm sorry, Miranda... for not following you*. Yet she felt no change in her husband, as if he hadn't heard. As he had kept secret this part of who he was – to his own people, to her people, to even Mara – she decided to keep silent what she had heard, what she had seen, to keep hidden this secret, that the man Malech was truly the angel Miranda.

Mara did not understand the meaning behind “Reboot,” but she felt her husband's wild panic, matched by the iron will of his denial of that panic. When the rain came, it began gently, and the farmers welcomed it. But when it would not stop and the winds began to blow with increasing strength, the people's calm turned to worry and then to panic when the river, their lifeblood, began to overrun its banks, breach the earthen levee walls, and flood the entire valley as the rain became a storm, seeming without end.

Mara, at the rooftop garden, saw the people try to evacuate the valley, and how successful her husband's evacuation order was carried through was difficult to tell in the blinding rain lashing against bodies and buildings. In the end, it was just a sixteen-year old girl holding tightly a crying two-month old baby, and a young man desperate to save them.

“Don't – don't be afraid,” he said, expanding long-unused wings that materialized as they achieved its full span.

“I'm not,” Mara simply said, their baby secured with sashes against her chest. She looked down as the waters swallowed the rooftop garden whole, making the whole earth into endless sea as her husband, his secret finally revealed, held her tightly as they rose into the wild and

stormy sky.

She closed her eyes, suddenly afraid of heights. *My love*, she thought fiercely. *My love*.

#

Mara's hand released its pressure from his chest, and she sighed deeply.

You knew, from the beginning.

I knew.

He groaned, in sadness and regret. *I should've known – I should've told you before –*

We are foolish creatures, she interrupted, smiling. *Young lovers especially so.*

I'm not young, Mara.

She smiled at that. *And how old is Miranda the angel?*

Miranda the angel is far too old and far too horrific a creature, compared to Malech the man.

And yet it is Miranda the angel trying to save Malech's wife and child.

He groaned in reply.

No matter your name, Mara sent, *you are who you are. And I will always love you.* She closed her eyes as she felt the life leave her little boy and, with one final pulse of her last reserves of life, she pushed away from him.

The force of repulsion startled him that his energy transfer connection broke, and he lost material substance. "NO!" he screamed, both in sending and in sound, as he saw Mara's body fall like a ragdoll to the waters below. He dove down, grabbing for her, but his hands only passed through her, like light illuminating the dust motes of the

air. Again and again he tried, in his pathetic pursuit to save the last of the non-chosen people of God.

When Mara and little Halim hit the water, their bodies passed through as silently and gently as if passing through a cloud – the water swallowed them whole, with no splash or wake, as if they were never there.

He dove into the water, a fallen creature of light swimming in the waters of the judgment of Creation. He looked for Mara and Halim, but they were not there. Swimming to the deepest depth, he saw that Mara and Halim were not there. In flying through the water, just above the rocky earth's surface, he saw the extent of the Reboot.

There were no drowned bodies, human or animal. The evidence of man's existence – his cities, his roads, his temples, his farms, all *tecbne* – were wiped out and wiped clean, as if they never existed.

As if Mara and little Halim never existed.

He shot out of those waters, an angel enraged, the color of his rage manifesting itself in an expanding fire in the sky, as if a star exploded, creating a new being burning with hate. He found the ark again, floating peaceably in a peaceable ocean, and he threw himself against it – futile, as the light of Heaven's force shield around the ship was so impenetrable that, from the inside, the inhabitants of the ark wouldn't have seen nor known an attack was occurring.

Exhausted, he turned away and slowly flew at a far enough distance so that he couldn't see the ark anymore. Home had been Heaven before his fall, and then Earth became his adopted home, especially when he became a husband and father. But now he had no home, no place – except for one place reserved for a creature such as he.

He had not known how to get there when he was a resident of Earth. But homeless, rootless, with hate burning him alive, he easily slipped from the Earth to the prison realm of Lightbearer, as if his previous existence was a fool's dream, and he had finally awoken to reality.

#

“Zoey, are you okay?”

Zoey found herself staring at the step where AJ was conceived long ago, trying to reconcile Miranda-Malech's grief and loss of Mara and Halim with her own grief and loss of her father, only just newly forgiven. Unsure of her feelings, she pulled away from Ed as she asked, “How long have you known this -- Miranda's memory?”

Ed gave a deep exhale. “For you – it would be eighteen years.”

“Eighteen years,” Zoey repeated softly.

“When you were fighting for Jamie's soul and I was running defense above that tower, Miranda accidentally sent. I know you were able to overhear my and Miranda's sending, but you didn't hear this.”

“Why didn't you tell me eighteen years ago... when you knew?”

“Ah.” He shook his head. “I wanted to, Zoey. But – don't take this the wrong way – both your brother and I felt you needed to know only at the right time.”

“The right time. And how is this the right time?”

“You're angry.”

“No – yes – I mean,” Zoey rubbed her eyes in frustration, angry at the tears she found there. “That's all ancient history, isn't it. Well before I or anyone else in my family were born.” She forced herself to look at the angel standing before her. “I'm sorry. I'm being silly.”

“No, you’re being human.” Ed held out his hand, and Zoey, with a little hesitation, took it. “Even a saint is allowed to feel that Heaven’s keeping secrets. With good reason. But I need to ask you this: how do you feel about Miranda, now that you *do* know?”

Zoey sighed. “Pity. Pity and fear. It’s like a Greek tragedy. She was heroic in her love as a husband and father, yet it was just that love that damned her, that drove her insane with rage and grief. My own father was afraid of becoming that, when our family was falling apart and he was powerless to stop it. That’s why he ran away – to save himself. But to spare us, too – to spare us from his guilt and shame. While I could never do what my father did, I can understand it now. And as for Miranda –”

“Yes?”

“If AJ had been more like Jamie, I could very well have been like Miranda.” Zoey sighed again. “Jamie and me and my dad were just ways for Miranda to grieve – as destructive as those ways were.” She looked at Ed, whose blue eyes shared the same intensity as hers. “She needs help.”

“And that’s why I had to wait until you were ready to share Miranda’s memory.” He gave a reassuring squeeze to Zoey’s hand. “Miranda’s actions wouldn’t be forgivable until you forgave your father – for not being brave enough to do what you and Miranda could do. Now that you have done so, it will help with my current mission.”

“Your current mission –” Zoey paused. “The one in jeopardy really isn’t my father, is it? If he’s in Purgatory, he’s already safe. It’s Miranda who’s in danger – who’s endangering herself, right?”

“Hmmm.”

“So... this mission isn’t really about saving my father at all. It’s about saving Miranda.”

“Astute, this one is. How do you feel about that?”

She smiled softly. “If you’re asking for my blessing, then – you have my blessing.”

“Spoken like a true Beatrice.” He kissed the top of her head and turned away.

Zoey saw Ed walk to the golden ring, but before he left she asked, “Can I ask you one question?”

“Shoot.”

“Do you still love Miranda?”

Ed paused in his movement. “Always.”

“Oh.” Looking up, Zoey saw the slowly fading rainbow as the last of the rainclouds cleared away, revealing a dazzling, sunny day, and then heard his sending as he took flight, his earthly clothes melting away into a raiment of silvery white that shimmered as he slipped out of the material world.

But I love you, too, Zoey.

This time, neither one said goodbye.

10 MAN IN OUR OWN IMAGE

In the throat-choking sea of dissolved salt, time had no meaning for the burning, naked body of Zachary James Fitzpatrick.

The wild Indian Ocean brought him to this strange sea, a vast, unending expanse of crystal blue water as still as a pool and yet exponentially saltier than a thousand Dead Seas. His body, buoyed by the salt, remained just six inches below the surface, but it was six inches of unbearable burning.

His body, as if the storm had shredded and flayed his skin, was red and raw, which the saltwater made agonizing, flowing into every wound, every scrape – stinging and burning without relief, without abeyance.

His screams only brought the choking saltwater into his throat, and he struggled to keep his face above the water, to keep his mouth and nose and eyes from the blinding pain of the torturous water.

To keep himself from becoming crazed from the pain, he forced himself to move forward, to swim in a painful, pathetic dog paddle, to concentrate on the movement to still his racing thoughts.

I am dead, he thought, and there was no doubt in his assessment. *I am dead, but I'm alive. If this is an afterlife, then why am I here – and what is this place?*

Zack cursed his ignorance, for it was Amy who kept to the old church traditions, not him. While his devout Irish-American mother made sure her son attended his catechism and participated in all of the stultifying childhood sacramental rites of passage, whether he wanted to or not, he left the Church by his late teens, only consenting to the Matrimonial Rite because Amy, following her Filipino Catholicism, thought it was so damn important.

A sudden splash from his arm sent the stinging water into his eyes, and he yelped in pain. But he didn't stop paddling forward.

Something that he could not name but felt from inside out compelled him to keep moving, even though he saw no land in sight. All he saw was the endless expanse of the punishing sea, yet he believed that land was out there – beyond knowledge, beyond sight.

In the absence of knowledge, all he had was faith that – despite all facts to the contrary – his torturous condition had to have an ending.

Not for the first time, he wondered if he was entirely alone in this strange, salt sea, but then he noticed the movement and sound of the waters changing. He opened his eyes – for he had closed them while deep in his thought – and saw a little island, solitary in the entire expanse of the water, its white sand beach foaming as the salt water lapped against its surface.

He paddled towards it and, in doing so, felt a strong current carry him away from that land – a current that came out of nowhere and, in his old sailor mind, alarmed him in its strength. He fought against it

and, in a final push of resistance, flopped onto the beach. His skin, already raw and exposed, scraped against the rough sand. He gasped in pain and passed out.

When he came to, he couldn't see anything, as his eyes were covered in a light bandage. Then he realized that his entire body was wrapped in linen-like bandages that had been anointed in something cool and soothing.

Someone large – much larger than he – was carrying him as if he were a child who had fallen asleep sitting up and was now being moved to bed. The sensation was both unsettling and comforting, as no one had carried him like that since he was four or five years old, over eighty years ago. His carrier gently set him down on some sort of chaise lounge, and then Zack immediately heard someone pull up next to him, open his mouth, and feed him something cool, sticky, and sweet – like some sort of watery oatmeal or thin pudding, although it had a flowery flavor to it.

At first he tried to resist, as he couldn't see what the food was and the thought of being fed like a baby disturbed him. But he was still weak from his exertions, and his feeder – although gentle – was firm in inserting the feeding spoon between his still-raw and chapped lips.

The effect of the flower-fruit meal was immediate, as his desperate thirst and hunger abated and a slow but pleasurable drowsiness took hold of him.

“Who --” Zack tried to croak out the question, but his feeder stopped his words with more food.

A strong wind suddenly picked up, a wind that sent the smell of the salt sea and even a bit of the sea itself, in atomized spray, across the

island and towards where he and his mysterious hosts were. His silent feeder abruptly stood up, and he heard sounds of windows and shutters closing.

Soon, he heard the winds' strength increase, and the sound of something being pelted against those windows – salt? sand? a freak instance of hail? – shook the room, as the wind began to whine and howl.

As if to drown out the strange dread brought upon by the high wind, his silent feeder began to sing:

“You sunburned sicklemen, of August weary,
 Come hither from the furrow and be merry.
 Make holiday: your rye-straw hats put on,
 And these fresh nymphs encounter every one
 In country footing.”¹⁰

The voice was a woman's, but unlike any woman he had ever heard. She sang in a soft, soothing mezzo-soprano. The hushed tone of her voice, along with the gentle rhythm of her words, lulled him further into the drowsy stupor that the delicate food had begun in him.

“Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises,
 Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
 Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
 Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices
 That, if I then walked after long sleep,
 Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,
 The clouds methought would open and show riches

¹⁰ Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Act IV, scene 1, lines 134-138.

Ready to drop upon me, that, when I waked,
I cried to dream again.”¹¹

Feeling no pain or discomfort, Zack drifted towards sleep’s waiting arms. Before succumbing to heavy slumber, he thought, *Amy would’ve liked this.*

And then he was suddenly awake as he realized, *No, no she wouldn’t.*

The sound of shattering glass and rushing water slammed Zack out of his paralysis, as he struggled to remove the bandages around his eyes.

“No!” an unearthly screech greeted him as the darkness fell away from his eyes.

He recoiled in instinctive horror at the crazed creature before him – a woman who was not a woman, with bloodshot violet eyes, nails like talons, dead-white skin oozing black, and oil-slick hair and wings which seemed to melt and bubble in the caustic sea water.

Whatever room or house or hut he was in was gone, as the punishing sea had crashed into and over it and was now swirling around him and the creature, trying to suck both of them underneath its violent surface. With a cry both enraged and fearful the creature took flight, but not without taking Zack with her.

He writhed and twisted under her strong arms, forcing her to choose either to drop him or follow him into the swirling vortex of water and salt. The old man and ageless creature wrestled just above the surface, Zack kicking and splashing as violently as possible such that she was soon enough covered in ugly rising blisters. In

¹¹ Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Act III, scene 2, lines 132-140.

excruciating pain, she finally let go.

Zack sought the relative safety of the punishing sea, diving well below the surface with quick, adrenaline-fueled kicks, leaving a quickly dissipating trail of inky blackness behind him. For the bandages were not made of cloth at all but was of the same oozing substance that he saw exude from the creature, a darkness made visible.

Zack shuddered, and the buoyant sea pushed him to the surface, where he retched inky darkness – the delicious food that the creature had fed him. His skin burning and his head dizzy, he could feel that strong compulsion again, like a deep ache in his heart that directed him forward, to start swimming onward.

He heard a screech from above – a raptor that had caught sight of its prey – and he cried out in fear and pain as he saw her dive headfirst, her strong arms outstretched in expectation.

But then a blur of light so bright that Zack was briefly blinded shot out and caught her just inches above his head. He stared as the figure of light dragged her high into the sunlit, deep blue sky, and his mind finally gave him the words for what he just saw.

Angel and demon.

He shook his head in one violent shudder and then continued his journey, not daring to witness the battle above him.

#

Over the bottomless Purgatorial Sea, two angels wrestled in the sky.

For Ariel, he felt an odd sense of relief. Finally, he was in motion instead of waiting and watching on Mount Purgatory, following his orders. Having full access to Central's intel, a bird's eye view of the entire Purgatorial Sea, and his own comm firmly in place, he had

crouched on a stony outcropping as he saw Miranda construct an island from the sub-atomic particles of Zack Fitzpatrick's discarded material body, from dust to dust.

From his perch, he felt both awe and disgust at Miranda's sub-creation, recycling Zack's matter to manufacture matter in the spiritual realm. Knowing Miranda, he knew that she was likely feeling smug and clever, finding a loophole or backdoor anchor to Heaven by catching a ride on Zack's dying soul, judging that he wouldn't be going to Hell but – given his earthly record – would have to undergo Purgatory before allowed into Heaven proper. He shook his head at her audacity.

But also knowing how it was to be fallen and homeless, he also understood her despair, of being Heaven's exile and yet not belonging in Hell. He understood her aching loss, not just the loss of Heaven but also the loss of Earth. She would need Zack close to anchor her existence in this lobby of Sacred Space. What she should've known but seemed to have either forgotten or denied was that Zack was more powerful than she was. She was fallen, while Zack, in making it to the Purgatorial Sea, was Heaven-bound.

Ariel shook his head, pitying her.

It was only human for Zack to seek some kind of relief from the waters, to invite any kind of respite. The purgatorial process was excruciating, as the remaining dross of a soul's earthly existence was literally eaten away, as an acid eats through rust. Vulnerable as Zack was, Ariel witnessed Miranda binding Zack from head to toe in her fallen substance, covering even his eyes, for in Sacred Space Miranda would not be able to transform her appearance and thus could not deceive the human's eyes.

But the subtle and then strong-armed actions of a fallen angel were mere parlor tricks compared to the protests and prayers of a human soul in Purgatory. The man's sending, *Amy*, reverberated across all of Sacred Space, a call in which the response was the very Purgatorial Sea rising up to reduce the alien island into pure energy, the particles dancing in the air like dust motes.

Ariel witnessed all of Miranda's actions, not questioning Central's decision to allow her to play out her plan until the acceptable time of intervention. When Zack cried out as he faced Miranda's rage, that cry was Ariel's cue: NOW.

He leaped up from his perch on Mount Purgatory. Aided by the thermal currents of the vault of Heaven, he shot down Miranda's attack like a heat-seeking missile and then pulled up just as quickly, with Miranda in tow.

More like animal than angel, Miranda screeched and clawed and bit and writhed. Ariel was able to see up close what eons of Hell's residency – outside and inside of Miranda – had done to shatter Miranda's angelic beauty and sanity.

Angel and demon, he heard Zack's sending. It was only then that he had to agree, as he tried not to doubt his own ability to complete his mission.

Go, Zack, go go go, he sent, as he endured Miranda's painful struggling but refused to let go.

#

Swimming and swimming and swimming, despite his nausea, despite his skin burning and stinging, despite his eyes momentarily going blind with the pain of salt. He could not see where he was going,

but the deep ache in him pointed true, like a compass's needle. Whether he was swimming for hours or days or weeks, he couldn't tell in this timeless sea.

Then he saw it – a solitary, unimaginably tall and narrow mountain jutting out of the sea like a dead volcano, its perimeter a narrow ring of rock and sand. His heart's ache pointed him there, and he did not question it. From the deep ocean, to the shallows, to the rocky beach, he dragged himself out of the water and lay face down, panting on the surface, the waves gently lapping against the raw and naked body of a thirty-year old Zachary James Fitzpatrick.

He heard soft footsteps approach, and he looked up. "Amy," he whispered.

Still looking as he best remembered her – a happy wife, a young mother – Amy sat down, the hem of her white shift floating in the waters, and pulled him up enough so that he could see her dark eyes, face to face. "FINALLY you called," she said, slightly exasperated, but smiling. "You *really* know how to keep a woman waiting, do you, sailor boy."

Zack stared, marveling that nothing – absolutely nothing – hurt. Then he burst out laughing, a laughter that was only stopped when Amy pulled him closer and gave a long, welcoming kiss.

#

Hearing Zack's laughter ring out across the Purgatorial Sea, Ariel let go of Miranda.

Hearing Zack's laughter echoing across the Purgatorial Sea, Miranda's face grew grief-stricken, and she shot out towards Mount Purgatory.

“Miranda!” Ariel called after her, but she wasn’t listening. He followed, but he was not chasing, for there was no reason to chase. Zack was safe – as Zoey had predicted – in the care of Amy, his earthly wife and one of the Communion of Saints. He was home now. So Ariel soared high above the crystal blue waters – caustic in its saltiness to any creature bearing the burden of fallenness, but refreshing in its sweetness to any creature unfallen or restored to unfallenness, like himself. He flew through the sky of Sacred Space, as clear and bright as a cool, sunlit day on Earth. Only on approach to Mount Purgatory did he see clouds, opaque white that obscured the very top of the mountain that touched Heaven, like Mount Olympus of Earth legend. The clouds cast enough moisture in the air that a permanent rainbow spanned the island, which glittered with the light of Heaven.

But it wasn’t the clouds, the rainbow, the light of Heaven, or even the vision of Amy guiding a newly restored Zack up the winding mountain paths that stopped Ariel’s flight in mid-air.

Assailing herself against the light of Heaven’s force shield around the mountain, Miranda flew headfirst again and again, each time slamming against the something invisible, each time inflicting great injury on herself as the shield held, pristine and intact.

Miranda had lost it.

Ariel recalled that old human saying: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” But Miranda, as maddened as she was with grief, was not entirely insane, even as he saw her battered body rebound like a broken bird against a car windshield. In her grief, Miranda sent, and Ed received without a word, witnessing her pathetic actions.

Why why why why did he get saved – he doesn't deserve it, lousy father, lousy husband, abandoned his family, damn coward. Why him and not Mara, not Halim, powerless, do nothing, need to do something, I can't stand this!

Miranda threw herself into the shield, feeling the substance of herself crushed and bleeding ichor. She focused on that pain, trying to replace the never-ending pain of betrayal by her Creator, the pain of seeing her family uncreated, annihilated, as if they were never born, and not a damn thing she could do about it. But she could do this self-injury, not even pausing between each beating against the shield for her injuries to heal, cursing her inability to die.

Christ, Miranda, Ariel sent, and he flew to intervene.

“Go away!” Miranda cried out loud, her face a battered, bleeding mess.

“Not this time,” he replied, and he stayed her hand. “Look.”

The clouds over Mount Purgatory parted a little. With Ariel serving as transmitter and amplifier, he revealed to Miranda what she could not believe in her fallen nature and her blind and deaf grief.

She saw Mara, forever a teenage mother. She saw Halim, forever a little baby but – miraculously – transformed as a human soul. They both peered down from above, amongst the Communion of Saints, glowing with the light of Heaven.

“Central can't uncreate, remember? To do so would destroy who He is. Just because the Reboot happened doesn't mean the righteous who weren't in the stasis ark got sent with the unrighteous. Did you see Mara and Halim in Hell?”

“No – I was never allowed to go further than Pandemonium's outer level,” Miranda replied quietly, her face enraptured, looking

radiant in her happiness. “Heaven. My God, they’re in Heaven.” She stared intently, fearing that if she looked away, then the vision had never happened. But just as suddenly as the feeling of happiness had come, Miranda could feel it slipping away, as the old resentment against Central threatened to return, of being made a fool, a pawn, in the human’s purgatory, of being ignorant for all of these eons of Mara’s and Halim’s true end, of living under a deception of her own making that no one had ever bothered to rip apart until now.

Ariel stared as Miranda started grabbing and ripping at her skin, as the dark, sticky ooze of her fallenness began to choke away her tiny glimpse of joy. She cried in panic and fear, unable to control the sign of her damnation. “Ari,” she cried out, using an old name she had for him, once upon a time, when they were both in Heaven. “Ari – help me – Ari, I don’t want to lose this joy, I don’t want this hate anymore – please --” She flung out handfuls of the black ooze, but it poured out non-stop, an unstoppable hemorrhage of despair and self-loathing.

In reply, he grabbed Miranda and, holding her tight, dive-bombed straight into the Purgatorial Sea.

Even under water, all of Sacred Space heard her scream.

Again, he did not let go, as he flew deep into the waters of the Purgatorial Sea. Within his arms he could feel the layers upon layers of Miranda’s fallenness being stripped away, each layer coming off in slimy inkiness, revealing another raw, slimy layer underneath.

Miranda writhed and convulsed, not in any desire to escape but in the involuntary spasms of a creature in excruciating pain, as if being tortured. If there was an easier way to purge Miranda’s fallenness, he would do it – but there wasn’t.

He kept his speed steady but faster than light, to allow the waters' scouring to outpace the inky ooze's regeneration. In the Sacred Space of this timeless sea, they had all the time in the world to undergo purgatory. However, he had no idea how many revolutions in the Purgatorial Sea the process would need, as no fallen angel had ever experienced this process, tailor-made for humans.

Eventually, Miranda's screams ceased. Eventually, the sickening slipperiness of Miranda's sloughing layers lessened, then ceased. Finally, Ariel opened his eyes – tightly shut the whole time – and saw the pure essence of Miranda, who was barely conscious, laid bare. He was not so much holding her as keeping in stasis the shimmering quantum particles that kept the core information of Miranda intact. It was this Miranda that he brought out of the water, finally breaking free of the Purgatorial Sea into the warm, sun-lit sky, and touching down gently at the foot of Mount Purgatory.

He spread his hands, and the shimmer that was Miranda flowed and spilled onto the rocky shore, coalescing into a form vaguely humanoid. He looked up and saw Mara, with a sleeping baby Halim strapped to her chest, approaching, her body shining like a beacon.

The mortal dust of Zack Fitzpatrick flew and danced toward Mara, as if called. She kneeled before the shimmering form and kissed where Miranda's forehead would be, as if in a blessing. At the spot the dust flew in, not only covering Miranda's form but filling in, like clay slip in a mold.

It was the miracle of transubstantiation that Ariel was witnessing. After the dust had settled, what lay unconscious and naked before them was not Miranda the fallen angel but Malech the man, newly

born.

In his sleep, he cried out, a soft baritone, and Ariel gave a small gasp, hoping that it was allowed, his small but sharp mourning for the passing of Miranda and their shared past.

“It’s allowed,” Mara said, picking up the angel’s thoughts.

“I – thank you.” He breathed deeply, letting the ache of grief wash over him and then evaporate away. “I’m ready.”

Mara now was witness as Ariel crouched and reached out, his right hand just centimeters above Malech’s chest, rising and dropping with every peaceful breath. At first, his hand was flat, palm facing down. But then he quickly made a tight fist and pulled away, and Malech’s newly born heart stopped beating, his breath falling away.

The dust, as quickly as it came together in Malech, fell away, phasing from matter to energy flowing into the rock and sand. What remained was a human soul, still in the position of deep sleep upon the rocky shore. Mara removed her outer tunic and draped it over Malech – just a young man under a blanket, sleeping on the beach, with a young woman sitting nearby, gently adjusting his blanket and sweeping a stray lock of dark hair from his sleeping eyes.

The angel adjusted his position, sitting next to both of them. He breathed out, a weird mixture of sadness, joy, and love roiling and tumbling within him. “It worked.”

“Yes,” Mara replied quietly. “Finally. But only when he chose to stop fighting, chose to ask for help. He very well could have chosen the other way.” She swept Malech’s hair away from his sleeping eyes. “Free will always makes everything complicated, does it,” she declared.

“Always.” He rubbed his eyes, suddenly tired. “What happens

next?”

“I stay with Malech as he sleeps, for as long as he was Malech on Earth before the Reboot. When he awakens, I’ll serve as his guide up Mount Purgatory and, from there, it’s up to Central to decide Malech’s role, as his experiences are very unique.”

Ariel chuckled. “Yes, even more unique than mine. A fallen angel is granted redemption and then human mortality. Who knew that could happen?”

“Well – God?”

He gave her an odd look until he realized that she was joking, and he smiled. “That’s about right.” He glanced upwards. “I guess I should be going.” He began reluctantly to stand up.

“You can stay and keep us company for awhile, if you’d like.”

He tilted his head to the side, listening. “Well, I’m allowed,” he declared.

“Good, then. We can swap stories – your happy memories of Miranda, my happy memories of Malech. How does that sound?”

Zoey would’ve loved this, he thought. Smiling, he settled back down, grateful for the space afforded to say goodbye to Miranda and welcome to Malech. “That sounds wonderful.”

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 hearing 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.¹²*

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

¹² Adapted from "Lorica of St. Patrick."

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.

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.*¹³

¹³ 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.

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.”

Hosanna in the highest.

“What can I do?”

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.

12 STAND AND WAIT

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide,
Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;
“Doth God exact day-labor, light denied,”
I fondly ask; But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, “God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts. Who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve Him best; his State
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed,
And post o’er Land and Ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Milton, John “Sonnet XIX.”

Her mother's favorite poem known by heart, AJ placed the slip of paper on her mother's headstone, weighing it down with a piece of limestone that she found at the base of a nearby oak tree. Then she methodically placed orange marigolds and candy skulls, all in a tidy row against the headstone. She did the same for the headstones of her uncle Jamie, her grandmother Amy, and her grandfather Zack – a little family reunion of sorts. Once done, she stood up, opened one bottle of Corona beer and sprinkled its contents on the headstones. She stepped back and surveyed her work with satisfaction as she opened the other bottle of Corona.

Happy Day of the Dead, she sent, raising her bottle in salute. She took a healthy draft and looked around, seeing other people gathering around their family graves, also paying respect to their dead.

It was fortunate, that her layover in Dallas was long enough that she could leave the airport, grab some celebratory items from a local grocery store, and make it to the cemetery. Also, while Mathematics conferences were always fun, she was looking forward to coming home, already seeing David and the kids waiting for her at LAX in her mind's eye. So AJ knew that she couldn't dawdle.

She squatted down, leaving a half-drunk bottle of beer at her grandfather's grave. As she stood up, she felt an odd presence and turned around.

She saw a little wizened nun – a woman with dark, deeply-lined chocolate skin and wispy white hair, enveloped in a cheery blue and white habit.

The nun was smiling at her over half-moon glasses. "Happy All Souls Day," she said in a soft oboe of a voice.

AJ at first stared at her, the nun's color an odd swirl of the darkest black and brightest white, in constant motion, turning and chasing each other like the yin and yang symbol of old. Then she recognized her for what she was, and she smiled back. "Happy All Souls Day, sister," she replied.

The nun's smile widened, her eyes disappearing in a constellation of soft wrinkles. "*Daalu,*" she responded, dipping her head slightly.

AJ left soon after, the nun still remaining in the cemetery, standing and waiting while observing the happy people celebrating the Day of Dead. When AJ turned around to look back one last time, the good nephil was gone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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She is also a survivor of a rigorous liberal arts education, a single mother, an aunt, a big sister, the oldest child, an adopted kid, an Asian-American, a US Navy brat, a bemused Catholic, a sci-fi/fantasy geek, a once-and-future globe trotter, and a writer.

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