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When Kokabiel woke up, he had a moment of sickening disorientation as he wondered where he was. Sentry barracks after the War in Heaven? Arboreal roost on Earth after punishing humans? Stasis dimension in Hell after the portal sealed behind him?

But then he felt the woman sleeping beside him.

Janey.

She was sleeping on her side, her back facing Kokabiel. He rolled over, moved her disheveled hair a little, and rested his head against the exposed nape of her head as he held her, skin touching skin. He breathed in her warm scent – sweet cinnamon with a little bit of earthy muskiness – and regained his bearings.

Sixteen years.

Kokabiel had been a human being for nineteen years.

In the first three years, it was just him and Aleph and, without Aleph, he would have felt lost in those early years. Kokabiel felt alienated from his human body; he felt like he was play-acting in his interactions with other human beings who weren't Aleph. Sometimes, he even had nightmares, when his very human brain would dredge up the more traumatic experiences of his prior life. He would wake up in a panic and, in the lonely confines of his room, spend the first few minutes of the morning concentrating on his breathing as he remembered who he was in this second life.

He was Aleph's father, and Aleph was his son.

Kokabiel leaned heavily into that identity, foregoing anything that would take him away from raising Aleph as a happy, little boy. Even though Kokabiel was busy in his freelanced audio engineer work, he always put Aleph first, turning down any project if it meant he couldn't be with his son at the end of the day or his son couldn't come along with him when at a remote location. Then Tiny joined them when he was a terrified stray, showing up on their doorstep one stormy late summer evening when Aleph turned four years old. Kokabiel found himself adopting the dog when he saw how happy Aleph was in having a puppy for his birthday.

For the first three years, Kokabiel's human life was his work and his simple little family, and he told himself that he was content with that.

Everything changed on New Year’s Eve sixteen years ago, when Kokabiel opened the door, saw Janey standing before him, and learned what it meant to be a flesh-and-blood human being.

In the days after, in a whirlwind of action, Janey officially introduced him and Aleph to her family, both in person (Eddie, Miriam, Isaac) and video link (AJ and David). Then, eschewing complex formality, Kokabiel and Janey married quietly through the county courthouse and decided where to live. Since Janey was returning to ADE, Kokabiel could work anywhere, and Aleph hadn’t started school yet, it made sense to live in Dallas. At first they stayed in the Adebayo home until, a month later, they moved into a larger house of their own, on the outskirts of the Metroplex, with enough private land for a dog – who looked to be a cross between a chow, a German shepherd, and a collie – to play.

But the larger house was also for a family to grow in.

Two weeks after Miriam and Eddie’s daughter Grace was born, Janey said to Kokabiel in the privacy of their bedroom, “It’s twins, love,” and he fell to his knees, wrapping his long arms around his wife’s waist. He leaned down into Janey’s abdomen, and while his human ears couldn’t hear the two heartbeats, his imagination could. Seven months later, Kokabiel and Janey’s children, Ellie and Stephen, were born, both having their father’s amber eyes. Their arrival was just in time for that year’s Day of the Dead family reunion on Cora and Setebos’ island. But other than that reminder of how different their family was from most humans, they were just like any family of five, plus the family dog.

The following years flew by as Kokabiel and Janey pursued their respective careers, raised their three kids, argued with each other, and made up. Meanwhile, their kids went to school, squabbled with each other, tried to get along, and grew up.

For most of that time, Tiny was there. He stayed up when Aleph overworked himself with school. He let Ellie hug him and cry when she experienced her first preteen crush break her heart. He lay next to Stephen when he recovered from complications to the flu. So when Kokabiel and Janey were told that Tiny had to be put down when the cancer had reached his brain, it was one of those rare times that Kokabiel wished that he had some of his former life’s power, to spare the pain of death from his two younger children. For while grief cut deeply for all of them, death had already touched Kokabiel, Janey, and Aleph in their previous life, but it was the first time death touched Stephen and Ellie. The twins were so shaken that there was no other dog after Tiny.

Thus Tiny wasn’t there, to see the boy who missed him that New Year’s Eve sixteen years ago become a twenty-year old university-graduated and Master’s level engineer. His wasn’t there to see

Aleph leave his hometown for training with NASA, to learn how to fly amongst the stars. But the rest of the family was there, including the former angel who gave up his immortality and was now a forty-four year old man, in order to see this boy be happy and free.

And to be with the woman who had captured his heart from the very first moment that he heard her.

Forty-two year old Janey Babson Miranda stirred, waking up. She felt the cadence of Kokabiel’s warm breath against the back of her neck, and she relaxed into him with a slight wriggle. Interlacing the fingers of her free hand with his, she softly rubbed his thumb with hers. “Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” Kokabiel said, his voice low, and then gave a sharp sigh.

Janey knew what that meant, as well as feeling him pressed against her. She smirked. “You’re incorrigible.” She felt him smile against her skin.

“And whose fault is that, I wonder,” he murmured, and he kissed her neck.

“Ah,” she said, feeling her body tingle. She unlaced her fingers and slid her hand between them, about to make some minor adjustments.

Then they heard their younger son Stephen yell from downstairs, “ELLIE! I TOLD YOU!”

“Ah,” Janey said, in a different tone.

“Maybe we can just ignore them,” Kokabiel said.

“NO, YOU DIDN’T!” Ellie replied, yelling, “AND STOP YELLING!”

“Nope,” Janey said. “Mood’s killed. And duty calls.” She turned, moved a few strands of Kokabiel’s long hair out of the way, and kissed him lightly, feeling the prickliness of his stubble. Then she got out of bed.

“Ah,” Kokabiel responded, his tone matching Janey’s. He rolled back onto his side of the bed, sighing, and forced himself to calm down, even as he saw her naked body pad over to their ensuite bathroom. “It’s likely something petty and stupid.”

Over the sounds of the toilet and then the bathroom sink, Janey replied, “They’re fifteen. They’re brother and sister. When is it NOT something petty and stupid?” She emerged from the bathroom and quickly threw on some clothes that were draped on a nearby chair. “Wash up. I’ll take care of it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Making her way downstairs, Janey followed the arguing sounds into the kitchen and saw her two younger children, the red of anger radiating out from both of them like waves of heat.

Stephen held a goopy whisk, his face outraged, the front of his shirt smudged with flour. Before him, on the kitchen’s center workspace, was a large bowl filled with a white, sticky, goo-like mass and various open containers of flour, sugar, milk, oil, and baking powder. Ellie was on the other side of the workspace. Her equally outraged face was dotted with whatever was on the whisk, which she had smeared with her hand in an angry attempt to wipe clean.

Janey, assessing the situation, asked, “Are you two seriously arguing over PANCAKES?”

“Mom!” Stephen said, looking aggrieved, “I told Ellie that I was gonna make pancakes today, but she’s a big fat PIG and ate ALL THE EGGS –”

“I DID NOT EAT –” Ellie yelled over him.

Janey made a loud, sharp hissing sound of irritation, and her two children stopped talking, having learned long ago that when their mother made that sound, it was a warning not to push her patience any further. “Ellie,” Janey said, “go and clean yourself off. And don’t come back until you’ve cooled down. Okay?”

Ellie frowned, still angry. But she said, “Okay, Mom,” and stalked off.

Janey turned to her son. “Stephen,” she said, “have you made homemade pancakes before?”

“No,” Stephen admitted. “But I found a recipe, and it needs eggs and – and ELLIE –”

Janey held up her hand, stopping him from getting himself angry again. “So why are you suddenly wanting to make homemade pancakes TODAY?”

Stephen frowned, looking much like his twin sister.

“Is it because it’s your brother’s favorite, and he’s leaving today?”

At that, Stephen’s face twisted, and Janey gently took his whisk and set it in the bowl. “Mom,” he said, but he didn’t know what else to say, so he sent.

Janey inhaled then exhaled, as she felt his wave of sadness, nostalgia, and worry. “I know,” she said. “I’ll miss him, too.” She looked at the bowl. “You know,” she said, “your grandpa’s pancake recipe actually doesn’t use eggs.”

“Really?”

“Really.” She reached up and tucked behind his ear stray strands of hair that had come loose from its hair tie; just like his sister’s, it was lighter than Janey’s hair but darker than Kokabiel’s. “So let’s see if we can work with what you have. Okay?”

Stephen nodded, looking like a little boy instead of the tall, lanky teenager that he was. “Okay, Mom.”

Janey helped her son salvage what he had until they had a good variation of David Babson’s recipe, and she showed him how to heat up the pan, put in a little oil to grease it, measure out the right amount of batter, and make a perfect pancake. By that time, Ellie had returned. Janey looked up and briefly sent her daughter what happened. Ellie teared up a little, nodded, and joined her twin, who was technically her little brother by fifteen minutes.

“Can I help?” Ellie asked.

He looked up. “Okay.”

Seeing the twins getting along, Janey was about to head back upstairs when she saw Kokabiel, dressed for errand-running, stop by the kitchen. “Aleph called,” he said. “He has more boxes than he thought he’d have, so I’m heading over.”

“Need any help?” Janey asked.

Kokabiel shook head. “He and I should be fine.”

She saw him leave, and she sighed. *Busy Saturday*, she thought. She continued her way back upstairs, to get ready for the day as well.

When Aleph and Kokabiel arrived by late morning, Janey was fully dressed, the kitchen was clean, and the pancakes were done. Just like his Uncle Eddie before, Aleph had cleared out his university apartment once he had completed his graduate program and his lease was up. But unlike his mother, Aleph had ten medium-sized boxes’ worth of papers, books, clothes, and household materials, to store away in his parents’ two-car garage that only housed one vehicle. Janey and the twins helped Aleph and Kokabiel unload the boxes from Kokabiel’s old-fashioned manually-driven van – a holdover when Kokabiel used to do live audio engineering, as well as the occasional instrumental performance, when he needed a stand-by vehicle to haul his gear.

“You know,” Janey said, after they had finished and were finally getting to a very late breakfast, “you could’ve moved your boxes BEFORE the day you’re supposed to leave for Houston, Aleph.”

“I know, Ma,” Aleph said, grinning, “but I like to live dangerously.” He kissed the top of her head as he passed by her and then sat down before the kitchen table, joining the rest of his family. His plate was piled high with Stephen’s pancakes. He shoveled a generous forkful in his mouth, chewed contemplatively, and declared, “Hey, good job, Stephen!” He shoveled another forkful.

“Thanks,” Stephen said, smiling.

Ellie added, “Mom helped,” and Stephen shot her an annoyed look.

“Still.” Aleph chewed happily and heartily. “What’s the recipe?”

Janey regarded her children, their youthful discussion creating a lively meal, and savored the last time they would all be together around that kitchen table. Aleph, looking the oldest she had ever seen him, had filled out: he was just as tall as Baraqel, his shoulders just as broad. Occasionally she, Kokabiel, and Aleph would still get emotional pings from Baraqel – *All well. Be well.* But Baraqel and the nephil children – who were no longer children – had their life, and Janey and her family had their own. Still, she thought, *Our son has grown up, Baraqel. You would be proud.* Stephen and Ellie were both a year younger than Aleph was when his physical development was frozen, but unlike their brother, they would become sixteen, seventeen, and so on – year after year growing up without impediment, and one day they, too, would launch from their childhood home and have lives of their own.

As if sensing her thoughts, Kokabiel sent, *Are you okay?*

I’m fine, she replied. *Just a bit of empty-nest melancholy. I’ll always think my babies are growing up too fast.*

He reached out and lightly touched her arm. *Some things don’t change.*

She smiled and nodded.

By early afternoon, a ride-share autonomous car pulled up, and Eddie and his sixteen year old daughter Grace got out.

“Hey, doofus,” he said, greeting his sister at the front door, careful not to crush a box in his hand.

“Hey, Doctor Dork,” Janey greeted in reply, hugging her brother. She then hugged her niece and opened the door wider, letting both in.

Eddie set down his suitcase by the door. Still dividing his time between overseeing projects for NASA’s Mars research arm in Houston and consulting for ADE’s applied VR team in Dallas, Eddie was coming along with Aleph in the corridor train trip to Houston later that afternoon. As for Grace, she and the twins were departing together in the evening, to spend their week-long Spring Break vacation with their California grandparents.

“Grace, your cousins are gaming in the living room if you want to join them,” Janey said.

“Okay, Auntie,” Grace replied in her soft, mellifluous voice. She set down her pack next to her dad’s suitcase and then left the adults behind.

Janey looked at what Eddie was holding. “What’s in the box?”

“Heh,” he said, “follow me.” He walked to the kitchen and set the box on the kitchen workspace. Then he opened it up and carefully lifted up a baker’s box labeled *Lilian’s* on one side.

“Is that –”

“Yes, ma’am,” Eddie declared. “It’s Lilian’s cherry cobbler.” He set it down next to the larger box. “You got any vanilla ice cream?”

She shook her head, chuckling. “I swear, you are ALWAYS eating. Why haven’t you blown up like a middle-aged balloon yet?”

“Two words,” Eddie said. “Miriam and Isaac. They’re keeping me healthy.”

“Technically, that’s seven words,” she said.

He rolled his eyes. “You’re such a doofus. But anyways, it’s not for me. It’s for you and your esteemed spouse. Speaking of which, where’s Kokabiel?”

“He’s in his studio, re-mixing a file. He said his client tried to go cheap with someone else, but it’s garbage, and the guy contacted him an hour ago in a panic. Kokabiel said it shouldn’t take too long.”

“Freelancer hours,” Eddie said.

“Yeah,” Janey said, smiling, “but it fits Kokabiel. Can you imagine him ever being an employee of someone? He even turned down a high-level salaried position at ADE Games.”

Eddie looked at her. “You and Kokabiel – you two really do fit well together.”

Her smile turned into a smirk. “In more ways than one.”

He scrunched his nose. “Ew, woman. I don’t wanna think of my little sister’s sex life.”

“Dork,” she said, lightly punching his shoulder. “And I’m only your little sister by ten minutes, Eddie.”

“Like I always say,” he replied, “you should’ve been more assertive if you wanted to be the older twin.”

She snorted. “I’m plenty assertive without having to fight for first place in the womb.” She put the cobbler in the refrigerator as Eddie leaned against the workspace tabletop. “If you’re not having cobbler, do you want anything?”

“You got any coffee?”

“Always.” From the always full carafe, she poured out two cups of coffee, put in two creams and two sugars in one of them, and handed it to Eddie. Standing in the kitchen, they could hear the raucous sounds of four young people, gaming in full VR kits. She said, “You mentioned me and Kokabiel, but how are you, Miriam, and Isaac?”

Eddie nodded into his coffee cup. “We’re good now.”

Janey looked at him.

“You’re checking to see if I’m lying, aren’t you,” he said, with a small smile.

“Sorry. It’s just... well, what with Grace’s abilities emerging just last month, it must’ve brought up past baggage.”

“You mean the fact that I had told Miriam and Isaac about how weird our family actually is – even though Isaac and I were already married and Miriam was carrying our child – ONLY because of what happened sixteen years ago? And that Miriam, Isaac, and Grace have never come along with me to the family reunions, for all of these years? Yeah – that came up again, when it looked like Grace is more like me than her mother.”

“Eddie –”

“But, fortunately for me, Miriam and Isaac forgave me, years ago, for keeping all of that secret. They love me. But more importantly, they love our daughter. They want what’s best for her. That’s why they’re letting Grace go with Stephen and Ellie, even knowing how they’re gonna travel this time.” He paused. “They’re just spooked, is all. But Grace said she wanted to go to the Day of the Dead reunion this year, and they said it’s okay with them.”

Janey blinked, surprised. “What about Miriam and Isaac? Will they ever go?”

Eddie sighed. “They don’t know. But if Grace wants her mom and uncle there, then I hope they’ll say yes. But I’m not gonna push it.”

Janey reached out and squeezed his hand.

Eddie squeezed back. “As I said, we’re good now – because we’re actually talking. It’ll just have to be baby steps for the next few months, Janey. And I’m all good with baby steps.” He shrugged. “Now drink your nasty black coffee before it gets cold. Bleah. How can you drink it like that?”

Janey laughed. “You mean, like a GROWN-UP?” She knocked it back as Eddie sipped his. “Go on and finish your kid coffee. Then see how our actual kids are doing. I bet you can show them a thing or two about clearing a level.”

Eddie smiled and then drained his cup. “What about you?”

“I’ll check on my esteemed spouse and make sure he hasn’t gone down the audio engineer rabbit hole.” Janey placed her cup in the sink and then walked out the kitchen-side backdoor, to the backyard.

Kokabiel’s studio was a large secondary building, built in their backyard but connected to the main house via a breezeway. Because Kokabiel was just mixing, not recording, Janey had no qualm in

lightly knocking on the door and then letting herself inside. Passing by studio monitors, mic stands, guitars, bass guitars, a drum kit, and a digital piano, Janey saw Kokabiel, headphones on and hunkered before a keyboard and two vid touchscreens. From the screens, she saw forty scrolling tracks of soundwave forms that looked so ugly that they may as well be recordings of random street noise. *This looks like a long one*, she thought. She quietly approached him and then sat down on a nearby chair, waiting for him to notice that she was there.

“I’m taking too long, aren’t I,” Kokabiel suddenly said. With quick finger strokes, he stopped the scrolling tracks and saved the changes. Then he took off his headphones, turning to Janey.

She shrugged. “How close to done are you?”

“Not even remotely. It’s so messed up that it’d be faster if they just re-record everything.” He stared at her. “Well, damn. Once I say it out loud, it’s pretty straightforward.” He touched his comm, tapped out a message, and sent it. Then he closed the file, shut down the program, and raised his arms over his head as he arched his back for a long, cat-like stretch.

She sat for a moment, admiring his still-lithe body. *My beautiful, foolish angel*, she thought. “You’re not going to get paid for telling your client to just start over,” she said.

“Don’t care,” he said. He settled back down after the stretch with a contented sigh. “It’s Saturday, it’s Aleph’s last day with us, and they’re taking me away from my family.”

“They’re also taking you away from cherry cobbler,” Janey said. “Grace and Eddie are already here, and Eddie brought cherry cobbler. From Lilian’s.”

“Well then,” Kokabiel said, smiling so that the faint crows’ feet edging his amber eyes crinkled a little. He stood up and extended a hand to Janey. “How can I resist that?”

When Kokabiel and Janey returned to the living room, Eddie, Stephen, Ellie, and Grace were playing, while Aleph was sitting on the sofa. But instead of watching the gameplay, Aleph was sitting back, his eyes closed, listening to the in-game music with a soft, sad smile.

“Kokabiel,” Janey said, recognizing the music, “it’s one of yours.”

The game itself was a third person exploration game, with plenty of action distributed throughout. But in one of the traveling sections, where the terrain was a vast, forested area under starlight, the music was a haunting, lonely melody – an interweaving of piano, choral voices, and echoing bells. It was a variation of what Kokabiel once heard a long time ago, in a previous lifetime.

“No, love,” he said to Janey, close to her ear. “It’s one of yours.”

When another ride-share autonomous car pulled up to the curb, everyone knew it was time for Aleph and Eddie to leave.

Eddie hugged Janey and her family. Then he hugged his daughter and said, “Have fun, okay sweetie?”

“I will, Pa,” she said. She smiled up at him, her eyes silver gray just like her father Eddie, her grandfather David, and great grandfather Setebos. “And... and stop worrying!”

“No chance, girly girl. It’s part of the ‘Father’ job description.” As Grace returned to her cousins, Eddie grabbed his suitcase and asked Aleph, “Ready?”

Shouldering his backpack, Aleph said, “Yes.” Then he turned to his family and, one by one, hugged everyone one last time. When he got to Janey, he held her longer than the others.

Understanding Aleph and Janey’s need for some privacy, Kokabiel beckoned Ellie, Stephen, and Grace to join him in the living room while Eddie walked to the waiting car.

In a quiet voice Aleph said, “You came back, Ma, like you promised, but now it’s me who has to leave. I’m sorry.”

She leaned back a little, her blue eyes meeting her son’s. “Why are you sorry?”

“You’re sad that I’m leaving.”

She smiled at that. “Of course, I am – that’s because I’ll miss you. But I’m also happy because you are your own person, making your own choices.” She paused. “And wherever you go, whatever you do, remember: your mama loves you. Forever and ever and ever.”

Aleph kissed her forehead and hugged her tighter. “I remember.”

Janey then let her oldest son go, waving goodbye to Eddie and Aleph through the open doorway until the car pulled away. Then she allowed herself to cry – soft, silent tears. Only when she couldn’t see the car in the far distance did she step back inside the house, closing the door behind her.

AJ and David had set the date of their grandchildren’s Spring Break vacation with them, long before anyone knew Aleph’s departure date. They had even offered to change the date, so that Janey and Kokabiel could stagger the departure of their children. Kokabiel deferred to Janey, and Janey declared, “No. This is the best day and time for all three, and we have to think of Eddie’s, Miriam’s, and Isaac’s schedules as well.”

Janey and Kokabiel played host to Stephen, Ellie, and Grace, answering the three teens’ questions about the family stories over dinner, including having Lilian’s cherry cobbler for dessert. They kept nothing secret since Stephen, Ellie, and Grace were now of age. So the twins were shocked

that Baraqel and Kokabiel never saw themselves as romantic rivals over their mother but as equal partners. Grace was surprised by that, as well as the fact that Janey had prior children, none were fathered by Kokabiel, they were half-human – and Aleph was one of them, before he became fully human.

Up to that point, Grace thought that Kokabiel had become a human because he fell in love with Janey, a human woman, and wanted to have a family, like from a fairy tale. But the fact that Janey already had a husband and family prior to Kokabiel was a shock. “My dad didn’t tell me that,” she said, her eyes as wide with surprise as an owl’s.

“I think he was just waiting for me to tell it,” Janey said. “It is my story to tell, not your dad’s. And your grandparents will have a lot more to tell about their own parents.”

“It’s pretty wild,” Ellie said.

“Even wilder than Uncle Kole and Auntie Janey?” Grace asked.

“Oh yeah,” Stephen said. “Ariel and Zoey. Cora and Setebos.”

Grace stared at them, then stared at her own arms.

Kokabiel, regarding his niece, said, “You’re not used to seeing it.”

She looked up. “Uncle Kole?”

“The energy signatures – the color.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I mean, my mom and Uncle Isaac can’t see it. I couldn’t until this year. If it weren’t for my dad and all of you, I’d think I was hallucinating.”

“And the Day of the Dead reunions – your dad says that you’ll be able to join us later this year. But I hope that your mom and uncle will come, too,” Janey said.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s still too much. They’re still kinda freaked out about all of this angel stuff. Honestly, my dad should’ve told them way before I was born – way before marrying Uncle Isaac.”

“I told your dad the same thing when he was dating Isaac,” Janey said, “but my brother can be a stubborn idiot that way.”

Kokabiel chuckled. “You really can’t get away from having stubborn idiots in your life, can you, love.”

Janey gave a small smile. “I suppose so.”

Grace looked puzzled, and Stephen and Ellie rolled their eyes, as if to say, *This again.*

“Sorry, Grace,” Kokabiel said. “Just a private joke between me and your auntie.”

Grace stared at him. “It still seems unreal,” she said, “that you were once an angel, Uncle Kole.”

He shrugged. “You know what? Some days, I feel the same way, too.”

“Does it feel weird,” she asked, “knowing what you used to be able to do but not being able to do it anymore?”

Stephen and Ellie both frowned, with Stephen saying, “Jeez, Grace –” but Janey made a small hiss sound, and he stopped talking.

Kokabiel gave a small head shake, smiling. “I’m a middle-aged man, Grace. That can apply to any middle-aged man who still thinks he’s a young man inside; if he tries to do the things that he could easily do in his twenties when he’s in his forties, that’s a world of pain right there. But to answer your question – yes, sometimes it does. Especially flying. Flying was amazing.” He paused. “But a very wise person once told me that humans adapt, and I’ve adapted. So if I could go back in time and have the choice of living as a powerful, forever-ageless celestial or living as a middle-aged husband and father with achy joints, I’d chose the achy joints.”

Janey grinned. “Aaaand I think you three need to go to the living room and play some VR lest my husband and I thoroughly disgust you with our middle-aged face sucking.”

“Oh my God – Auntie!” Grace exclaimed, as Stephen groaned and Ellie gave a long-suffering sigh.

Kokabiel saw them flee into the living room. “You know, all we’re going to do is clean up.”

“True,” Janey said, “but I can’t pass up a chance to embarrass teenagers. Their reactions are hilarious.”

He snorted. “You are a cruel, cruel woman.” Smiling, he stood up and began to clear the table.

As they finished cleaning up the kitchen, Janey said, “What you said to Grace – thank you.”

He glanced at her. “You already know all this, Janey.”

“Yes,” she replied, “but it’s nice to hear it out loud – especially to someone else who isn’t your wife.” She looked up at him.

He leaned over and kissed her softly. “Then I’ll remember to say it more often.”

With the leftovers put away and the kitchen cleaned, Janey and Kokabiel joined the kids in the living room. They weren’t gaming but talking, and at one point Kokabiel got one of his acoustic guitars from his studio. Listening to him, Grace asked why he was an audio engineer instead of a professional musician, and he replied, “Because while playing music feeds my soul, engineering feeds my belly.”

Janey touched her ear then, where her comm was, and glanced at the text that briefly hovered before her eyes. “Your grandfather is fifteen minutes out from his house. You kids should get ready to leave.”

Fifteen minutes later, Kokabiel and Janey waited for them before the front door. Since Grace had left her pack by the door, she shouldered it after she and Ellie joined them with Ellie’s pack. The last to arrive was Stephen, who looked a little teary.

“Look what Aleph left for me,” Stephen said, and he held up a little battered stuffed sparrowhawk.

“Oh, Stephen,” Janey said.

He shook his head, smiling, looking a lot like a young Kokabiel. “Asshole. Even hundreds of kilometers away, trying to make me cry.” But he opened his pack, rammed down the contents to make more room, and carefully set the sparrowhawk on top before zipping his pack back up and shouldering it.

As they waited a little bit more, Grace suddenly asked, “If most of the humans in our family have the same abilities, then why can Grandpa David do all that extra stuff – like make portals?”

Janey replied, “It’s a side effect when he was accidentally conceived without sex.”

“WHAT?”

“I told you,” Ellie said. “Everything in this family’s pretty wild.”

“But –” Grace began.

“You can ask your grandpa yourself,” Janey said, seeing the beginnings of a tell-tale shimmer.

Then, glowing with a silvery-gray light, a doorway-sized portal appeared just in front of the front door, connecting Janey’s house in Dallas with her parents’ house in Los Angeles. Reluctant to use this specific ability since it was tiring for him nowadays, David usually would let his mother Cora open a portal for the once-a-year Day of the Dead reunions, just like she would do for Janey and Eddie. But with Grace’s newly emergent abilities, he made an exception, especially if it meant that he and AJ could see their grandchildren sooner, without the risk of prying eyes trying to invade the personal privacy of Dr. AJ Fitzpatrick’s family members.

Janey and Kokabiel hugged the three teens one last time, and they saw them enter the portal in single file, with Ellie holding Stephen’s hand and Stephen holding Grace’s hand, like children making sure nobody got lost. Once Grace stepped in, the portal shimmered away, and Janey, who had held her breath, let out a sigh.

“You okay?” Kokabiel asked, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

“Yeah,” she said. “I know it’s silly. Portaling is safe. But old phobias die hard.” She wrapped an arm around Kokabiel’s waist, resting her head against him. “It’s so quiet now with everyone gone.” She saw the darkness through the windows. “What time is it?”

“Nearly midnight,” he said. He paused. “Like sixteen years ago.”

Janey looked up, her blue eyes meeting his amber ones.

She had given much, in her two lives. Her youth. Her desires. Her body. But he had given much, as well. His freedom. His power. Himself. They had given to each other, and they had chosen to give each other.

Wordlessly, she unwound her arm and grasped his hand, as if to make sure that he wouldn’t get lost, and led him away from the door.

Long ago, in a violence-torn place, Kokabiel had followed her. He had followed her again, crossing from immortality to mortality. He followed her now, as the house grew dark, when the only light was her sinuous, twining colors, dancing like an aurora in the night, flowing seamlessly into his silver. In their bedroom, they shed their clothes. Janey pulled him towards her, onto their bed, and he followed her lead, continuing what they had started that morning, and sixteen years ago, and a lifetime ago.

He would always follow her, his Beatrice.

The beacon through the darkness, calling him home.