

11 Blind Date: Part II

As the little, autonomous car sped towards the metal and glass of downtown Dallas, twenty-six year old Janey Babson leaned back into her seat, her eyes closed as she let the jet lag that threatened her New Year’s Eve celebration with her family take over a little bit. But as the car emerged from one of the covered thoroughfares, the bright lights of the city cut through her closed eyelids. Her eyes blinked open, momentarily blinded, and she was reminded of that day, three years ago, when she finally let Lilith go.

#

When Zaia returned to Janey and Rifan from the darkness, Zoey felt the change. As the celestial pocket dimension in Hell Actual collapsed around them, Zoey portaled them all to the surface of Cora and Setebos’ island. Shocked, Zaia and Rifan barely had time to process what had happened, even as Janey, holding onto both of them, sent a torrent of information, when a massive shimmer appeared above. Zaia and Rifan stared as it expanded into a descending bubble. Once it reached the ground, it burst in a flash of light, and the angels Baraqel and Kokabiel, the nephilim children, and the Beatrice Cora stood before them, under the clear, dawn sky, from which two other angels descended.

“Ariel! Setebos!” Baraqel and Kokabiel greeted, reaching out their hands to their fellow celestial brethren.

“Ma!” Janey’s children saw her and took off running. They embraced her in a loud, chaotic mob, and then, seeing their grandparents awake for the first time in their lives, their exuberance spilled over and they embraced them too, sending their relief and love to them as well.

“Ah!” Zaia and Rifan received these extraordinary children’s emotional outpouring, and they found themselves simultaneously laughing and crying, overwhelmed with amazement and joy.

When Zaia had a chance to compose herself, she reached out with an arm that no longer felt pain and touched her daughter’s face. “Lilith, my girl,” she said, her clear blue eyes still brimming with tears, “your children are beautiful.”

After a time, they all settled down, sitting underneath the spreading branches of the island’s belajoun tree, on rugs and cushions summoned by Cora and Setebos. The children sat with their parents and Kokabiel, and Zaia and Rifan sat next to them. Zoey sat with Cora and Setebos, and sitting alone was Ariel, still the patriarch of Janey’s family.

“As much as we would like to stay here longer,” Ariel said, “this moment is only a brief respite from the consequences of the Reboot, and it’s almost time for all of us to leave Cora and Setebos’ hospitality. Kokabiel and Baraqel, you are both restored to your original, unfallen status and, as such, are to report to Central.”

Janey glanced at Kokabiel and Baraqel, but their expressions were unreadable.

Ariel leveled his eyes at Zaia. “With your return from Hell’s thrall, Zaia, both you and Rifan are now Heaven-bound, to report to Sacred Space. Considering what you both endured in Hell Actual, I believe your time in Mount Purgatory is expedited.”

Zaia, her mind filled with extraordinary knowledge, asked, “So it’s true – Rifan and I are really dead?”

“Yes.”

“But how can I feel like I’m alive? Isn’t my daughter alive?”

Ariel replied, “This place is unique, Zaia. Only on this island are the living and the dead the same. But the dead cannot stay here. Also, your process post-death isn’t finished. You and Rifan need to move on.”

Zaia wanted to protest, but she knew the truth of Ariel’s words. The veracity and certainty of the knowledge in her head confirmed it. “What of my daughter? And my grandchildren?”

“Janey is a living human,” Ariel said, answering the first question, “and at twenty-three years old, she still has a long life ahead of her.” He paused. “All Janey needs to do is live her life.”

“Be happy and be free,” Zaia said, recalling her daughter’s words in her mind. She smiled, bittersweet. “I wish I had that time with her, when I was alive.”

“Ma,” Janey began.

“It’s okay, Lilith,” she said, turning to her daughter. “I’m happy that you got a second chance to have the life that you deserve.” She turned back to Ariel. “But my grandchildren – they are immortal, yes? What happens to them?”

Setebos glanced at Ariel, who nodded. “Zaia,” Setebos answered, “there are other nephilim, but only your grandchildren and one other child were born of Beatrices.”

“Who is the other child?” Zaia asked.

“His name is Halim,” Cora replied. “He was only a baby when he became a human and died at the Reboot. He’s with his mother and father in Sacred Space.”

Aleph glanced sharply at Cora but said nothing.

“Cora and I monitor the nephilim in the world, and they are able to control their energy signatures, for good or ill, to live amongst humans,” Setebos continued. “But your grandchildren’s angel-Beatrice hybrid energy can’t be contained. Even if we were to do extraordinary means to isolate the children from humans, like allow them to sequester here forever, that is neither sustainable nor ethical, even if the children willingly choose to do so.”

Baraqel frowned. “Be happy – be free,” he suddenly said. “They can’t do that anywhere beyond this island.” He remembered what Ariel had once said, many years ago. “But they can be free beyond Earth.”

Setebos replied, “Yes. They can be free outside of Earth, anywhere else in the universe.”

“But – by themselves?” Janey’s face grew alarmed. “They’re only children, Ino!” she protested. “Baraqel!”

Baraqel stared into Janey’s outraged, blue eyes. “They only stayed like children because of me – of being in stasis for too long, both before the Reboot and after.” He looked towards his children, seeing the barely hidden anxiety in their faces, children who had never known any other place than Earth but were willing to obey what was best. He made a decision. “So I’ll go with them, Lilith.” He saw surprise and relief wash over them.

Janey stared at him. “Baraqel –”

“Lilith,” he interrupted, “just like our children, I don’t have a place here on Earth. And it’s about time I act like their father, don’t you think?” He looked at Ariel. “I wouldn’t feel right, reporting to Central, while my children feel lost in a universe that I helped create, Ariel.”

Ariel looked thoughtful, as if listening to something far away. Then he replied, “Nothing’s been assigned to you yet. So it’s allowed as a permanent duty, Baraqel, if that’s your request.”

“It is.” Baraqel exhaled, and he looked at Janey and Kokabiel, who stared at him.

“Father,” the children began to speak, suddenly curious about what their next life would be.

Cora glanced at Setebos, and both seemed to come to the same conclusion. Setebos looked at the sky and said, “It’s a beautiful morning. Would you children like to fly around the island with me and your Ina Cora?”

All of the children were immediately distracted, and they looked at their parents, who nodded, smiling. They then sprang up and followed Cora and Setebos, excited to become hawks and eagles, except for Aleph, who noticed the strange tension between his parents and the one whom he still thought of as a second father. “Ma –”

But Janey said, “Go with Ina and Ino for now, Aleph. Okay?”

He looked at her. “Okay, Ma.” He stood up and reluctantly left.

Similarly, Zoey glanced at Ariel. “Zaia, Rifan, let’s walk around a bit and talk. I know you must have many questions for me and Ariel about Janey’s life.”

Zaia and Rifan, understanding what was meant by the impromptu stroll, gave their assent and, after another hug with Janey, left with Zoey and Ariel.

Janey waited until the others were sufficiently far away before she spoke what was on her mind. “You’re leaving us,” she said, speaking for herself and Kokabiel.

“Well,” Baraqel said, “no one said angels being stationed Earthside would be permanent. Even Kokabiel will be leaving, Lilith.”

Her face twisted a little, and Kokabiel replied, “Don’t be an ass, Baraqel.”

Baraqel smirked, shaking his head. “Not an asshole?”

Kokabiel suddenly punched his partner’s shoulder, hard. “You’ve been promoted – now you’re a whole ass.” But his voice wasn’t unkind.

Baraqel heard the affection underneath the words, even as he rubbed his shoulder. “Admit it, brother – you’ll miss me.”

“Stop it, both of you. You idiots.” Janey couldn’t help the tears from falling at that point, and she hit both of them before she wrapped one arm around Baraqel’s waist, another around Kokabiel’s.

“I’m sorry,” Baraqel said.

Janey sniffled. “You really are an ass, Baraqel.”

At that, Kokabiel laughed a little, and the three all held each other for as long as they could.

Zaia and Rifan were the first to leave.

They hugged their daughter and grandchildren, reluctant to part from them. Before the angels Baraqel and Kokabiel, Zaia and Rifan bowed, as was the custom of the Kamreti. Rifan said, “Thank you – thank you for taking care of our daughter.”

Kokabiel shook his head in wonder as Baraqel replied, “Zaia, Rifan – if anything, it was Lilith who took care of Kokabiel and me.”

Ariel and Zoey decided to bring Zaia and Rifan to the Mount Purgatory in person, so everyone bade them farewell as they left through Ariel’s portal in the middle of the hazel herb field, which closed with a soft shimmer behind them.

Baraqel and the children were to stay a little longer with Setebos and Cora. Under Cora’s tutelage, the children would further explore the extent of their nephil abilities, as well as how to harness

and control them. Meanwhile Baraqel and Setebos, two former Celestial Engineers and teammates in the Creation Battalion of the material universe, would plan what exactly Baraqel’s new duty would be, guiding his children out in the cosmos. Kokabiel would report to Central after sharing with Cora the pre-Reboot training he had done with the children.

That left Janey to return to Dallas.

Janey hugged her family goodbye, one by one. When she got to Aleph, he held her longer than her other children. In a quiet voice he said, “You came back, Ma, like you promised, but now you have to leave – it’s not fair.”

“Aleph.” She swayed back and forth as she held him, as if he was still her little boy, but she knew nothing she could say would deny what he was feeling. For he, of all her children, was most like her, and she felt the same way.

With a soft sigh, Aleph let his mother go, and he returned to his siblings.

Baraqel and Kokabiel, having already had their own one-on-one goodbyes with Janey, hung back.

In the same spot as Ariel, Cora opened a portal. But even as Janey stood before it, she couldn’t help but worry that – once she returned to her regular life – her extraordinary experiences and her regained connections with her family would just evaporate like a dream. Then, from her periphery, she heard movement, and she glanced to see Cora look surprised, give an assessing look at Kokabiel, and smile with a little head nod.

Kokabiel strode towards the portal. “Can I tag along?” he asked her.

“What?” Janey stared at his amber eyes.

“Well,” he said, shrugging, “I don’t know what my next assignment will be, and I may not have another chance to take a peek at what this current world looks like. So, if you don’t mind, I’d like to tag along to your destination, and then I can report to Central from there.”

Unexpectedly, she felt reluctant for him to join her. “It’s not very exciting,” she blurted out.

Kokabiel snorted. “Janey, after what I’ve been through, ‘not exciting’ sounds pretty good to me.”

“Well – okay.”

Kokabiel stepped aside to let Janey enter first. Two steps later, she emerged from the lone belajoun tree in a nature reserve in Dallas, Texas, and Kokabiel followed immediately behind her, with Cora’s portal shimmering closed behind them.

Everything was as she had left it: the gaudy orange vest, battered work gloves, rumpled blue ADE shirt, and a half-filled trash bag filled with litter. She felt oddly embarrassed by that, but Kokabiel didn't even see it, as he looked around, sensing the difference in time and place. Janey noticed it, too: unlike the clear sky of a late afternoon at the island, it felt like the same cloudy October mid-day from which she had left. Barely seen in the leaf litter was her discarded metallic comm. She picked it up and checked the time.

“Janey? Are you okay?” Kokabiel asked, noticing her stunned expression.

She looked up. “I've only been gone for five minutes,” she said. She shook her head, gobsmacked. “The most life-changing event that has ever happened to me, and it's only been five minutes in my regular life. How crazy is that?”

“Janey –”

“I'm fine, I'm fine.” She shook her head again. “It's been too long. When my family used to have annual visits to the island, we had time dilation as well. I'm just not used to it anymore.” She stared at her comm for a second, wondering what to do with it, and then remembered that she was back in 21st century urban life. She placed it back behind her ear; it felt weird and foreign. “So,” she said, “what do you think?”

“It's busy,” he said. “And loud. The sky is filled with packets of information, zinging all over the place.” He pointed to her ear. “From devices like that. How do you ever rest?”

Janey smiled at his question. “I'm human,” she said, “and humans adapt. We get used to it.”

“Hmmm. Well, let's get a better vantage point.” He flew up, becoming ethereal as he hovered above the treetops.

Janey's eyes followed his ascent, and she remained looking up. Among the ordinariness of her world, Kokabiel's presence became extraordinary again: his tall, lithe form, glowing white-silver; his aquiline wings and long hair the color of smoke and ash. *An angel*, she thought. *He's an angel.*

Suddenly, Janey's comm began to ring. Startled, she fumbled at first, before remembering how to answer it. “Yes?” she said.

“Hello, Ms. Babson? This is Ranger Escobedo. I noticed that your feed dropped, so I called you. Is everything all right?”

“What? Oh – yes, I'm fine. Just... a technical difficulty.”

“Okay, then. Well, it's nearly noon. We'll be reconvening for lunch at the visitor center in five minutes.”

“Oh. Okay. Thank you.” When she disconnected, her virtual map appeared, and she saw the blue dots indicating her other team mates, slowly moving toward one area of the map not too far away.

Overhearing her conversation, Kokabiel touched back down and became embodied. “You’re at work,” he said, looking at her through the holographic display.

“Yes,” she said. She sighed. “Back to reality.” She tapped the comm to mute the map.

He nodded. “Then I should go.” He twisted his hand, and a new, silvery shimmer appeared from the belajoun behind him. He turned to her one last time, and Janey went to him for one last embrace.

“I didn’t forget you,” she said, her face pressed against him. She could hear the rhythm of his breathing, the beating of his heart.

“Technically, you did,” he replied. “And you say I’m your best friend.”

“Kokabiel!” She pulled back, a little angry, but was startled to see his tears.

“You remembered – in time,” he said. “But I never forgot you.” He smiled, and Janey was reminded of his somber eyes when he stood before her bedroom door, when she was a much younger Lilith. “For how could I forget you,” he said, “when I love you?”

“Kokabiel...”

“So,” he continued, “promise me that you won’t wait for me or Baraqel.”

She stared at him. “What?”

“Don’t be like your grandmother Zoey, waiting till the end of her life for Ariel. You already had a life with us – as Lilith. But you’re Janey now. You’re young, with a full life ahead of you.”

She frowned. “Why are you —”

But Kokabiel wasn’t listening. “Be happy – be free. You gave that to us. Our Beatrice. Forever our Beatrice. But now you get to live your own life, for yourself.”

Janey stood, silent. Then her anger turned to fury. “Shut up,” she said. She pushed him away. “Shut up!” she said, louder. “You don’t get to tell me what to do, what to feel. Dammit, Kokabiel, you sound like Baraqel! Even he didn’t tell me that! Is that why you came along – to tell me this bullshit?”

Kokabiel looked at her with dismay. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Well, guess what – you DID!” She shook her head. “Maybe because you and Baraqel aren’t human, but that’s NOT how human emotions work! I know that you and Baraqel can never be part of my life, but that doesn’t make me stop wanting it! And even if it hurts to feel this way, then at least

it’ll remind me that – that I still love you!” She threw her hands up. “GOD! Idiots! Idiots to the very end!”

Kokabiel came to her then. He swept her up and kissed her – long, hungry kisses, as if he had been starved all of his life. Janey responded, angrily at first but then passionately. Suddenly, he turned away, as if staying any longer would be an irresistible temptation, and strode into the portal.

It disappeared before Janey even had a chance to reach out to him again, her hand landing painfully against the rough, old trunk of a tree that shouldn’t even had existed in her world.

#

Am, crap, Janey thought, as she peered outside the car window. Even with the efficient routing of the autonomous car, it was still land-based, and the land was clogged with revelers out and about for the last hours of the year 2059. After inching towards downtown, she wasn’t surprised that her comm rang with the distinct tone of her brother.

“Hey, where ARE you?” Eddie asked, his voice barely heard over the din of party sounds.

“Stuck in traffic,” Janey said. “Seriously, it’s been stop-and-go for the past hour. I mean, I can see the building from here, but the way it’s going, it’s gonna be another thirty minutes, at least.”

Eddie gave an exasperated sigh. “Of all days –” he began, but stopped. “Okay, just get here as soon as you can.”

“Why? What’s the rush? It’s only 10:30. Isn’t Miriam’s shower supposed to go well after midnight?”

“Yes, but –” He stopped himself again.

“EDDIE. What are you not telling me?”

“Well – remember that guy I said I invited? He just left.”

“So?”

“So you missed him!”

Janey smirked. “Again – SO?”

“He’s a really good guy, Janey.”

She snorted. “Eddie, the last thing I need is for my so-called big brother to set me up on a blind date with a complete stranger.”

“But he’s not –” Eddie suddenly stopped himself yet again. Then he sent.

Janey stared ahead of her as she received her brother’s sending. *No way*, she thought. *No fucking WAY*. “Why the HELL didn’t you tell me this EARLIER?” she yelled.

“I didn’t want you to be sad if he didn’t show up!” Eddie replied, distraught. “Janey –”

“Shut up,” she said, rapidly keying into the car’s control pad instructions to return to the Adebayos’ house. “I’m coming.”

“How?”

“By foot.” Janey tapped her comm, disconnecting the call. She got out of the car, secured its door, and took off running.

It had taken Janey three years to move on.

For the first two years, she passed on overtime at work in order to take college classes. Mimicking her life when she caught up with her high school peers in order to graduate on time, Janey took four years’ worth of coursework in two years. Her life was work, school, sleep.

And while asleep, Janey received in her dreams Baraqel’s brief updates. They were like video postcards from interstellar space. Massive gas planets orbiting hot blue stars. Icy rocky planets around bloated red giants. Binary systems wherein one star danced around another like lovers – or enemies. All the while, her nephil children had changed their forms, not only to survive but thrive in their travels with their father. Even though they barely looked human, they were still beautiful in their transformed space-faring bodies. Baraqel would never send words: just surreal images, haunting sounds, and emotions alternating between joyous and bittersweet. But as the months and then years wore on, the messages arrived less often until she would wake up, wondering if what she had dreamt was from Baraqel or just her own brain, throwing its own little movies in the night.

A week after Janey received her Bachelor’s degree in General Studies, she took a leave of absence from work. For one year, she was on her own version of far-ranging exploration, to see the universe of humanity – the good, the bad, and everything in between. Just like Baraqel, she would sometimes send snapshots of her journeys to Eddie and her parents, AJ and David. But more often than not, she would just send a ping – to show that she was still alive and well – as she kept the details of her travels private: to reflect on her experiences, to let them settle and become her own. Conversely, they respected her privacy, keeping minimal communication during her leave except for important news, like Miriam’s pregnancy.

So she had no idea what Eddie had encountered before she had returned to Dallas.

#

As Eddie arrived at ADE’s lobby, he saw a man checking out from his hotel room. At first, Eddie thought nothing of it – many out of town clients, freelancers, and partners chose to stay at ADE’s on-site hotel for convenience sake, especially if ADE was footing the bill. But then Eddie saw

a young boy shyly clinging by his side, holding a stuffed animal. Again, that wasn't too unusual – ADE provided courtesy childcare as well. However, he found himself staring as he recognized the color of the boy's energy signature and then the man's.

The boy, being stared at, made a little scared sound, and his father glanced at his son, saying, “What's wrong?” Then he saw Eddie, wary at first, but then his eyes widened in stunned realization.

Eddie blurted out, “Don't go!”

#

Janey weaved through too many vehicles, too many people, on a frigid New Year's Eve night. Dressed for a car ride, her coat was too thin to keep her warm, her shoes not waterproofed enough to keep her feet dry from the frigid post-rain puddles. Her labored breaths created instant condensation clouds; her eyes, ears, and hands stung in the cold air, and her feet ached. But she continued to run, grateful that her body was already conditioned for physical exertions such as this. In twenty minutes, she had arrived in ADE's bright, marble lobby, panting hard as everything hurt with a deep-seated ache. *I'm here*, she sent. *Oh! Miriam and Isaac –*

Don't worry, Eddie replied. *They'll understand.*

How? They don't know what our family's really like yet!

So I'll tell them.

Eddie –

Janey, just go! We'll see you later.

On wobbly legs, she went to the bank of elevators. Forcing her hand not to shake, she placed it on one of the elevator touchpads. It recognized her fingerprints from its database of pre-screened ADE visitors and employees, and one of the elevator doors slid open. Instead of choosing the rooftop level, where St. Augustine's was, she chose the tenth floor. Alone during her ride up, she recovered a little from her frigid run and warmed up enough to remove her coat. At the tenth floor, she stepped onto a quiet corridor (for who else would be in a company-only hotel on New Year's Eve?), walked down until she reached the other side, where a floor-to-ceiling reinforced window showed Reunion Tower in the near distance, and turned left. She stared at the door number that her brother had sent in her head and knocked.

She heard soft footfalls approach from the other side. Latches disengaged and the door opened. She looked up at him, looking exactly as she remembered, albeit barefoot in black slacks and a half-buttoned white dress shirt. “So,” she said. “You're human now.”

The man who used to be the angel Kokabiel replied, “Yes.” He paused. “Your brother told you.”

“Yes.”

He nodded and, without another word, stepped aside to let Janey in. He closed the door behind them and then held out his hand for Janey’s coat. As she removed her shoes and peeled off her sodden socks, he draped her coat onto the nearest chair in the one-bedroom suite. Still silent, he led her to the closed bedroom door, opened it, and stepped aside again.

Sleeping soundly, in the middle of a king sized bed, was Aleph – just a four year old human boy.

Janey exhaled sharply, barely stifling an outburst. Kokabiel placed his finger on his lips; she nodded. Slowly, quietly, Janey went inside and sat down on the carpeted floor next to the bed as Kokabiel closed the door, staying outside in the living room. Alone with her son, she saw his familiar facial profile, the rise and fall of his little chest underneath his flannel pajamas, and little hands clutching a stuffed sparrowhawk. In her head, she replayed what Eddie had sent – what went through her head the entire time she ran desperately through the crowded, frigid streets to reach this room, as she sent to the man on the other side of the bedroom door, *So that’s why you disappeared.*

#

In ADE’s lobby, Eddie recognized the Lilith energy in little Aleph, and with Janey having sent to him what had happened to her within their grandparents’ island three years ago, Eddie even recognized the silver energy and physical appearance of Kokabiel with the man standing in front of him.

And based on his shocked reaction to Eddie, Kokabiel’s emotional color exploding in red alarm, he recognized Eddie’s shared energy with Janey as well.

Eddie blurted out, “Don’t go!” which sounded very strange to the lobby staff. Within those words, he had also sent, an incoherent blast of where Janey was, what she had been going through for the past three years, and what was happening later in the evening. He could see Kokabiel debate silently with himself and, after a brief internal struggle, he sighed. “One more night,” he said, “but you’re paying.”

“Deal.” As Eddie took care of the transaction, he noticed that the name registered to the hotel room was “Nikolas Miranda.”

Meanwhile, Kokabiel kneeled down to the little boy, saying, “We have to stay for one more day, okay? Daddy has to go to a grown-up thing this evening, but we’ll get Miss Pat to babysit you again. You like Miss Pat, remember?”

Aleph frowned, obviously bothered by the change in schedule. “But you said we’re gonna go home today.”

“I know.”

“But I miss Tiny.”

Eddie glanced at Kokabiel, who mouthed *our dog*.

“He’ll be fine,” Kokabiel said. “He’s having fun at the dog sitter.”

“But –”

“And it’ll be New Year’s with fireworks tonight. You can stay up, and you and Miss Pat can see it from our room window, right in front of you.”

Aleph chewed his lip, thinking. “Will you be back to watch with us?”

“Sure.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Aleph hugged his stuffed sparrowhawk. “Okay, Daddy.”

With the room taken care of for one more night and Kokabiel added to the registry of the invitees, Eddie was reluctant to leave, but he still had much to do for Miriam’s baby shower preparation. “You’ll be there, right?” he said, watching Kokabiel and Aleph walk back to the bank of elevators with their bags.

Kokabiel glanced back, his amber eyes stern. “I’ll be there.”

At 8:00PM, Kokabiel arrived in the middle of a boisterous party, and Eddie could tell that Kokabiel was not the type of person to enjoy it – just like his sister Janey.

After congratulations to the expectant mother and a gauntlet of more introductions and pleasantries, Kokabiel gravitated to the quietest part of St. Augustine’s, and yet plenty of Eddie’s, Miriam’s, or Isaac’s friends and family members found him because he was striking in appearance. Even just wearing basic black slacks and a white long-sleeved button-up, Kokabiel stood out: the tallest person there, with amber eyes and long hair the color of bluish gray mixed with smoky brown, tied in a no-nonsense ponytail. Soon, information about the handsome visitor circulated among the party-goers. Nikolas Miranda was twenty-eight years old, an only child to parents who died while in

college. He graduated with university degrees in audio engineering and music, and he had worked in his field even when he was still in college. He had a college sweetheart and became a father at age twenty-four, but the mother of his son tragically died from the last flu pandemic, leaving him a single parent.

Of course, Eddie knew all of that backstory was fabricated.

“You’re still young and handsome! You should find a good woman, get a mother for your son,” some well-meaning party guests said, a few even speaking in flirty tones.

Kokabiel smiled tightly, holding up his drink, and suffered through their fascinated attentions.

More than once Miriam and Isaac pulled Eddie aside, asking, “Who is he again?”

“Friend of the family,” Eddie said again. “We lost touch a long time ago, but turns out he’s in town, and I ran into him this morning.”

“Why haven’t we heard of him before?” Isaac asked, and Eddie would have to say, “I’ll explain later.”

A little after 10:00PM, Eddie was finally able to sit down with Kokabiel, saying, “I’m sorry – I didn’t mean to leave you here all by yourself. And I don’t know what’s holding Janey up.”

Kokabiel shrugged, gesturing outward with his second glass filled with top shelf tequila. “Probably traffic,” he said. “It is New Year’s Eve, at the end of one decade, beginning of another. A momentous occasion.”

Eddie looked around, and, ironically, the din of the party gave them some audio privacy. “I meant to ask –”

“How did Aleph and I become human?” Kokabiel finished for him.

“Yeah. Human like – well – like Janey and I are human. Human, but with sending and seeing the color of people’s energy.”

“Right.” Kokabiel took a sip from his glass, his eyes assessing to make sure that no one was paying attention to them. “Just before Aleph was to leave Earth with his father and siblings, he finally spoke up. He missed his human mother. Hearing about Halim’s changeover gave him courage to ask Baraqel if he could become human too – so that he could stay on Earth and be with her.”

Eddie stared at him. “How did Baraqel respond?”

“Saddened. But not surprised. Aleph, more than any of his siblings, is the most like his mother, the most human. And Baraqel only wants his son to be happy, so he agreed to it and contacted Ariel and Mara, Halim’s mother.” Kokabiel paused and took a sip from his glass again. “But the change represses his nephil memories, since he’ll technically be reincarnated, so they said the best course

would be for Aleph to be a human baby, grow up in human society, and then connect with Janey when his memories return. Janey regained hers at twenty-three, the biological age of Lilith before the Reboot, so Ariel expects Aleph’s will return when he’s sixteen.”

Eddie realized what that meant. “Since Baraqel would be with the rest of his children, and Janey would be out of the loop, living her own life until Aleph’s of age, then logically the person who would raise him –”

“Would be me. And, no, I wasn’t ordered to. I volunteered.”

“And your memories stayed intact?”

He shrugged. “Angels are sentient intelligence. So even with the change, we keep our memories – Miranda becoming Malech, Halim’s father, is precedent for that. But anything celestial – like immortality, time and space traveling, flying –” Kokabiel made a gesture with his free hand indicating *Poof. Gone.*

“You... sacrificed so much.”

“No. Not really.”

Eddie blinked. “Huh?”

“Look,” Kokabiel said, “if Janey shared what she knew of me to you, then you know that I had mixed feelings about being a celestial. Even before being stationed Earthside, I always felt out of place in my existence. But taking care of Aleph – I’ve always loved him as if he were my own son. And with becoming human, well, it’s normal for humans to feel out of place in their existence, to make it up as you go along. So it’s nice not to feel like a freak just because I’m kinda messed up in my head.”

“Oh.” Eddie frowned. “Okay, but why were you reluctant to say yes when I asked you to stay?”

Kokabiel looked at Eddie as if he were an idiot. “Other than the fact that I’m kinda messed up in my head?” He took another sip and continued. “Because it’s too early. Aleph’s only four years old. His mother’ll be a complete stranger to him; wouldn’t that hurt her? Besides, from what you’ve just sent me, she’s still working out what it means to be Janey instead of a Lilith-plus. I don’t want to make her life any more complicated than it already is.”

That got Eddie angry. “Well, that’s arrogant as hell. She MISSES you. She MISSES her son. Shouldn’t you let Janey decide for herself whether she thinks it’s too early to have you and Aleph in her life?”

Kokabiel drained his glass and set it down on a nearby bistro table. “Eddie.”

“WHAT.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

Eddie stared at him. “Oh. Right.” He looked around. “What time is it, anyway?”

Suddenly, Kokabiel tapped his comm behind his left ear. “Hello? Yes?” He paused, listening. “Oh, okay. No, it’s no trouble. I’ll be there.” He tapped his comm again, disconnecting. “Well, I’m off.”

“What?” Eddie checked his own comm. “But it’s only 10:30!”

“Yes,” Kokabiel said, pushing away from the table, “and a four year old boy just woke up from a nightmare, hysterically crying for his daddy, and Miss Pat is trying not to freak out. Miss Pat has gone above and beyond the call of duty, methinks, and deserves the rest of the night off.” He stood up, moved his chair back to the table, and picked up his empty glass to return to the bar counter.

“But what about Janey?”

Kokabiel looked at Eddie. “If she’s still coming, tell her whatever you like. You know my room number.”

Then Eddie saw Kokabiel negotiating pleasantries and goodbyes, and left. *Dammit, Janey.* He tapped his comm, and when it picked up, he tried not to yell. “Hey, where ARE you?”

#

Light-headed, Janey rested her head against the edge of the bed. *Ah, I need to eat.* The last thing she ate was cherry cobbler with ice cream at Lilian’s, hours ago. She began to stand up but noticed that Aleph’s stuffed sparrowhawk had slipped from his hands. Carefully, she placed it back, lightly touching his fingers. *So little,* she thought, remembering when he was sixteen – a young man already. Then she stood up, wobbling slightly, and – slowly and quietly again – left the bedroom, closing the door softly behind her. Turning around, she saw Kokabiel, changed into gray sweatpants and a plain white T-shirt, sitting cross legged in front of the balcony floor-to-ceiling window, eating fast-food pepperoni pizza from a large open box.

He glanced up at her and then looked back to the window. “Hungry?”

Janey tried not to stare. “Where’d the pizza come from?” She walked over and sat down, the pizza box between them.

“A teenage girl had been babysitting Aleph. Even in the latter half of the 21st century, teenagers and pizza exist in a symbiotic relationship. Anyways, it’d be a shame to waste it, and I wasn’t really that hungry with everybody peppering me with questions at that party. But now I’m starving.” He

took out another slice, folded it in half, and began to tear into it when he noticed Janey staring at him. “What?”

“I just realized that I’ve actually never seen you eat before.”

He shrugged. “Makes sense. The last time you saw me, I was still an angel, so I didn’t have to. But now?” He took a big bite, chewed thoughtfully, and swallowed. “Necessary and delicious.”

Janey nodded. Copying Kokabiel, she folded her slice and ate. They ate in silence, and by the second slice, she wasn’t light-headed anymore.

“Aleph still asleep?” he asked. He handed her a napkin when it looked like she was finished eating.

“Yes.” She wiped her fingers and mouth and set the used napkin in the now-empty pizza box.

“Hmmm. I know he wanted to see the New Year’s fireworks, but he’s had a rough evening. I’ll let the little guy sleep and just get yelled at tomorrow morning.”

“Yelled? At? ALEPH?”

Kokabiel chuckled. “He’s a lot like you, Janey. It’s obvious he’s your kid.”

She looked at him. “And you? What are you to my kid?”

He took so long to answer that Janey was about to ask again. “I’m his dad.” He stood up. “I’m gonna get something to drink. Want anything?”

“What do you have?”

Kokabiel went to the kitchenette, washed his hands, and checked the fridge. “Water, milk, sweet tea, and beer.”

Even though Janey was still a light-weight when it came to alcohol, she felt that she needed something stronger than water, milk, and sweet tea. “What kind of beer?”

“Corona.”

“Yes, please.”

Kokabiel returned with two opened bottles and handed one to Janey. “Here’s another thing you’ve never seen me do,” he said, and he took a long draft of beer.

Janey nodded again, and she took a tentative sip. Then she asked, carefully, “Did it hurt?”

“Did what hurt?”

“The changeover. For you and Aleph,”

He regarded his half-drunk beer bottle. “I wish I could say it didn’t hurt,” he replied, “but I’d be lying.”

Janey began to speak but stopped herself.

He took a sip of beer and continued. “You know how Miranda became Malech – scoured to unfallenness in the Purgatorial Sea, reduced to the barest essence of what makes you YOU, and then having that become human?”

“Yes.”

“It was that, but I had it relatively easier since, unlike Miranda, I was no longer a fallen angel. Still, even restored as I was, the process was –” He paused. “Let’s just say that I wasn’t prepared for having death embedded into every part of me.”

Janey’s eyes widened. “Please,” she asked, “explain.”

He sighed. “Remember, back then, when you were pregnant with Dalet and Limeh and I yelled at you to stop talking as if you’re dying?” He saw her nod. “I didn’t understand that being human means having a clock, from the moment you’re born, that counts down to the end of your life.” He rubbed his thumb against his beer bottle, focusing on the cool condensation on his skin. “I was conscious when that death clock got put in me.” He paused. “Hurt like hell.”

“Kokabiel –” she began.

“It’s okay,” he said, interrupting her, “I’ve felt worse. But now I truly understand when you said that you were trying to leave a bit of you when you’re gone. The deeds humans do, the children they have – aware of their death, they just want to leave a legacy. Something to show that their mortal lives meant something once they’re gone. Something for those they leave behind to hold onto – especially when their death comes sooner than expected. Being a human father to Aleph taught me what you already knew.”

Janey stared at Kokabiel and then glanced behind them, at the closed bedroom door.

“Don’t worry. Ariel put Aleph in Lethe first, so he was unconscious for the whole process. He has no memory of it.” He shook his head, remembering. “Mara lifted Aleph – this tiny newborn human – from the Purgatorial Sea. Then Cora took care of him for his first year while I was learning how to be a human being out in the ordinary world. Due to time dilation, he was a year old when I returned after one month. That was surreal.” He shrugged. “Fortunately, I’m a fast study and could reasonably do everything that my official records said I could do.”

“Is that why Aleph is four years old, even though it’s been three years since the last time I saw either of you?”

“Yes.” He took another draft of his beer.

“And you kept his name? Aleph?”

“Sure. Why not? In this part of the world, it’s not too strange.”

“What about you? Your official name is Nikolas Miranda. So do you go by Nikolas? Or Kokabiel?”

He sighed again. “In my head it’s Kokabiel, but that’s not a normal name for humans in this part of the world, right? Yes, officially it’s Nikolas, but I don’t care for it. Ariel picked that out by the way, when he implanted my entire human life story in Earth’s official records. Whatever.” He shrugged, finished his beer, and stretched back to set the empty bottle on the coffee table behind them. “I’ve been called Kole as a nickname, which is acceptable. Nick, not so much.”

“Okay,” Janey said, “because I can’t think of you except as Kokabiel. But I’ll call you Kole in public.”

Kokabiel looked at her. “So. I take it you’ll be part of my life.”

Janey looked down at her barely-drunk beer. “Kokabiel,” she said, “the real reason I was running late is because I stopped by the nature reserve... where our tree is.”

He was silent.

“The belajoun tree. Where the portal was – remember? When I returned back to Dallas, and... you tagged along. And then you left... afterwards.” She paused. “I sent.” She looked up. “That I missed you.”

Kokabiel’s amber eyes bore into hers. “Janey,” he asked, “what am I to you?”

She inhaled, then exhaled. “You are,” she said, “the love of my life.”

The first of the New Year’s Day fireworks began exploding in front of them.

Kokabiel, deadpan, declared, “Well, that was great timing.”

They both stared at each other for another second and then burst out laughing.

“Oh my God, that was so cheesy!” Janey said. She leaned back to set her beer bottle on the coffee table.

“Which one?” Kokabiel asked. “What I said or what you said?” He pushed the pizza box out of the way.

“Both!” Janey sat up, and she was face to face with Kokabiel, who had moved, closing the distance between them but still leaving her some space.

“Happy New Year, Janey,” he said, not moving, as if still unsure.

“Happy New Year, my favorite idiot,” she replied. Then she reached for him, the emotional color of her intentions clear to Kokabiel, but he caught her hands in his. “Kokabiel?”

“Janey, I – God, I don’t know how to say it,” he stammered, suddenly shy.

She looked at him, a kaleidoscope of colors radiating from him through his silver energy signature: excitement, joy, desire, and – embarrassment? “Kokabiel,” she asked, carefully, “are you a virgin?”

He groaned, dropping his head.

“Ah,” Janey said, starting to draw back, “ah, I’m sorry. We can go slow –”

But Kokabiel held her hands firmly. “No.” He shook his head. “We’ve waited long enough... centuries....” He paused. “I... just don’t know how to start.”

Janey smiled, seeing the sweetness of his vulnerability. *Just like my mom and dad*, she thought, remembering how AJ Fitzpatrick and David Babson met. She leaned closer and tilted her head so that he could see her. “It’s okay, love,” she said. “Just follow my lead.” Then she moved forward and kissed him – long, hungry kisses – until he was lying on his back onto the carpet. Janey straddled him, her arms and hands cradling his head while his hands reflexively held her hips. Then she sat up and removed her hair tie, her long brown hair falling loosely to her shoulder blades.

Kokabiel stared at her, fascinated, when she unbuttoned and took off her shirt and then her bra. “Ah!” he gasped, but recovered enough to follow her lead. As he sat up, she moved off him, and he took off his T-shirt and his own hair tie, his smoky ash hair falling past broad, finely muscled shoulders. But then he saw her remove her jeans and panties in one step; focusing on the process lest his nervousness overwhelmed him, he followed her lead with his sweatpants and boxers.

But then he looked up at her as she returned to him, pushing him back as she straddled him again. She reached down, and he twitched as she held him steady and, with a gentle rhythm, lowered herself and let go. His hands on her hips again, he marveled as her body accommodated him, as he felt her from within for the first time, their warm bodies joined as one.

Janey carefully leaned forward, trembling a little as she rested her hands on his chest, and said, her voice breathless, “I think... you can figure out the rest.”

He sat up again, his hands sliding to her back, and he gently pushed, while his lips and tongue explored her nipples: yet another new sensation.

“Kokabiel,” she murmured, her hands in his hair, their bodies moving in tandem.

And they continued, neither leading nor following, as the New Year’s fireworks, the explosive sounds silenced by the room’s windows, remained unwatched.

Sometime later, Janey and Kokabiel took a shower, connecting again under the steam and water, and then set up the living room’s sofa bed to get some sleep. Wearing his T-shirt, Janey lay next

to Kokabiel, her head against his bare chest. Like three years ago, she could hear the rhythm of his breathing, the beating of his heart. Sated, with a little too much booze in him, Kokabiel was the first to fall asleep, and Janey felt his body relax underneath her, even as he held her in his sleep. Warm, lulled by Kokabiel’s breath and heartbeat, Janey also fell asleep. Then she had a dream.

In the dream, the nephil children were exploring a planet close enough to Earth’s conditions that they weren’t transformed into otherworldly creatures. But this time Janey noticed they looked older, and there were only five of them. Then she heard Baraqel’s voice.

“I’m sorry, love, for keeping what happened to Aleph and Kokabiel secret. I know you hate Need to Know. But even across the universe, I can sense that you know now. And what I want to say is this: as Lilith, you and I made a life together that I will always hold dear, no matter where I go. As Janey, you and Kokabiel deserve that same happiness. Take care of each other, take care of our son – yours, mine, and Kokabiel’s. Make a life together.”

“Ah,” Janey sighed out loud, feeling Baraqel’s bittersweet emotions in his voice, and she awoke, the room brighter with early morning sunlight. She had moved in her sleep, facing outward from her side of the bed. She blearily opened her eyes – and started.

Aleph was standing by her bedside. His cobalt blue eyes, glowing a little, peered into hers. In his little boy voice, he asked, “Mama?”

She stared at him, uncertain if she heard him right.

“Mama,” Aleph said, smiling, “you came back.”

“Kokabiel,” Janey said. She reached one hand back and shook the sleeping man beside her. “Kokabiel!”

“Hmmm?” He sounded groggy and a little hungover.

“He remembers!” Janey exclaimed. She sat up, opening her arms, and Aleph, without hesitation, moved forward for her hug, wrapping his little arms around her, one hand still holding his little stuffed sparrowhawk. She kissed Aleph’s hair, dark like her own. “Our boy remembers!”

Kokabiel was awake now. Sitting up, he peered down from behind Janey’s back, feeling strangely nervous. “Aleph,” he said, “do you know who I am?”

Ab! Janey froze, waiting for her son’s answer.

But Aleph looked up at Kokabiel, still smiling, and answered with the casual conviction of any four-year old, “Don’t be silly, Daddy. You’re my daddy here, like Mama, not my daddy far away.”

Janey felt Kokabiel’s breath against her neck as he exhaled hard, relieved. She turned towards him after Aleph wriggled out of her arms, suddenly amazed by the idea of a bed magically appearing in the middle of a living room, and climbed on top.

“That’s right, Aleph,” Kokabiel said, feeling Janey’s hand in his. “That’s exactly right.”

Forgetting last night’s missed fireworks, Aleph gleefully began to jump and down. He waved his arms, the little sparrowhawk flapping in his hand. His little body went higher and higher. Before the watchful eyes of his parents, he looked like a baby bird, learning how to fly.