

13 THE DAUGHTER AND THE SON

Stay good, AJ, stay good.

“Dr. Fitzpatrick, can we get one more photograph?”

“Sure.”

The applause still resonating in her ears, AJ forced a teeth-baring smile again, flanked by various dignitaries and organizers of yet another STEM conference. She was their keynote speaker, yet she couldn’t remember all of their names, and the flash of too-many cameras made her see only translucent green and red blobs over their sweaty, smartly coiffed heads.

Stay good, AJ, stay good, ran through AJ’s head like a mantra.

Some hours later, after the obligatory dinner with those self-same dignitaries and organizers, she retreated to her room, a luxurious suite in the conference hotel, several floors above the lobby and the ballroom below. While the hotel generally kept its Art Deco splendor and opulence, its security systems were solidly in the twenty-first century. The smart lock scanned AJ’s fingerprints as she twisted the doorknob to her room; identity matched, the lock clicked open, and AJ stepped in without a pause. The door click-locked as soon as it shut behind her. Privacy secured, AJ kicked off her “keynote speaker” high heels. While she hated high heels, they looked good in photo ops (as her university’s public relations staff often reminded her). So she wore them for these public occasions but never told the staff that she only owned one pair, on general principle.

Switching on old-fashioned lights, she saw snow through the unshaded windows, miraculous snow coming down in light, fluffy flakes. For the last two days that she had been in town, AJ had only been in the hotel, shuffled along by conference minders. From Los Angeles to Washington DC, from the airport to the conference hotel, she hadn’t been outdoors, so the only bottle of whiskey she could get was from room service.

After tossing her blazer on a leather chair next to an electric fireplace, AJ went to the in-suite kitchen, grabbing the bottle of overpriced booze and a small glass tumbler. With the expertise of ritualized experience, she opened the bottle and poured about a double-measure of the amber liquid. Returning to the sitting area in front of the fireplace with glass in hand, she sat on the chair opposite of the chair on which she had draped her blazer. Holding the glass, she called out, “Transcom.”

Voice activated, an image of a keypad appeared under her right hand on the armrest. With her empty hand, she keyed in the room’s access code and then the phone number to her husband’s personal comm instead of the house comm, just in case the twins were taking a nap.

Ring-ring. Ring-ring.

AJ sat patiently, holding her untouched glass.

Ring-ring. Ring-ring. Ring-ri – “Hi, love.”

“Hey, babe.”

She heard light crackling sounds, the tells of a personal comm being adjusted behind one’s ear. “How come you’re not on your comm?” he asked. “You usually hate using the hotel’s.”

“It’s somewhere in the room, and I’m too lazy to find it right now. I haven’t worn my comm all day.”

“Ah,” he said. “Avoiding those ‘Alert! New messages!’ dings from ‘They Who Controlleth the Conference?’”

“Yup. No reminders telling me where to go, when to go, and what to say, which drove me crazy yesterday. Today was beautiful, blissful silence – relatively speaking – because today’s SPECIAL.”

Her husband chuckled. “I’m going to the kitchen as we speak.”

“Where’re the kids?”

“Hanging out with the grandparents.”

From her hotel room, AJ heard him go into the kitchen, open a waiting bottle of whiskey, and pour a double measure of whiskey into an old-fashioned glass. As he did so, he asked, “So, how’d the speech go?”

“Oh, you know. I stayed good and kept to the old standbys. Ongoing applications of my postdoc work on trans-spatial quantum entanglement communication. All my early stuff that’s still popular. One of these days, I’ll be old news enough so that folks won’t see me as an up-and-coming ‘young genius’ anymore, and I can actually get to stay home more often, for a change.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” he said.

“I know, but still.” She raised up her glass. “So, shall we toast?”

“I’m ready.” She heard him raise his glass, on the other side of the country. “To us. Happy anniversary, AJ.”

“To us. Happy anniversary, David.”

In unison, AJ Fitzpatrick and David Babson sipped their glasses.

But then AJ drained her glass. “I’m sorry,” she said, her voice thick with alcohol.

David sighed. “I already said it’s okay --”

“It’s our third wedding anniversary, and I’m not in town to celebrate it with you -- AGAIN. Not to mention missing your birthday last year, Janey and Eddie’s first steps, your parents’ move-in to their cottage in the backyard --”

“AJ.” He paused. “Does your fancy hotel transcom have holo?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Turn it on.”

As AJ activated holo on her end, she heard a soft hum and suddenly the voice had a body, as David switched on the holo on his comm. She could see the full image of her husband: his dark hair disheveled, his slim body clothed in his usual weekend wear of jersey and jeans. He was leaning against the kitchen’s island counter, with the half-drunk whiskey glass in view. But what she noticed most – what she always noticed – were his piercing silvery gray eyes. Even over two-thousand miles away, she felt those beautiful eyes peer into her. “What?” she said.

He looked at her.

“WHAT?” His gaze was starting to make AJ’s heart beat hard and fast.

He smirked. “Just derailing your train of thought from the Land of Guilt-Trip, Dr. Fitzpatrick.”

She stared and then gave a bark of laughter. “Hah! I taught you that, didn’t I.”

“Yup.” He reached back for the glass and then knocked it back, setting the empty glass back on the counter.

“Still having that layover in Dallas tomorrow?”

“Yes,” she said, “but not long. Just to pay my respects to my folks’ gravesite. I should be home by 5:00.”

He nodded. Early enough in their relationship, AJ explained how important observing the Day of the Dead was for her, as she was the only surviving member of her family until she married and had kids. He was about to say something when he suddenly turned his head. “Ah, I think the twins and my parents are coming over.” He looked back at AJ. “Time to get supper going. And then the GLORY that is grading high school pre-calculus worksheets!” He shook his head, smiling.

AJ said, “David?”

“Yes?”

“I promise, we’ll have a proper anniversary celebration when I get back,” she said. “Just you and me.”

Gray eyes met dark eyes. “See you tomorrow, love.”

“See you tomorrow, babe.”

David’s holo image winked out once the call disconnected.

In the kitchen, AJ poured another measure of whiskey. With glass in hand, she walked to the floor-to-ceiling window and stood, watching the snow fall in a dark November evening illuminated with city lights, cold and silvery as seen from her high hotel suite.

She smiled, remembering how she and David met.

#

Nineteen-year old AJ usually went straight home after her classes, but today she decided to stick around on campus. The rare snow falling on an otherwise frigid early March day may had something to do with it, as it dusted the starkly modern metal-and-concrete buildings with soft white, making the campus look unfamiliar and new. The Mardi Gras festival in the student union, with its promise of free food, definitely had something to do with AJ’s decision to stay on campus for a little while longer.

As a commuter student who was on the accelerated Bachelor’s to PhD Mathematics track, AJ had made no effort to make lasting friendships in her one year as a university student. She was on track to getting her Bachelor’s degree in May and was looking forward to starting graduate-level coursework immediately afterwards. Thus she was in an in-between space, where she couldn’t relate to any student her age, yet she – who lived at home with her single mother and held no job -- was too young to have anything in common with the doctoral students, many of whom were Adults with a capital A. Still she perused the festival, the space crowded with pop-up booths and students drawn to king cakes, beads, masks, spicy Cajun food, and New

Orleans-style jazz.

In spite of the crashing sights, sounds, and smells of a festive, colorful cacophony, AJ was drawn to one understaffed booth, to a twenty-something year old man whom she found vaguely familiar. He was struggling with a helium tank and failing to air up green, gold, and purple balloons. His frustration bled out into a bright aura of jagged silver and purplish-red that erupted and surrounded him like an electromagnetic field of anger and panic, a colorful field that only AJ could see. Assuming that no one could hear him above the din, he swore out loud, “Shit! Shit shit shit SHIT!”

Ah, she thought, finally placing who he was in her mind. He was one of the grad assistants in the Mathematics Department: a tall, thin, dark-haired fellow whose Scottish accent was a sharp contrast to his inscrutable non-European appearance. *What was his name again? Devin? Daniel?* Out loud, she asked, “What’s wrong?”

Perhaps out of frustration, he answered bluntly, while still struggling with the balloons, “This tank’s fucking defective, and I need to get another one, but I can’t leave this table unattended, and I have no fucking clue where my relief is and --” He stopped abruptly as he realized, to his horror, that he had been ranting to a complete stranger. He glanced up. “OH GOD.”

AJ stared at his eyes: wide and silvery gray, edged with long eyelashes. “I can man the table if you need to get another tank,” she offered.

“WHAT? Oh, no, you don’t have to --” he began to protest.

“It’s no trouble. I don’t need to go anywhere. You’re just going to get another tank, right?”

“Yes, but --”

“Okay, then.” AJ went to the other side of the table and set down her backpack. “What do I do while you’re gone?”

He looked at her, realizing that she had decided to help him, no matter what he said. He pointed to a fanned out stack of brochures advertising the math program, as well as cheap Mardi Gras beads. “If anyone wants one, they can get one.”

“Okay. Simple enough.”

He looked at her one final time before he left. “I’m David, by the way.”

“AJ.”

“Thank you, AJ. I won’t be long.” He took off, weaving quickly through the crowd. After a brief time, he returned, pushing a two-wheeled hand truck laden with a new helium tank. “How’d it go?” he asked, unloading the new tank.

“Okay,” she said. “Although you’re running out of beads.”

He shrugged and wasn’t surprised when AJ didn’t leave. Together, they filled up balloons, tied them off with ribbon, and attached the brochures and remaining beads to them as a marketing ploy and balloon weight. The balloons drew more people to the table, and by the end of the allotted time for festival tables, all the

balloons were gone.

“I’d like to pay you back somehow,” David said, as he was clearing out the table.

“You don’t have to.”

“I insist. You volunteered hours of your time, and you didn’t have to.”

“Well... if you insist.” AJ shrugged. “There’s an indie flick I’d like to see in a theater right now, but it’s not my mom’s taste, and I was just going to wait until it shows up on streaming. We can go together. If it’s not too awkward.”

“Why would it be awkward?”

“It’s an erotic historical drama. With subtitles.”

“Oh.” He blushed.

“Hey, it’s okay if that’s too extreme --”

“Let’s go.”

“Are you sure?”

He snorted. “Sure.”

But, on a Friday evening, when the theater lights came up after the end credits finished scrolling, David didn’t dare look directly at AJ as she stood up to leave. He followed her to the theater lobby, still silent, his heart racing.

AJ saw David’s aura – a clamoring kaleidoscope of anxiety, shock, and horniness, all wrapped up in acute embarrassment. “Are you okay?” she asked.

He forced himself to look at her. “I think,” he said, carefully, “I need a drink.”

“Lead the way.”

In a nearby restaurant was the second time in a row that AJ shocked David.

“NINETEEN?” he said, his voice cracking into an octave higher than his usual speaking voice, the color of his aura exploding in purple-red alarm.

AJ had to smile. “I was a wise baby.” She knew, even then, that David was someone special when he burst out laughing.

“All right. Coffee it is,” he said, after he caught his breath. “Damn. And you’ll be taking grad classes this summer?”

“Yes.”

“Christ. I feel like a slacker.”

“How old are you?” AJ asked.

“Twenty-seven.”

“Oooh. Cradle-robber.”

“OH GOD.” He covered his face.

“Hey – hey!” AJ reached across the table and pulled his hands away from his face. “I’m sorry. I was teasing.

But I can see all of this was really too much, too fast.” She shook her head. “That’s why I’ve kept to myself, just focusing on school. I’ve had to grow up fast, you know? Because of my mom, my childhood was pretty odd. Sometimes I forget how to act around normal people.” She smiled. “Let’s call this even, okay? For helping you on Tuesday. We can just be Math Department acquaintances again.”

David stared at AJ’s hands, which held his hands across the table. “No,” he said. He raised his eyes, seeing an exciting woman who was smart and funny and kind. “No. I want to see you again. It’s just --” He paused. “You see, I may be older than you are, but I’ve never gone out with anyone before.”

“Really?”

David sighed. “Really.”

AJ stared at him, seeing the truth in his statement in the color of his aura. “David, I’m not looking for anything permanent, okay? I’m still nineteen, after all.”

“Oh.” He started to withdraw his hands.

“HEY.” She held his hands firmly. “When are you graduating?”

“I’m slated to graduate next spring.”

“That’s one year. Plenty of time to be together, don’t you think?”

David stared at her. “Do you start all of your relationships this way?”

She smiled and leaned across the table for David’s first kiss.

For David, being with AJ would be a dizzying series of firsts.

First date. First kiss. First symphonic performance. First amusement park. First sleeping over after pulling an all-nighter studying. First argument over something stupid and petty. First meeting with a girlfriend’s mother. First road trip. First sex underneath a starry sky.

With each week and month, David’s Master’s graduation came closer, and, while still respecting AJ’s wishes to end their relationship without tears and regret, he couldn’t help but feel melancholy in the back of his mind. On the day of his graduation, his parents, due to ill health and tight finances, couldn’t come, but he saw – shining like a bright star – AJ cheering him on from the audience, and he dreaded having to say good-bye.

On the last night before David left for the long road trip to California, AJ visited him in his motel room. As she lay in his arms, he said, “I hope this isn’t farewell forever. But wherever I end up, next time we meet, I’m buying you a drink.”

“What drink?” AJ asked, her head resting in his chest so that she could hear and feel his heartbeat.

“Why, love,” he said, “whiskey, of course.”

Then he was gone to a doctoral program in California. AJ remained in Texas, to finish up her own doctorate, to have a brief fling with another grad student before he graduated. Then, finally, AJ had her own graduation. All that time, David and AJ kept in cordial contact – just two old friends casually keeping tabs on each other over social media.

However, if AJ were honest with herself, what with her postdoc being at a university in California, then she hoped that David would seek her out, even though she had insisted that they part with no conditions, no strings.

But David did have one condition: to buy her that drink once she came of age.

She was twenty-three years old when, one day, she arrived at her campus office early in her postdoc. Standing before her closed door was David, a thirty-one year old high school math teacher and former doctoral student.

“David.”

He brought out behind his back the gift of a bottle of whiskey and an engagement ring. He handed her the whiskey and then bent down on one knee. “AJ,” he said, “will you marry me?”

“Are you sure?”

He snorted. “Christ, woman. I’m sure.”

She smiled. “Well... if you insist.”

#

Three years of marriage, two babies, and two elderly in-laws moving in had passed for AJ Fitzpatrick, with the land of the living.

But today she was also part of the land of the dead.

Happy Day of the Dead, AJ sent to the souls of her pre-marriage family, the Fitzpatricks. She raised her bottle of Corona in salute towards a clear, cool sky and drank her beer before the grave headstones. All in a row were her mother Zoey, her uncle Jamie, and her grandparents, Amy and Zack, their headstones decorated with orange marigolds and macabrely cheery sugar candy skulls, lightly sprinkled with another bottle’s worth of Corona beer.

She looked around, seeing other groups of people clustered around gravesites, having picnics connecting family members across the great divide that was death. This was why she loved the Day of the Dead festivities. While she cherished her Babson family, she was still connected to her Fitzpatrick roots, thanks to the miracle of her own birth, only possible with the long ago intervention of a celestial being, and having certain inherited abilities. However, it was times like these when she would feel a twinge of regret, of not being able to share this singular fact of her identity with David. She knew it would sound like the words of a madwoman and -- like her grandfather, uncle, and mother before her -- she had hidden this part of her in order to have a normal life.

She set down her half-drunk bottle before her grandfather Zack’s headstone and stood up to leave but then felt that someone was watching her. Turning around, she saw a little old nun in a blue-and-white habit, her dark skin and white hair an external sign of the electrical black-and-white aura swirling around her.

“Happy All Souls Day,” the nun said.

AJ regarded her, and then she remembered – a memory her mother Zoey had shared with her in a sending, when her mother once upon a time felt alone and frightened among the church pews. *That’s you!*, she sent. Because AJ could see that the person before her had both human and angel mixed in her aura, she identified her as nephil, one of the rare creatures who survived an Earth recreated. Out loud, AJ replied, “Happy All Souls

Day, sister.”

The nun replied, “*Daalu*,” which was “Thank you” in Igbo. It matched the nun’s appearance, a disguise that made AJ grin since the nun was far older than the country of Nigeria, far older than the existence of the Igbo people.

AJ waited a little, since her mother’s experience taught her that the nun’s appearance meant a change was about to happen. But the nun remained where she stood and seemed to survey the Day of the Dead festivities in general. Having a connecting flight to catch, AJ couldn’t stay any longer, and she began walking towards the cemetery’s main gate. Before exiting, she glanced back but didn’t see the nun anywhere, and she stepped through the gate, to a waiting taxi cab to bring her to the airport.

After the usual routine of check-in, boarding pass, security clearance, and a brisk walk to the gate, AJ settled in the general seating area, waiting for her turn to board. She leaned back, trying to get comfortable in an uncomfortable seat, when a flash of blue-and-white caught the corner of her eye. She sat up sharply, in time to see the nun stand before her and touch her shoulder.

It wasn’t Lethe sleep.

Somehow, AJ knew that her physical form was still at the airport, slightly dozing in the waiting area before her gate. She knew that her spiritual self had been transported, to a grove of trees on top of a high mountain. But the person who stood before her wasn’t the nun, even though she had the nun’s energy signature. The nun disguise had dropped away, and AJ gawped, exclaiming, “WHO ARE YOU?”

Except for her dark eyes, she looked as if she could be David’s sister.

“My name is Cora,” she said, “and your husband is my son.”

“WHAT?” She shook her head. “HOW?”

As an answer, Cora sent her life, her knowledge. As the sending hit AJ, she saw AJ drop to one knee onto the forest floor. Cora crouched down before her, asking, “Are you okay?”

AJ stared at her, her eyes bright with tears. “You could’ve warned me beforehand. DAMN. I feel like I’ve just been punched in the head.”

“I’m sorry.”

AJ shook her head. “I’m fine.”

Cora adjusted her weight, sitting next to AJ, so with a grunt AJ sat down as well.

AJ glanced at Cora, a woman both stranger and strangely familiar. “So David and I are alike. A weird human having a human mother and an angelic father-figure. Except I know who I am because my mom raised me and told me about her and Ariel. While David was adopted by Ruth and Will Babson and you were...” She threw her hands up. “I can’t believe Ariel commissioned you as a FREAKING FAIRY GODMOTHER to David. He probably thought you were just a figment of his childhood imagination until you gave that handkerchief to him. And even then, knowing David, he probably just rationalized it away somehow because it’s just too much to comprehend.”

“I know. That’s likely why he never told you about me, just a childhood imaginary friend that he outgrew.”

“And Setebos is in – what? The angel equivalent of a coma? How is that even possible?”

“It’s not supposed to be possible. After I put Setebos in Lethe sleep, Uriel took Setebos and placed him in a stasis field. There, he flooded the field with a portion of the Purgatorial Sea, to have his memory of me and Caliban permanently removed. But when Uriel drained the field, a narrow film of the waters froze around Setebos, and then another force field formed over the ice.” Cora shook her head. “To say that the Uriel was alarmed would be an understatement. He and the other archangels couldn’t even touch the force field without being thrown back. Then Ariel reminded them of your mother’s intercession, that she had done what the angelic hosts thought was impossible: save a fallen angel. He believes I have that ability as well, especially since I’m entangled with Setebos’ energy.”

“But you failed.”

“Yes, I failed.” Cora’s fist clenched, as she remembered. “I could get through the field, but not through the ice. I tried more than once. They had to stop me because I wouldn’t give up.”

“What you sent, that Ariel said that you need an extra boost of Setebos’ energy signature, to increase the signal strength. Is that really supposed to be David? A key to open up the ice layer?”

“That’s what Ariel believes.”

“But isn’t David absolutely human? I mean, I can see the psycho-emotive states and energy signatures of humans, nephilim, and angels. David is completely human.”

“Except for his eyes,” Cora said.

“His eyes?”

“He inherited his eyes from Setebos, which signifies that he still has Setebos’ energy signature. But, as part of the Reboot, it was repressed.”

“And what will release it?”

“Angels are sentient intelligence. According to Ariel, all it would take is for David to know who he is.”

“But only if David believes it.”

“He will.” There was iron-certainty in Cora’s reply.

“Why are you revealing all this to me first, instead of David?”

“Honestly? So he could have someone he trusts tell him he hasn’t gone insane.” She stared ahead of her. “AJ, I was in your Uncle Jamie’s head. I know how it feels when nobody believes you.” She paused. “When you feel like you’re totally alone in the whole universe.”

AJ looked at Cora’s profile, noticing how much David resembled this woman. “FINE,” she said. She began to scramble up.

“What?” Cora looked on as AJ stood up.

“I’ll tell him.”

“What? No --”

“You said so yourself. He needs someone he trusts to tell him he hasn’t gone insane. The corollary is that he needs someone he trusts to tell him, period. And since you were hiding your true identity from David for the first twenty-two years of his life, he’ll likely have some emotional baggage, knowing that his biological mom had been lying to him.” AJ shrugged. “Besides, it’ll finally give me a reason to tell him that Fitzpatrick part of me. After all, what David has to do is all coming from Ariel, and I’m Ariel’s --”

“-- daughter,” Cora finished for her.

“Yes.”

Cora regarded AJ’s explanation and then stood up as well. “I’ll see you and David, soon,” she said, lightly touching AJ’s hand.

AJ started from her doze, still reclined on an uncomfortable airport waiting room chair.

“Boarding Group 4,” the announcer declared. “Boarding Group 4.”

She glanced at her watch, noticing that she was “gone” for only five seconds. As she boarded her flight, AJ thought, *Ready or not, David – here we come.*

#

David realized it was difficult to plan a romantic anniversary date with a house filled with boisterous two-year old twins and eighty-something year old parents slyly hinting that they understood the need for his and AJ’s need for “privacy.”

“If you need us to keep Janey and Eddie for the night, that’ll be fine,” Ruth said.

“Thanks, Mum.”

“After all,” Will added, making arthritic pelvic movements, “you wouldn’t want them barging in your bedroom in the middle of --”

“Oh God, Dad, STOP.” David sighed, seeing the twins mimicking their crazy Grandad. It looked like spastic hula-hooping.

The sound of Will Babson’s cackling still echoed in David’s mind as he drove to pick up AJ from the airport. From the pick-up lanes he immediately saw her. When she saw him and waved, his heart still made that odd lurch, just like the first time she held his hands after watching a movie that mortified him. AJ often made him do things that tested his resolve, to discover that he was braver than he thought he was. That was one of the many reasons why he loved her.

Her luggage loaded and the car back on the road, David noticed that AJ looked distracted. “Are you okay?” he asked.

At that question, AJ looked sharply at him while, at the same time, almost not seeing him. Then she shook her head, giving a small smile. “Yeah...” she replied.

He’d heard that tone before. “But?”

AJ seemed to struggle trying to answer.

“Lady, you have better say something,” David said, keeping his voice playful to cover up a creeping anxiety,

“or else my mind will start wondering what the hell I did wrong.”

AJ inhaled deeply and exhaled long and slow. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Uh – sure. What?”

“Have you ever wondered about your biological parents?”

His eyes still on the traffic in front of him, David asked, “Where’s this coming from?”

AJ looked at him, waiting.

He sighed. “When I was younger, probably a lot. I was teased when I was a kid for how I looked. Then I got older and other things became important. Like moving to the States. And meeting you.” He shrugged. “My mum actually did try to find them – at least my biological mother. But nothing to go on except a note in a basket.” He glanced at AJ. “Why’d you ask?”

“Because,” AJ said, her voice calm and measured, “I met your biological mother in Dallas.”

David stared ahead, his face unreadable.

“David?”

“How could you tell?” he asked.

“She looked like you.”

“Well,” he said, “that’s something.” He swallowed hard. “I think I need a drink.”

AJ peered at David, seeing his hands clenched on the steering wheel. “Go to the beach,” she said. “I have booze in my checked bag.”

David nodded and turned off from the highway, going down smaller roads until he parked.

While AJ left a short message to their house’s comm that they would be arriving later in the evening, David pulled a bottle of whiskey from AJ’s checked bag. Together they walked to a lonely spot on a beach mostly empty on a late Sunday afternoon. Without a word, they sat down and shared the bottle. They watched the waves ebb and flow with a loud hiss on the sandy shoreline.

After a tense silence David said, “All right then. What’s her name? And what did she say?”

“Her name is Cora,” AJ said. She paused. “And this is what she said.” She held David’s hand and sent to her husband for the very first time.

She sent what Cora gave her – Cora’s memories, her emotions, her speculations. But then she sent what had always been in AJ – the passed-down memories of her mother and Ariel, which mingled with her own memories, desires, and fears. Of the seeming unfairness of being in the dark, but the faith that everything would work out, in the end. As if bottled up for eons but now freed, AJ’s sending flowed out of her in a torrent, like the cleansing rains that restarted the world, and she couldn’t tell if she and David had sat there on the beach for mere seconds or whole hours. Once done, AJ felt spent, and she breathed heavily, catching her breath.

At one point, AJ had closed her eyes, as if shutting out the external world would help focus her sending. So when she opened them again, she started, as David’s eyes had turned to her, wide and glowing with a silvery white internal light.

Unlike AJ, David discovered that he had a hidden emptiness that he only knew existed when it began to fill up – filled up with memories, filled up with knowledge. His hand still held by AJ’s, he raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Fairy,” he said, “can AJ come with us?”

AJ looked up and saw Cora standing before them, a shimmer in the air behind her, indicating a portal.

“I’m sorry,” Cora said. “where we’re going AJ can’t go. It’s just souls, angels, and you and me because --”

-- of our condition,” David completed. He frowned. “I should be mad at both of you, for keeping all of this secret from me.”

“David...” AJ said, while Cora only bowed her head in silence.

“But I’m not,” he said. “AJ was right, Fairy. It was good that all of this came from her first. Because I love her.” He turned his silver-white eyes towards Cora. “This is how you feel for Setebos?”

“Yes, my boy,” Cora said.

“All right then.” He looked at his wife. “I’ll be back, love.”

“You better be,” AJ said, “or I’ll use up all your whiskey for a cake. And then eat the cake.”

He stared at her and then suddenly laughed. AJ was relieved to hear David sound like her husband, as opposed to this strange, hybrid creature, of the man raised by Will and Ruth Babson crossed with the living knowledge of celestial beings. He stood up, only releasing AJ’s hand at the very last, and he stepped forward and through the portal.

Cora looked at the woman still sitting on the sand. “Thank you,” she said, “for bringing him to me.”

“Well... just bring him back to ME, okay?”

Cora nodded and then stepped through the portal, which wavered and then dissipated.

AJ stared at the space where a mother and son had disappeared into thin air and raised the whiskey bottle in a silent, solemn salute.