

4 And Found

Home was Miriam’s house, which had become Isaac’s house when he had returned from his travels.

Home was where Janey, her parents, and the Adebayo siblings last celebrated Eddie’s graduation before he moved away for his post-doctoral fellowship at NASA’s Johnson Space Center, several hundreds of miles south, in Houston, shortly thereafter.

Home was also where Janey would have to move to before Eddie left.

Eddie was apologetic, that she would have to move away since their apartment was university-owned and her brother was no longer a student. “Of course, you could always become a student yourself, Janey,” Eddie suggested, but she waved away that idea, saying, “I like working. Besides, I don’t even know what I’d major in. The problem is where I’d live – I don’t think I can afford an apartment by myself.” She frowned, sighing. “I guess I’ll need a permanent job.”

“Well,” Eddie replied, brightening, “I have a solution for you.”

“Oh?”

“Miriam.”

Janey blinked and then said, “Of course. Miriam.”

That was how Janey learned that Miriam and Isaac had founded a company named Art, Design and Engineering, with the initials ADE, a subtle nod to their last names. ADE was headquartered in the top floors of a downtown Dallas building in the West End, a building that Miriam and Isaac also owned. In an earlier incarnation, before the Adebayo siblings became the owners, it had been a historic hotel, and the lower floors still served that role, being an in-house hotel for ADE’s out-of-town clients and personnel. On the ground-floor was a fast-casual café – open to the public – a café that Miriam and Isaac saved from going under when its original owner decided to leave the restaurant business. While Isaac was indeed traveling for his own interest, Miriam also tasked him to forge international business relationships for ADE. Meanwhile, Miriam’s grad school period was her extended sabbatical from the company, to get a proper MBA, and her living in the dorms as a resident assistant was her unofficial field-research for what college-educated people cared about, in choosing how to live, work, and play.

Miriam, Janey quickly realized, was a very savvy businesswoman.

Over a cup of coffee in Miriam’s kitchen, Janey asked, “Isn’t this nepotism?”

Miriam answered pragmatically, “I’m just giving you the publicly-available info for the open position. You have the work experience for it. But you can still blow the interview and not get hired, and I won’t be your immediate supervisor if you do get hired.”

“Okay,” Janey said, “but the other thing... moving in with you and Isaac... jeez, I don’t want to impose!”

“What imposition? This is a big house, I’m away for long hours, and Isaac’s often gone for days on end for business trips. It’s not as if I’m opening our home to a complete stranger.”

“But... is Isaac really okay with this?”

Miriam chuckled at that. “My dear, you’re his lover’s twin sister. OF COURSE he wouldn’t have you struggling with finding a place to live.”

“Okay. It’s just...”

“Janey. I know you’ve worked hard to be independent. Edmund once told me that you gave the funds that your parents reserved for your own schooling to him so that he could take more classes. But think of my home and this job position as my and my brother’s way of saying thank you. If it weren’t for your grandmother – and your own mother agreeing to let my grandmother have the property that would’ve gone to your mother – then my brother and I wouldn’t have this house. This company. Why, we probably wouldn’t have met Edmund! We will always be grateful to you and your family, Janey. Always.”

Janey exhaled. “Wow. You’re good.”

Miriam smiled. “Is that a yes?”

“Hah. Yes. That’s a yes.”

“Good. Let’s move you in.”

Janey surprised Miriam, Isaac, and Eddie when she moved. She had three suitcases’ worth of stuff when she moved in with her brother and, six years later, she had three suitcases’ worth of stuff when she moved out. Janey had accumulated so little over those years in that student apartment, both in material things and emotional attachment, that it was as if her life had been put on pause.

Then the summer after Eddie’s graduation ended. On the last night before her brother left for Houston, Janey was about to drop off to sleep when she heard a light knocking on her door. When she got out of bed and opened the door, she saw her brother standing there, disheveled and in his boxer shorts and an old, sloppily belted robe.

“Eddie? Weren’t you already asleep?”

“No,” he replied, his voice low in that hushed nighttime hallway. “I was waiting for Isaac to fall asleep. He’s such a night owl, but he finally did. And Miriam’s been asleep hours ago. I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No – not yet.” Janey yawned. “What’s up?”

“Can I come in?”

Janey stepped aside.

Eddie walked in and sat down on her bed; Janey joined him, sitting in darkness except for the silvery light of the full moon, filtered through the curtains of her bedroom window. He said, “Remember when I said I needed to tell you something – on graduation day?”

“What? I thought that was when you told me about Miriam helping me with living here and getting a job.”

“No. It wasn’t that.” He paused. “I’ve been meaning to tell you this – for years and years – but I wasn’t sure if it was okay. But we’re not kids anymore, and now with me leaving....” He trailed off.

“What is it?” Janey asked. She waited, and when he still hesitated, she asked, “What’s wrong?”

He sighed. “Janey, do you remember ANYTHING of what happened to you once you had stepped in Dad’s portal six years ago?”

She frowned. “No. Of course not. You know that.” In spite of herself, she became angry. “Why’d you bring that up? You know I’m not supposed to know. Mom and Dad’re afraid it might give me a seizure or something.”

“You don’t believe them.”

She shook her head. “About the seizure thing? Or risking another coma? Not really. But I believe them when they say that they’re trying to keep me safe. I mean, what else can I do?”

He sighed again. “I know about as much as you of what happened when Dad couldn’t find you – that you went somewhere dangerous, Ino Setebos got you out, and you were already in a coma.” He paused. “But there’s something else that happened, something that even Mom and Dad and the rest of the family don’t know, and the memory of it, well, it’s haunting.”

“Eddie!” Janey whispered sharply. “Why didn’t you tell Mom and Dad if it’s been making you feel bad?”

“That’s the thing, Janey. It didn’t make me feel bad. But I was afraid – I don’t know – if I told them, then they might say that maybe I was just seeing things. That it really didn’t happen.”

Janey shook her head. “What are you talking about?”

Eddie inhaled and then exhaled deeply. He said, “When I stepped out on the other side of the portal, I glanced back. You were still inside, and... Janey... I saw your color.”

She stared at him. “What?”

“Your color. You were – jeez, Janey. Waves of fluorescence, like under black light. Like bioluminescence. But it was a dark purple-blue, which usually means negative emotions, but the way your color was glowing, so brightly... it was beautiful. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“My... color,” Janey said. She stared at the moonlit darkness in front of her. Then she started to cry.

“Oh God – I didn’t mean to upset you, maybe I shouldn’t have –”

“I’m not upset, you idiot,” she interrupted. “I’m... I’m... HAPPY.” She gave a snort of laughter at that, even as her tears fell. “Did you really see my color? Really?”

“Janey,” Eddie said, “I did. I really did. But... it was only that one time. Never before. And... never since.”

She shook her head. “It’s okay – it’s okay. It’s just... you saw my color. You saw ME. That makes me feel... shit, I feel REAL.” She shook her head again. “You should’ve told me. At least me. Do you know how much I’ve wanted to hear you or Mom or Dad tell me that? Do you know how long?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Idiot.” Her tears still fell. “Shit – I can’t seem to stop crying. Why – why can’t I stop?”

Eddie wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, and Janey wept into his robed shoulder. Together, in the moonlit darkness, he held her until, finally, her crying eased up, and he wiped her eyes with the sleeves of his robe. “Better?” he asked.

“Yeah. Better. You?”

“Me, too.” He flopped backwards onto the bed, as if a huge burden was lifted from him and he could breathe again. “I’m glad I finally told you.”

“Will you tell Mom and Dad?” Janey asked.

Eddie thought about it. “Only if you want me to.”

Janey was silent. Then she said, “Can we just keep it between us for now?”

“Sure.” He stifled a yawn.

“You better get back to bed. Early train departure tomorrow,” she reminded.

“Yeah.” He sat back up. Then he kissed Janey’s forehead and stood up. “G’night, Janey. Sweet dreams.”

“G’night, Eddie. And thank you.”

The darkest of blues meant sorrow and despair.

She knew that darkest of blues, as she knew those six, and as she stepped forward, one of them – the oldest one – raised his head.

He sent, and it was a cry of pain.

She had staggered backwards, for she had heard. *Oh God*, she cried out in her sending, *I didn’t know... I didn’t know....*

... and when the dark center of that circle began to glow, she saw and rushed forward, her heart bursting...

After two months, Janey’s support position in ADE’s procurement division became permanent, and after another month, her full company benefits kicked in. Even though technically she was part of a professional team who engaged with vendors and other departments in the corporate network, such interactions were often virtual. Since Miriam – as the founder and CEO of an up-and-coming firm – often had long, involved hours and Isaac was often out of town expanding ADE’s national and international clientele, Janey sometimes felt like a hermit, isolated in her high-tech cubicle or alone in a house that felt too big, in spite of its ranch-house modesty. Considering how often she peered closely at curated material management data, as she manipulated them across multiple screens and one VR headset, she felt like she was becoming part of some myopic machine.

So – in spite of her natural predilection for solitude – Janey was actually craving social interaction by the end of the fiscal year in late September, one month after her one-year anniversary with ADE.

One day, her supervisor, a well-meaning but old-fashioned guy named Curtis who gravitated towards wearing khaki pants and tucked-in polo shirts, declared that – in the name of public outreach – their department was tasked to send over at least one volunteer for a community clean-up event at Cedar Ridge, a nearby state park and nature preserve.

At that request, Janey actually raised her (virtual) hand and said, “I’ll do it.”

“You?” Curtis and several of her co-workers asked in unison, surprised.

“Yeah. I probably need the fresh air and exercise, anyways.”

Thus, on a cloudy October Saturday morning, Janey found herself among a large group of fellow employees, all of whom she didn’t know personally. They wore garishly orange vests over their

blue company T-shirts, which increased their visibility among the close-growth trees, and wore work gloves over their hands, which increased their grip of their large, sturdy, biodegradable trash bags. Divided into teams of five, each led by a park employee, they fanned out to clean up their designated area, with the order to reconvene at the initial starting point at noon for lunch.

With her comm tuned to her work band (instead of her personal band), Janey could keep in contact with her team, even if she didn't directly talk to them. She could see where everyone was in a virtual bird's eye schematic of their section of the park, projected slightly above her immediate sightline. She saw herself as a glowing red dot, while others were duller blue dots, moving around her. That allowed her to concentrate on her task on hand, which was picking up stray bits of trash, either left by neglectful visitors or blown in from outside the park. Even in this day and age, in which paper and plastic had been replaced with virtual documents and biodegradable or reusable materials, Janey picked up plenty of trash to keep her busy, making the time pass quickly.

However, some of her team mates were complaining, saying, “Why can't this be automated?”

“Because machines aren't delicate enough around the forest floor nor discerning enough to catch what the human eye can see,” their park leader answered.

“Why do we have to walk around and pick all of this up by hand?”

“I believe I answered that question.”

“Are you sure we can't just leave some of this stuff here?”

Their park leader replied, “Anything that doesn't belong is unhealthy for the forest, as well as any animals here, so we can't leave ANY trash behind.”

“This bag is getting heavy!”

“Yes,” their long-suffering park leader responded, “gravity will do that.”

Jeez, people, leave the poor man alone, Janey thought, muting the audio feed. She looked around, not recognizing where she was as she had been distracted by the continuous stream of complaints by her so-called professional colleagues while she had automatically picked up trash and stuffed them into her bag. She glanced up at the virtual map, and the space where it should have been, transparent and glowing, was just empty space. She stopped walking, as she thought, *Shit, where did it GO?* She tapped her comm, to turn on her audio feed, but all she heard was static – the telltale sign that she was disconnected. *What the hell? It was just there a moment ago!* She tapped the short-cut numbers to several of her team mates, including the park leader and the main office of the park, but the static continued. In an act of desperation, she called Isaac, Miriam, and even Eddie – nothing.

Oh God, Janey thought, fear rising like a sickening wave from her chest, *oh God*. Her first impulse was to drop her bag and start running around in an adrenaline-fueled panic, but she shut down that impulse. She knew that rushing around in an unfamiliar and heavily forested state park was guaranteed to decrease her chances of people finding her when, once they noticed that she was missing, they started looking for her. But just in case someone was already looking for her –

“HELP!” she yelled, as loudly as she could, “HELP! I’M LOST!” She closed her eyes, listening, but all she heard was the wind rustling through the leaves of the trees. Panic started rising again, but she forced herself to breathe, to focus on her breath, as she thought, *I wanna go home*. As she did that, a memory rose up that made her sad, a memory that she had avoided to remember as it reminded her of the family reunion that had been missing from her life for the past seven years: *Take me where I belong*. But then, almost as if her mind wouldn’t let her succumb to that melancholy, she remembered that Eddie had seen her, shining in blue, and that memory gave her solace. *I’m okay*, she thought. *I’ll be okay*.

She exhaled. Feeling steadied and calm, she opened her eyes and saw a tree across a small clearing.

Janey wasn’t into botany at all, but even she knew what type of tree this was. It was from an ancient species that shouldn’t have existed on modern-day Earth. Its massive, rough trunk and broad, dark green canopy, which topped many-fingered limbs branching out of that trunk, were as familiar to her as her wondrous family. It was a belajoun, the same as what was on her paternal grandparents’ island. When she saw that it shimmered, Janey’s heart leapt up, for she knew that it could only mean one thing.

She stripped off the vest, gloves, and ADE shirt, revealing the simple tank top that she was wearing underneath. She removed her comm and left the bag of trash where it was. Without hesitation, she took off, closing that clearing in five long strides; she ran headfirst into the tree...

...and remembered.

One by one, Janey’s family entered the portal to travel to the Day of the Dead family reunion: her father first, mother second, and brother third. Then Janey stepped forward. Her last thought on the home side of the portal was what she always thought, ever since she was a little girl, but that year – her sixteenth year of life – felt like a fevered wish: *Take me where I belong*. She saw her twin brother glance back at her just as he stepped out, a white field of flowers called hazel herb seen behind him. But then she saw his face fall, astonished, as he exclaimed, “Janey! I – I can SEE your color –”

Janey stared back, confused. “What?” She walked forward as her brother repeated, “You’re BLUE—” But then everything went silent as she stepped out of the portal.

Instead of the bright sunshine of the midday sun and the airy landscape of an island mountaintop plateau, Janey was in complete darkness. Alarmed, she turned back to the portal, but it had shimmered away, leaving her stranded and alone. Afraid of what lay in the dark, she kept silent, and she stumbled, trying to find her way, but feeling only damp, cool air and hearing her footfalls echo in a space that felt cavernous and desolate.

It was so dark that she feared that she had lost her sight.

But then her eyes adjusted, and she noticed a cold, blue light faintly above her. Looking up, she saw innumerable dots bathing the darkness, and she realized what they were – glow worms, adhering tightly against the cavern ceiling and illuminating the darkness and the silence. In their soft, blue glow, she could just make out what had been there in that hidden place, right in front of her: six kneeling figures, separated from each other and yet positioned in a circle with heads bowed low towards an unseen center. She gasped, for she saw fluorescing waves of indigo – the darkest of purple and blue – emanating from their bodies like negatively imaged coronas. But when she saw their color, she looked down on herself and was startled that she was the same color as they. Suddenly, to her astonishment, she knew.

One of them radiated the darkest of blues, a color that meant sorrow and despair.

She knew that, as she knew those six. As she stepped forward, the one who raised his head she knew was the oldest one and, like the others, was ancient even though he looked like a boy, just a sixteen-year old boy.

And he looked so much like her.

He saw her and sent, and it was a cry of pain.

She staggered backwards, almost to where the portal had been, for she had heard, and his pain was searing. *Oh God*, she sent, and she was sending without realizing it, *I didn’t know – I didn’t know...*

For he had sent everything that had happened, everything that she had forgotten, and he ended with one word, cried out in pain and need: *Ma!*

She had fallen down by then, but she scrambled up to her feet, even as she felt dizzy and sick. It made no sense to her – that this boy, who resembled her and looked the same age as she, was her eldest son and the other five – who appeared younger than he was – were her children. It made no sense to her that she suddenly knew that they were locked in eternal stasis, never to break free. Yet she did not question this newly emerged knowledge, and she stared as six ribbons of glowing indigo

flowed from herself to the circle of six. The ribbons passed through them and then converged to an invisible, central focal point, which began to glow, revealing a lone, winged figure lying on the ground, curled into a tight fetal position, and – as if submerged underneath smoky glass – another winged figure mirroring the other. She cried out, her voice echoing sharply against the high cavern walls, as the memory of who those two were shot through her like an arrow of fire. Heart bursting, she rushed forward.

The figure on the ground began to stir....

No, Ma!

Suddenly she felt strong arms around her. She struggled and flailed as her son pulled her back and flung her out and away from the circle. Suddenly another person appeared above her, and she recoiled in fear, about to scream, but she stopped. Her fright died out as quickly as it had sparked. “Ino!” she cried out in relief.

For she remembered that she was Janey Babson, just a sixteen-year old girl, and this incredible person who alighted before her – tall, pale, dark hair, silver gray eyes, wine red wings – was the angel Setebos: former Celestial Engineer, former Watcher of humanity, current guardian of Earth’s nephilim – and her beloved paternal grandfather. With a quick nod, he sliced the ribbons connecting Janey with the circle, and the ribbons of color dissipated into the darkness just as Janey collapsed, exhausted, into his arms. He looked at the boy. “Aleph,” he said, vocally.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he answered. His voice sounded reedy, as if he wasn’t used to speaking out loud.

“How did you bring her here?”

“I... I don’t know. I wished to see her. And she came.”

“It wasn’t intentional?” her grandfather demanded.

“No – NEVER. I know why she must stay away. It’s just... it’s just... I miss her.” He looked at Janey, shamefaced.

Janey stared back. “I remember. I remember who I am – or who I was?” She closed her eyes, as she felt her head throb. “It’s so confusing, I don’t understand how...” The more she tried to sort the sudden knowledge in her head, the more pain she felt until it felt like sharp stabs. “Why does it hurt?” she suddenly cried out.

Her grandfather placed one hand above her head, and she felt the pain lessen a little. Then he picked her up, carrying her like a small child in his arms. “Thank you for alerting me, Aleph,” he said, “but you must be more careful. This level of energy, you know – it can kill her.”

Her son looked stricken.

“We must go before the energy dampening wears off.” Her grandfather’s wings outstretched, and Janey felt herself being carried aloft.

“I’m sorry,” Aleph said again, and the melancholy in his voice made Janey’s heart break.

“No – wait! Aleph,” Janey started, looking down, but she didn’t have the chance to finish, as her grandfather portaled her away, and she felt herself under the spreading canopy of her grandparents’ belajoun tree. “Janey!” she could hear her other family members cry out – her mother, father, brother, and all the rest.

“I remember everything, Ino,” Janey whispered, even as her tears fell, in pain.

“I know, my dear,” he replied in a low voice, “and I’m sorry for this.” He placed one hand over her forehead, and Janey could feel her thoughts muddle and fade as she felt the spreading warmth of Lethe sleep, from him to her.

“No... no...” she moaned, the face of her son, the figures of her five other children, and the image of the dual creatures curled tightly on the ground – slipping away, “don’t make me forget... please...” Janey trailed off, fighting it, and fell asleep.

Then she woke up nine months later, remembering nothing.

As twenty-three year old Janey passed through the portal in the belajoun tree, she broke through her grandfather’s Lethe sleep, and the memory of what happened seven years ago in that hidden cave came back in a torrent. She realized that her mind had been working through the Lethe sleep over those years as she slept. It had pieced the broken memory and turned it into forgotten dreams that left her tired and haunted but otherwise unharmed, testing to see what she could handle until she was ready to have all of it.

But Janey was not the sixteen year old girl that she once was. As the memory of that day – and the sleeping knowledge that awoke in her on that day – returned, she was not hurt by any of it.

Instead, it made her stronger.

She stepped through, arriving on the other side. Even though it had been seven years, everything still felt like familiar ground, as she stood on a vast field of white hazel herb found only on her paternal grandparents’ island. The sun, huge and orange, was setting on that part of the world – an unmapped part of Earth and yet distinctly apart from Earth, all at the same time. Her cobalt blue eyes bright with tears, she saw across from her, a short distance away, the twin of the park’s lone belajoun tree. And, for the very first time as Janey Babson, she sent, her spirit angry and triumphant:

I remember – when I was LILITH.