

## 2 Hidden Things

When Janey was sixteen-years old, she came along with her twin brother to her first and last high school party only because he looked like a sad puppy after she said, “No,” when he asked her if she was coming along with him as his guest.

“But, Janey –”

“You know I don’t like those things.”

“How would you know? You’ve never gone to a party before.”

“That’s not true. We’ve gone to the family reunions every year since we were born.”

“That’s not the same!” Eddie pouted. “It’ll just be the gamer people, okay? Not too big. I’ll feel like I’ve abandoned you, just leaving you home alone since Mom and Dad’re still at Mom’s conference.”

Janey rolled her eyes.

Eddie looked at her with his sad, puppy dog eyes, looking frustratingly adorable.

She sighed. “FINE. I’ll come along to your stupid party. But I’m not dressing up.”

“Yay!”

She rolled her eyes again. “What are you – four years old?”

A somewhat meandering ride service trip later, Janey and Eddie arrived at a large, two-story house, illuminated by multicolored lawn lights and spooky-theme music faintly heard from the circular driveway. The music grew louder the closer they walked to the heavy-paneled front door. As if seeing them arrive through a security camera, the door opened before Eddie had a chance to ring the doorbell.

Janey stared up into the eyes of a tall, lanky guy whose green eyes matched his green hair, loud music spilling out behind him.

“John!” Eddie greeted, smiling at a thousand watts.

“Zack!” John, the green guy, replied.

Janey started at the name “Zack,” as she often forgot that Eddie’s first name was Zachary, named after their maternal great-grandfather.

“And you even brought the hermit!” John added.

“HERMIT?” Janey looked sharply at her brother as he punched the guy’s shoulder, but John only laughed.

“Come on in!”

John directed them to a spacious living room, where Janey saw a gathering of about a fifty people. Some were in the adjoining open-concept kitchen getting food and chatting. Some were in close groups of three’s or four’s, sitting in various areas of the living room, in animated conversation. But most were crowded around a designated gaming space, spectating and commenting on four gamers in full VR gear playing some sort of horror-meets-dance-party-meets-dungeon-crawl role-playing game. The gameplay was projected on one entire wall, with the in-game music blaring through wireless stereophonic speakers strategically hidden throughout the living room. Above the din, she grabbed Eddie’s arm and hissed in his ear, “You call this NOT THAT BIG? And do you actually know all of these people?”

“Ummm... yeah? And... mostly?” Eddie stared back, suddenly realizing that his social-averse introvert of a sister was likely feeling like an awkward stranger intruding upon a tribe of close-knit friends. “Oh crap! Are you gonna be okay?”

Overhearing Eddie’s response, John turned around and asked, “Is something wrong?”

“Ah,” Eddie began, but Janey plastered a big smile and cut in, “No – no, we’re fine. Big party, huh.”

“Yeah,” John replied. “It’s officially for the gaming club members, but they always bring others along, so...” He shrugged and smiled.

Janey frowned at her brother. “I wasn’t supposed to come?”

“Janey –” Eddie began.

“You’re okay,” John interrupted. “Actually, it’s good to finally meet this mysterious sister that Zack says he has. We were beginning to wonder if you were a figment of his imagination or just some kind of people-hating hermit.”

“Gee. Thanks.”

He laughed. “Hey, be nice to the guy who’s feeding you.”

“This is your house?”

“Yeah, my parents. On a date.” John made a face and laughed again. “As long as we don’t trash the house, they’re cool with me hosting the club’s Halloween party here.”

“JOHN!” someone called from the gaming area. “How the hell do you clear this level?”

“Ah! Hold on!” John gave Janey and Eddie a wide, toothy grin. “Sir Zack, Lady Hermit, duty calls.”

Janey looked at the retreating figure of their host and shook her head.

“You like him, huh,” Eddie said.

“What? No! NO.”

“Really? Well, I know he likes you.”

“Why? He just met me.”

Eddie shrugged. “Maybe you’re his type – a prickly, sarcastic smartass.”

She punched his arm.

“You know I’m not lying, Janey. I know what I’m seeing.”

Janey rolled her eyes. “I know you’re seeing something. But I think you’re interpreting it wrong.”

“Says the girl who never goes out to parties. Or dates.”

“Whatever. I’m getting food. You want anything?”

“Maybe something to drink? I wanna check out this game.”

“Of course.”

Like a newly arrived tourist navigating in an alien country, Janey kept her smile plastered on her face as she nodded and made small polite sounds of noncommittal assent as she grabbed a plate and loaded it with pasta in red sauce, garlic bread, and what Janey suspected was either breaded eggplant or breaded butterflied chicken. Except for a few T-shirts here and there with images of skulls, black cats, or pumpkins, nobody wore anything Halloween-themed, opting for designer-labeled casual wear. With a plate on one hand and a glass of some kind of tropical punch in the other, she looked for a space to sit among one of three expansive sectional sofas crowded with spectators but saw none. It was so crowded that many were sitting on the floor, their backs against the legs of those sitting on the sofas. From her vantage point, she also saw four players standing before the projected, fast-moving game play. They were kitted in full VR gear of helmet, chest piece, gauntlets, and greaves, and John obviously had parents who could afford to have top-of-the-line, haptic VR gear for all four.

Sitting at the edge of one of the sofas, Eddie saw Janey, waved her over, and stood up.

“But where’ll you sit?” she asked, carefully sitting down as she handed the punch to her brother, who took a big gulp.

Eddie glanced at the drink, shrugged, and slumped down next to her feet, expertly not spilling his glass. Leaning back, he looked up and said, “Don’t drink the punch.”

Janey stared down at her brother’s silver gray eyes. “Huh? Why?”

“It has alcohol in it – lots.”

“What? HEY, then why are you drinking –”

But Eddie only sat back up, waving his hand dismissively. Then he grabbed her garlic bread, took a bite out of it, set it back on her plate, and smiled, crooning, “Thank yooooou!” After taking a smaller sip, he resumed following the gameplay, exclaiming, “LEFT! LEFT! JEEZ. Are you sure you’ve done this before?”

“Is that Zack?” one of the players yelled. “If you think it’s that easy, why don’t YOU try it, smartass!”

John, who was one of the four playing, called out, “He’ll do it once you’re dead, Babs – which is gonna be now if you don’t WATCH OUT!”

“OOOOHHHHH!” a collective groan arose as Babs died in a glorious gore-filled slice-and-dice spectacle, disco music serenading her death in a minor key throughout.

*UGH.* Looking down, she noticed that the pasta and red sauce resembled the bloody viscera that she had just witnessed and wondered if John had purposefully ordered the meal to gross out his guests and if John’s parents knew that he was serving alcohol at a party filled with high-schoolers. *Whatever.* Janey carefully began to eat what was obviously a professionally catered buffet and tried not to feel out of place in an opulent house filled with the teenaged children of well-off parents.

Even though, technically, Eddie and Janey also came from a well-off household, they weren’t raised that way, as their public face was that of the teen kids of a high school math teacher, not the scion of a world-famous scientist. Janey knew that her parents’ decision to protect the family’s privacy was so that she and Eddie could have a normal childhood. However, doing so made her feel mistrustful of others not in her family; in contrast, Eddie had no problem weaving in and out of social groups – he could be and often was friends with anyone. But, of course, he would have no problem.

She chewed contemplatively. *Eggplant,* she thought. She glanced up and saw Eddie set down his drink, stand up, and approach Babs, who was angrily removing her VR gear, starting with her helmet. Janey saw Eddie take Babs’ helmet, lean in close, and say something in her ear. Babs shook her head but also started laughing.

Janey took in the image of her brother and this girl he easily made happy and thought, *What color did you see, Eddie?*

“A little help here!” Babs’ gaming partner declared.

Babs started and, between herself and Eddie, the VR gear was off Babs and on Eddie. In full kit, Eddie looked like some futuristic mecha soldier, which made Janey smile since he was one of the gentlest human beings she’d ever known. Just as she wondered where Babs was going to sit, she saw

Babs step enough away from the gaming area but close enough to rejoin if anyone else died in-game. Then she sat down on the floor, her legs crossed, and watched intently Eddie’s gameplay.

*Hub. Her name is Babs. If she and Eddie got married, she’d be Babs Babson.* Janey smirked. *God, I’m such a dork.* She shook her head and finished her food before she saw anything else that would kill her appetite, whether that be another gory virtual death or a girl swooning after her brother.

Plate emptied, Janey stepped away to place her dirty plate and fork in the massive commercial-sized kitchen sink and grabbed a couple of chocolate chip cookies from the buffet spread. She returned to the living room, only to see that the empty space where she once sat had filled in while she was gone. Noticing that Eddie’s drink was still on the floor where he had set it, Janey picked it up – “Excuse me” – and stood behind the seated spectators, holding her brother’s glass and noshing on cookies.

Janey couldn’t even begin to understand the mechanics of the gameplay, as all four players’ first person points of view were displayed as four split-screens, in addition to a general bird’s eye map that showed on the top right corner of the screen and an always-changing inventory of everyone’s weapons, potions, and other items. It was loud, dizzying, and fast-moving. But even with all the visual and aural chaos, Janey could tell that her brother’s gaming was superior to the other three. While John and the other two players struggled through each level, and John even died so that Babs could take another go, Eddie continued onward, gaining more power, items, and experience, with little damage. He was good – really good.

Janey frowned.

It wasn’t fair.

Eddie inherited the ability to see other people’s emotional states as waves of color flowing out of them like ripples in water. He inherited the ability to send, a form of telepathy that was more than merely the transmission of thoughts and words. He resembled their father, a math teacher so popular because of his appealing looks and kind personality that many students (and even some teachers) at their high school were literally giggly around Mr. Babson. He inherited so much of their mother’s smarts that, beginning in middle school, he skipped ahead one grade level, which now made him a senior while Janey was still a junior.

So – of course – her brother was a crazy genius at gaming.

*Why the hell did you even bring me here, Eddie?* She didn’t worry that Eddie could hear her thoughts – because he couldn’t. No one could. Unlike her parents and brother, Janey couldn’t send nor receive

any family member’s sending. She also couldn’t see people’s colors, and – in a pained twist of fate – her parents and brother couldn’t see Janey’s color as well, as if Janey had no color at all.

She felt like a hidden thing in her own family, and it was so stupid to think this way because weren’t all ordinary human beings – isolated and alone unless they spoke up – just like Janey?

She shook her head, remembering Eddie’s sad puppy eyes when she initially refused to come, and felt a keen stab of guilt and love for her goofy, sweet brother interrupting her self-pity. *Shit*, she thought, *I don’t want to feel this way!*

The cookies were gone, but she still had Eddie’s glass of punch. It had gone warm, since Eddie was still in the game and would probably be so for the rest of the evening unless he chose to take a break. Janey drained it in one, continuous swallow, tasting the acrid alcohol underneath the painfully sweet pineapple, orange, and lime juices. She could feel it immediately go to her head in a spreading wave of numbing warmth. It helped dial down her unexpected burst of envy.

*Maybe... just one more.*

She went to the kitchen and got another glass of punch. As she walked around, seeing the few guests not watching the gameplay, she smiled and sipped her drink. But once she got to an isolated enough area, she drank the whole thing in one and had enough wherewithal to set the glass on a table before the effects of the alcohol really hit her – which they did. Hard.

*Oh no.*

Janey could feel her senses going away, starting with her hearing and then her sight.

*Oh no no no no!*

And then her sense of balance.

*NO!*

“Are you okay?” Janey heard, muffled as if spoken through thick wool blankets. She recognized the voice.

Janey started laughing, weakly. “Can I lie down somewhere?” She slumped forward and felt John catch her.

“Shit!” John exclaimed, alarmed. “Are you sick?”

Janey stared up, seeing a blurry green through tunnel vision. “You... alcohol... punch. SHEESH.”

“Oh. OH. You didn’t know?”

She began to sweat heavily. “Just lemme lie down... PLEASE.”

“Do... do you want me to get Zack?”

Even compromised, Janey heard the fear in his voice. *What a hero.* “No need.”

“Okay.” He sounded relieved.

Janey felt him lifting her up and carry her as if she were a little girl. Still on the first floor of the house but with the party sounds growing fainter behind them, John eventually stopped, adjusted Janey’s weight in his arms, and opened the door to a dark, private room with his free hand. The lights didn’t automatically turn on, and John didn’t verbally nor manually turn on a light as he entered the room, walked a bit, and then set Janey down on some sort of couch. “You’re in my dad’s home office. Is this okay?”

Janey grunted in assent.

“Need anything? Water? Wet washcloth?”

“Nuh uh.”

“You’re... you’re not gonna throw up, are you?”

“No.”

“Well... just... just lie down until you feel better. Okay?”

“M’kay... Sorry....”

“Yeah. Me too.”

Janey heard John leave, closing the door behind him. She lay in the dark, sweating and breathing and trying not to feel stupid. She had only been this incapacitated exactly once before – she and Eddie had discovered their father’s supply of whisky when they were thirteen years old and got into big trouble because of it – and knew that what she was wasn’t drunk, or at least drunk like most people. Instead of getting buzzed and then increasingly drunk, her body responded to any ingested alcohol as if it were acute poisoning and would shut down so that it could process it out of her body as quickly possible.

She lay there as her liver processed the alcohol like crazy, and she knew that her breath and sweat stunk as if she had been on an all-night bender. *All the disadvantages of drinking alcohol and none of the advantages.* Fifteen minutes was nine-hundred seconds, and as Janey breathed and sweated, she counted to nine-hundred. At her countdown’s end, her senses returned to normal, the heat radiating from her body stopped, and her head cleared up. In the dark, she sat up and said, “Lights,” but nothing happened. Then she reached around for some kind of light switch, and, finding none, carefully stood up and walked where the door was, based on the faint outline of light outside of the room.

After struggling a bit with the door knob – which alarmed Janey at first and made her wonder if it had locked – she opened the door to an empty hallway. Further down the hall, she found a nearby

powder room, got rid of the last bit of alcohol remaining in her body, rinsed her face and neck to get rid of some of the stink, and drank greedily from the faucet. Just as she was about to open the door to leave, she heard someone pass by and, then, back towards the home office, heard its door opening.

“Hey,” she heard Eddie’s voice call out and echo down the hallway, “where’s Janey?”

From the powder room, she heard the office door quickly shut, this time hearing a definite locking sound, and then footsteps quickly retreating back to the party. Her heart beating fast and hard, Janey thought, *OH NO YOU DIDNT*. Just as the footsteps was about to pass by the powder room, she swung open the door, nearly hitting the person in the hallway. Stomping towards him, Janey hissed, “WHAT THE FUCK, JOHN.”

“Hermit!” John exclaimed, his voice breaking into a shocked squeak. “Uh – you’re better!”

Janey was so angry, her eyes twitched. “Were you just gonna leave me there without anyone knowing and then come back to do – WHAT?”

“I – I –” he stammered. His face twisted, shamefaced. “No. I’m sorry.”

For the second time that evening, Janey wished that she could see people’s colors, as she wondered if John was being sincere or was just weaseling himself out from being caught. “Whatever. But don’t you EVER pull that kind of shit on any girl or I WILL expose you for the spineless creep that you are.”

“You – you wouldn’t –”

“If you’ve heard anything about me from my brother, then you know what I would or would not do.”

“JAAAA-NEEEY!” Eddie called out again.

Janey turned away from John, preparing herself just in case he stopped her, and was relieved when he just stood in the hallway as if turned to stone. She returned to the party by way of the kitchen, grabbing a couple of cookies as an excuse. “I’m here,” she said. “So, you’re finally taking a break, huh.”

“Yeah, sorry.” Eddie walked towards her, finger-combing his flattened hair. “I’m sure you were pretty bored.”

“I’m fine.” The lie came out easily. “But eat something.” She handed him the cookies.

“Thanks.” He took a bite. “Where’s my drink?”

“Oh, that. It got warm, so I threw it away.”

“Threw it away?” Eddie peered at Janey and then leaned in close, sniffing.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Janey stepped back, but not quickly enough.



“JANEY. You drank my punch, didn’t you!”

“Uhhh...”

“ARE YOU OKAY?” Eddie’s loud voice started to draw attention.

Janey yanked him close and hissed, “Shut up! I had to lie down a bit, but I’m fine. Okay? So... so stop yelling – it’s embarrassing!”

Eddie’s eyes met Janey’s blue ones and he sighed. “Okay.”

She pushed him away. “Just eat your damn cookies, you dork.”

Eddie ate the cookies. Meanwhile, John had returned as well. Janey could feel John’s panicky stare from across the huge living room, and she ignored it. *This is Eddie’s party. These are Eddie’s friends.* At her insistence, Eddie ate more food from the buffet but refrained from the punch, opting for tap water. Her “I’m in public” smile plastered on her face again, Janey made agonizing small talk, primarily saying over and over, “Yeah – we’re really twins. I look more like our mom’s mom, and yeah – my brother does look a lot like our dad.” She would smirk whenever she replied to a drunken fangirl or fanboy of her father, “Uhhh... yeah, I guess Mr. Babson is kinda hot...”

Less than an hour later, Eddie announced, “Okay, we’re heading out.”

Janey looked at her brother, surprised.

“Awwww, why so early?” many replied, especially Babs, who added, “It’s not even midnight!”

“Sorry, sorry!” Eddie grinned, running a hand through his perpetually unruly hair. “Our parents are coming back early tomorrow, and the house is an unholy mess. We’ll really get it if we don’t clean up before they get home.” He looked around and saw John. “Thanks for hosting the party this year, man.”

John looked startled. “Uh, yeah. No problem.” He gave a too-wide smile. “Let me see you two out.”

Eddie waved his hand. “Naw, it’s okay. I think they need you back to clear another level. See you in school.”

“Oh – okay. See you.” John glanced at Janey.

Janey forced herself to smile. “Bye.”

“Bye.” John quickly looked away.

Through sounds of teen commiseration, Janey and Eddie put on their light jackets, made their way to the front door, and left the party, the door locking automatically behind them. On the circular driveway waited an autonomous ride service car, and they climbed in without a word. Only when it pulled away from John’s house did Janey ask, “When did you call for ride service?”

“After I ate the cookies you gave me.”

“But – why?”

Eddie rubbed his eyes, tired. “Janey, just tell me what happened.”

“What? Nothing happened.”

He sighed. “I don’t have to see your color to know you’re lying. Also, I don’t have to see John’s color to know something happened between you two, even though I could see it.”

Janey looked down at her hands. “What did you see?”

“Red. Panic-fear red. Mixed with blue and purple – sad and angry and... horny.” Eddie winced, then continued, “But mostly fear. Ever since I stepped away from the game, those colors would blow up like a pressure wave whenever John saw you. But even without all that, I’d have to be an idiot not to see him staring at you like some kind of stalker, hiding in the shadows.”

Janey shivered. “God, I didn’t want to know that.”

“Tell me what happened.”

She shook her head. “Words won’t do. They won’t. I have all THIS –” she gestured sharply at her head and heart – “but how... Christ, Eddie, if only I could send, but all I have are words –”

Eddie reached out and touched her shoulder. “Janey.”

She started crying and was angry that she was crying.

“Just try.”

She looked up.

“And I’ll keep my big mouth shut for once and listen. Okay?”

Janey gave a little a laugh, drying her eyes with the palms of her hand. No matter what, this was her big brother, and he loved her. “Okay.”

She began talking – but didn’t tell him the reason she chose to drink in the first place.

The next two weeks were hard.

Janey, being a junior, had no classes with John, who was a senior. But knowing now what she looked like, in the few instances that John saw Janey during the school’s passing periods between classes, he would turn around and avoid her, as if afraid of what she might say in the corridors, crowded with students walking by. John’s action angered Janey, that she had depended on and then been betrayed by someone so weak and cowardly.

But what angered Janey more was that Eddie still blamed himself.

“This is why I didn’t want to tell you.” She was standing in the open doorway of Eddie’s bedroom, having caught him sitting on his bed, staring into space. “I knew you were just gonna feel guilty.”

“But Janey, if I hadn’t forced you to come in the first place, then —”

“I keep telling you that you didn’t force me to go. I CHOSE to go. And I CHOSE to drink. It’s not your fault that that John also CHOSE to be a creep when he thought I had passed out. And – besides – nothing happened since I recovered before anything COULD happen. I told you, he’s so spooked that even when I do see him at school, he turns around and avoids me like the plague. So you don’t need to worry about me, okay?”

Eddie shook his head. “It’s just – Janey, I thought John was my friend. I mean – shit, we’re graduating together.”

“I know.”

“And the fact that he tried that on you, and I didn’t see that he could –”

Janey frowned. She hated it, seeing her brother like this. She hated that he felt responsible, just because he was older, just because he could see colors and she couldn’t. “Jesus, Eddie, are we really gonna let a wuss like John still make us feel bad during our family reunion? Seriously?”

“But it could’ve gone so badly if John had been a different kinda guy.”

“But he isn’t. And it didn’t. IT DIDN’T.” She saw her brother, deflated and forlorn, and exclaimed, “Jesus, Eddie!” She strode into his bedroom and smacked his head with an open palm.

“Hey!” Eddie rubbed the sore spot. “What was that for?”

“I’m trying to knock some sense into you because you’re seriously pissing me off!” She sat down on the carpet in front of him. “John’s just a guy who tried to do something stupid, and you’re just a guy who misread him. So what? You’re not a freakin’ GOD. So could you PLEASE just drop the guilt trip? You’re probably glowing with guilt colors, and I sure as hell don’t want our family having to ask why you look like you just ran over someone’s puppy.”

He sighed. “Poor puppy.”

“I’m serious, Eddie.”

“And so am I.” He ran a nervous hand through his hair. “I can’t just make feeling guilty go away just like that, okay? Like I promised you, I told Mom and Dad that I felt bad because you felt miserable at a party where you didn’t know anyone, but they probably can tell that I’m not saying everything.”

“Did they say something to you?” Janey glanced at the doorway, just in case their parents had come back upstairs to check on them.

“No. Since you seem to be okay, they’re letting it slide. But why won’t you just let them know everything?”

“And have them worry about me for being stupid? No thanks.”

Eddie shook his head again. “Here you are, telling me not to blame myself – but you’re doing it yourself, you hypocrite.”

She stared at her brother. “Fine. I’ll stop if you stop. Deal?”

He stared back at her. “That’s not how feelings work, Janey.”

Janey could feel the force of her brother’s stare, and she knew that he was trying to see her color, but it was pointless. She looked away. “It doesn’t matter with me – nobody can tell if I’m okay or not if I don’t say something. But you’re a freaking color wheel of emotions. And I don’t want our family having to see whatever the hell the colors of guilt and misery are, as if –”

“Right,” he interrupted, “puppy.”

“I’m all good,” Janey said. She spoke in a manner that was so convincing that she half-believed it herself. “It makes me sad that you’re not, you doofus.”

Eddie sighed and stuck out his hand in front of Janey’s face.

“Huh?”

“Deal.”

She gave a little smile, took his hand, and shook. “We better get going before Mom or Dad calls for us.”

Downstairs, Janey and Eddie saw their parents before the front door: Mr. David Babson was a forty-eight year old high school math teacher, renowned to being popular amongst his students and colleagues alike; Dr. AJ Fitzpatrick was a forty-year old physicist, renowned to being the youngest woman to win the Nobel Prize in Physics at age twenty-seven. Back then, in order to keep their young family away from the sudden limelight, they had decided that none but their closest friends and family knew that they were married to each other. Even after seventeen years of marriage – perhaps because of that long-held open secret – they still looked like newlyweds, as they held each other in a close embrace, their foreheads touching, while their mother spoke to their father in hushed tones. Their mother still looked like a young woman, with her smooth, olive skin and short, pixie-cut hair, dyed lavender, and their father was just as handsome as ever, with his floppy dark hair only starting to go a little silver at the temples.

Eddie and Janey loudly cleared their throats, and their parents released each other and turned to their children, who joined them.

Their mother reached out and wrapped one arm around Eddie’s waist, the other around Janey’s. “Ready, you two?” she asked.

“YES,” Eddie and Janey replied simultaneously, both ready to get away from the world for a little while.

“Right,” their father said, smiling at the three of them. “Here we go.”

Even though Janey had seen it every year since she could remember, it was still wondrous to her, that they departed for their Day of the Dead family reunion as if they were going out the door, like any other family of four about to go on a trip. But there it was: her father’s silver gray eyes glowed as if white-hot, he made a small twisting motion with his hand, and a doorway-sized portal shimmered before them. While the family reunions were always special in themselves, her father summoning a portal in the middle of their home’s foyer still made Janey feel like she was stepping into a fairy tale, like Lucy Pevensie, who had been hiding in a wardrobe only to emerge into a Narnia locked in snow. For Janey and her brother and parents, they would step out to their destination, thousands of miles away, on a green, idyllic island found on no human-made map.

Meeting them would be a surreal extended family made up of human souls crossed over from death, personal angels, and (in the case of her grandmother Cora) a human who was assumed, body and soul, into immortality. They would sing and feast and dance and share stories. They would stay for what would feel like days but were actually hours. It was like a fairy tale, and for once a year, Janey felt like part of her extraordinary family; once a year, Janey felt special.

One by one, they entered the portal – her father first, mother second, and brother third. Then Janey stepped forward. Her last thought on the departure side of the portal was what she always thought, ever since she was a little girl, but this year it felt like a fevered wish: *Take me where I belong.* She saw Eddie glance back at her, just as he stepped out on the other side, and saw his face fall, astonished, as he exclaimed, “Janey! I can see your color –”

The sunlight through the window woke her up.

Still groggy, Janey opened her eyes. *I was asleep?* She saw at first the bright ceiling and then the bed and her surroundings. *This is my bedroom – I’m home? But wasn’t I just in the portal?* She lay still, trying not to panic, as she couldn’t remember anything between leaving the house for the reunion and waking up in her own bed. After a few minutes, searching for memories that weren’t there, she sat up,

groaning, and winced a little, feeling a dull headache behind her eyes. *Did I hit my head?* She looked down at herself, noticing that she wore an old nightgown that she never wore anymore (she usually wore an oversized T-shirt and boy’s boxer shorts), but also that her body felt reduced – shrunken – as if she hadn’t moved in a long time. She stared at her arms and legs. *How long was I asleep?*

“Eddie? Mom? Dad?” she called out, her voice sounding hoarse. She swallowed and called out again, louder, her voice sounding increasingly frightened. “EDDIE? MOM? DAD?”

She heard from down the hallway, from the stairwell, “Janey?”

Relief exploded over her, as she recognized the voice: “Dad!” She started to get out of bed and stumbled onto the floor, the muscles in her body feeling weak and disused.

“Janey!” Into her bedroom ran her father, who went to her as she struggled to sit up. He hugged her tight and stifled a sob.

At that, she got scared, feeling the obvious release of fear in his voice and actions. “What – what happened? Where is everyone?”

Her father at first said nothing, as he just held her. Then he exhaled deeply, as if he had been holding his breath, and regained his composure. “Let’s get you off the floor.” He hooked her arm over his neck, gently lifted her up, and set her down back on her bed, sitting up. He then pulled a chair closer to the bed, sat down, and placed assessing hands an inch over her head, his eyes faintly glowing. “How do you feel?”

Janey stared, as the only time she ever saw her father’s hidden ability was during the opening and closing of the reunion portal. She could feel her dull headache ease. “I’m... okay?” Then she noticed that her father’s hair was much longer than she remembered. “Dad, how long was I asleep?”

“Ah.” He gently placed his hands onto hers. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Uhhhh... I saw Eddie on the other end of the portal, and I was about to step through.”

“And then?”

“And then... I woke up here.”

Her father held her hand. “Sweetie – you’ve been in a coma for over nine months.”

She stared. “Nine... MONTHS?” She started to shake. “How? HOW?”

He shook his head. “Something went awry in the portal. We don’t know how it happened, which is the frightening part. All of these years, nothing like this ever happened. When you didn’t come through the portal, I went back in myself... and you weren’t there.” Fear briefly passed through his face as he remembered.

“So I went somewhere else? Where?”

Her father’s face tightened, and Janey realized that he had become angry. “There are dangerous areas within your grandparents’ island – areas that your mom and I didn’t even know about. You somehow arrived at one of those areas. Setebos was the one to find you and get you out.” He was about to say something, paused, and continued, “But you were already unconscious by then.”

“Ino?” Janey replied, using the name for “grandfather” in her grandmother Cora’s language. “Ino saved me?”

Her father flinched a little at her word “saved,” but he nodded, even though Janey could still feel the anger under her father’s response. “We still don’t know how you portaled away from the reunion. So, for your safety, you can’t go to the reunions anymore until we figure this out.”

Janey tried not to, but she started to cry. How could she explain to her father how important these annual reunions were to her?

“Janey,” he gently said, “you were in a coma for nine months. Nothing we did brought you out; you woke up on your own, but I can’t tell what changed such that you could. It’s too random – too unpredictable. We can’t risk that again.” He paused. “I can’t risk that again.”

She nodded, looking down.

“Ah, sweetie.” He reached out and wiped away her tears. “You won’t be alone,” he said. “Your mother, brother, and I decided not to go as well.”

She looked up sharply. “Dad!”

“We all go as a family, or we don’t go at all.”

She tried to smile but couldn’t. She looked at the window, bright with late summer sunshine. “Nine months... so it’s August again?”

“Yes. Mid-August. I took a leave of absence from the school to care for you since – well, you already know what I can do.” He shrugged, unused to addressing his hidden second nature openly.

“Dad...” Janey understood the enormity of what he was saying. As the chimerical son of a human woman (Ina Cora) and a former Watcher angel (Ino Setebos), her father was, as he would sometimes say to her and Eddie, fully human, except for the bits of him that were not. Having been adopted as a baby and then raised by a fully human couple from Scotland, her Grandpa Will and Nana Ruth, David Babson was already a married, working man and a father of twins when he found out that Cora and Setebos were his birth parents and that he possessed otherworldly abilities. Uncomfortable with having them, her father chose to use them only for the family, and rarely at that. So Janey stared, realizing that her father had stayed by her side for nine months, trying to pull her out of her coma while keeping her from starving and wasting away as she lay in bed like Sleeping Beauty.

“Your mom felt guilty that she couldn’t take off as well,” he continued, “but I would’ve none of that nonsense. As for your brother, well, he didn’t want to return back to school.”

“Because I was sick?”

Her father peered at her. “That – and also because Eddie told your mom and me everything about what happened at that Halloween party.”

She stared back, not knowing how to respond.

“John Forrester was my student. It would’ve been... very bad if I had returned to the classroom, knowing what he tried to do.”

“I – I’m sorry for not telling –” Janey began, but her father only smiled, shaking his head.

“It’s all past, sweetie. Fortunately, as the Math Department Coordinator, I found qualified substitutes to take over my classes. And, as I said, I wanted to take care of you.” He paused. “But once I was gone, your brother felt cut off from the family when he was at school, notwithstanding his animosity towards John. So he asked if he could finish his remaining graduation requirements at home. Since he only needed three credits to complete the minimum requirements, the school granted his request. He graduated this past January and helped care for you.”

“You... AND Eddie?” Janey considered what her father said. “But – it’s August! Please tell me Eddie didn’t let college go just because of me, or... or else I’ll smack him!”

Her father leaned back and laughed. “Oh, sweetie. It’s been a while since I’ve laughed like this. Thank you for coming back to us.”

“Don’t – don’t make me cry, Dad!”

“Okay, okay. Your brother. You’re right. Even though you were stable, as long as you were in your coma, Eddie chose to stay in the house, looking after you. But the longer he stayed here, the more we could see that he felt frustrated and useless, since I was taking care of your needs and your mom was active in her work. We finally had to sit your brother down and remind him that you would hate that he was sacrificing his own future, just because of survivor’s guilt.”

Janey nodded. “I bet he got angry.”

“That he did. But in the end, he saw that we were right.”

“So, he’s in college?”

“Yes, but not here. Eddie realized that if he stayed local, then he’d be too reminded of what happened to you at that party, as well as too tempted to drop everything and come back home. He needed to be far away, but not so far that it wouldn’t eventually feel like home. So he applied and got accepted at your mom’s and my alma mater.”



“The one in Texas? In Dallas? He’s in Dallas?”

“Yes.” He paused. “Arrived exactly now, in fact. Your mom’s with him. They drove, and she’s helping to settle him in before the semester begins next week.”

“Arrived exactly now... how would you know that they arrived exactly – DAD. You’ve been sending this whole time, haven’t you!”

He smiled, just as the house comm began ringing with the specific cadence of the onboard comm of her mother’s car. “I wanted to share the good news, that you were awake, sweetie – but I also wanted to give time for Eddie to calm down, as I know he’d likely want your mom to turn the car around and drive back home.” After the second round of ringing, her father called out, “Accept call – bedroom 3.”

“Hi-hey, Janey.” Eddie’s voice resonated over the house comm speakers in Janey’s bedroom, and even though he sounded calm, Janey could hear a weird nervous shakiness, as if her brother had been crying not too long ago.

“Eddie,” Janey said. “It’s so weird. In my head, I just saw you a few minutes ago. Has it really been nine months?”

“Yes,” he replied. “It’ll be even longer since I won’t be home until Thanksgiving break.”

“That’s okay,” Janey said. “That’ll give me time to get my strength back. How can I smack you for whatever college freshman idiocy you’ll likely have done with puny arms like these?”

“Janey,” her brother began, but then he suddenly asked, “Mom, Dad, can I just come home? I mean, Janey’s okay now, and... and I can help with her catching up with school since she’s really fallen behind now –”

“Hey!” Janey retorted.

“Eddie –” her father started.

“Eddie.” Her mother’s voice was calm but firm. “You’re already here. We’re pulling up in front of your dorm as we speak. And between your dad and me, I think we have Janey’s schooling taken care of.”

“But –”

Janey realized what Eddie was trying to say but couldn’t put in words. She said, “Except for middle school, we’ve never been apart, have we.”

Eddie stopped, and she could hear him breathe hard, trying not to cry.

“I’ll miss you, twin,” she said.

“Yeah. Me too.”

“Ah,” her father and mother said.

Janey frowned. The way her parents spoke made her feel strange, as if they were keeping something back from her, something that her brother also knew. She asked, “Dad, will you still be on leave, even though I’m awake now?”

“What? Oh, yes. You’re right that you’ll need time to get your physical strength back, and we need to make sure there aren’t any other lingering effects.”

“So, I’ll catch up with school at home?”

“Yes.”

“Then... when I get better and get caught up, can I visit Eddie?”

Her father started to frown, but he caught himself and shrugged. “What say you, AJ? Eddie?”

“Well,” her mother replied, her tone careful, “we’ll see. After all, Janey may need –”

“It’s okay,” Eddie interrupted. His voice sounded as measured as their mother’s. “Janey, just... just stay there and get better, okay? I have my comm, so you can talk to me whenever. But right now, it’s getting late, and we gotta move my stuff from Mom’s car.”

“Oh. Okay.” Janey tried to hide her disappointment. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Talk to you later.” Janey heard the sound of a car door opening and then slamming shut.

“... Janey?” It was her mother.

“Yes, Mom?”

“It’s been a long drive, sweetie, so your brother’s a little tired and isn’t himself right now.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll be home as soon as I can. I love you, sweetie.”

“I love you, too, Mom.”

She heard her mother disconnect the call, and for a brief moment, the silence felt weighty and awkward.

Breaking the silence, her father said, “Well, sweetie, it’s about tea time. I’ll make some actual food for you, for a change, and bring it to you.”

“Can I go downstairs instead?” Janey asked. “I wanna move around.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” she replied. Her father stood up and held out his hands to help her up. Smiling up at him, Janey placed her hands in his. But her smile was the smile of the party, the fake plastered smile. Her brother’s so-called tiredness, her mother’s non-answer of “we’ll see,” and her father’s barely hidden frown: these things bothered her. It was a forced normality to cover up what remained

unspoken. *They know what happened, but they're hiding it from me*, her thoughts intruded. Recalling her father's anger, her smile became rigid. *OH GOD. Did I do something wrong?*

Her father's face suddenly twisted, and he sat back down, saying, “I'm sorry.”

“Dad?”

He stared at her. “Your smile. I know that smile. I make that whenever I'm supposed to pretend I'm all right even though I'm breaking inside.” He shook his head. “I'd be a shitty parent if I couldn't recognize that on my own child.”

“It – it's okay, Dad –”

“No,” he interrupted. He placed his hands on either side of Janey's face. “Don't lie to make me feel better. Tell me what you're feeling.”

Janey let the smile drop, and her face matched her father's expression. “I'm confused. And scared. And... and MAD. Because... because... you know what happened to me. So you're – you're lying!” She angrily brushed her father's hands off her face and rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands, not wanting to cry. “Everyone's lying to me, and I hate it!”

Her father covered his face in his hands and sighed in frustration. “Shit.” He looked up, above Janey, as if seeing through the ceiling and arguing with someone far away. “SHIT!” he exclaimed.

Janey recoiled, scared. “Dad?”

He looked at her, reached down, and held her hands again. “I'm sorry, Janey. You're right. We know what happened. But for your safety, you're not to know the details. To protect you, nobody can tell you. And I hate it, too. We all do.”

“But – that's not fair! Why can't I know?”

Her father shook his head again. He began to speak, paused, and then said, “I can tell you this much, Janey. For us – the people in our family – revealed self-knowledge is risky. Dangerous. So it has to be the right time, when it happens. I mean, I didn't know who I was, REALLY was, until I was past thirty. You know the story. But what happened to you, Janey – you were too young. You're still too young.”

Janey looked down, at her father's hands protectively covering hers. “It's not fair.”

“I agree. It's not. But please trust us, that we're doing this because we love you, Janey. And I promise you, as soon as we're allowed to tell you, then we will. Okay, sweetie?”

She considered what her father said and shrugged. “Okay.” She looked up, seeing his silver gray eyes looking care-worn and sad. “Okay,” she repeated, her voice soft and accepting. She gave a little smile, a real one this time. “Can I have pancakes?”

Her father blinked, smiled, and leaned forward. She felt his strong arms around her small form in a warm, protecting hug. “Yes. You can have pancakes.”