

The Last Beatrice

*Book 3 of **The Celestial Engineers***

RUFEL F. RAMOS

The Last Beatrice

Written and published by Rufel F. Ramos

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: The following is a work of fiction. All people, places, and events are purely products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual people, places, or events is entirely coincidental.

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DEDICATION

For Stephanie D.

CONTENTS

| | | |
|----|------------------------------|-----|
| | Acknowledgments | i |
| 1 | Blind Date, Part I | 1 |
| 2 | Hidden Things | 16 |
| 3 | Lost | 46 |
| 4 | And Found | 64 |
| 5 | The Headman's Daughter | 81 |
| 6 | The Fallen Ones | 109 |
| 7 | The Regent of Kamret | 141 |
| 8 | The Immortal and the Foolish | 173 |
| 9 | A Family at the World's End | 201 |
| 10 | Breaking Through | 229 |
| 11 | Blind Date, Part II | 259 |
| 12 | Home | 291 |

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1 BLIND DATE, PART I

Janey Babson entered the street-level café, sat down at one of the window-side bistro tables, and placed her battered messenger bag by her feet before the host could seat her. Without a menu, she ordered the one item that few diners knew the kitchen made, as the dish had never been advertised nor mentioned in the menu, not once.

“How do you know?” her waitress asked. Her little name badge said PAT, and she was a pert, young woman. Her blue-dyed eyebrows raised in surprise.

“Are you new?”

“No – I mean, yes.”

“Pardon?”

“I mean, I started in the café this week. But I started in the childcare center here before Christmas. I mean, I work part-time in both. So...” Pat grinned sheepishly.

“Ah. Well, I’ve been gone for a while, but my family’s local. This

place has been a favorite of ours for a long time, so I know the secret menu.”

“Oh. Okay.” She made note of the order. “And to drink?”

“Black coffee.” Seeing Pat’s question forming, she added, “No cream, no sugar.”

“Oh. Okay. Anything else, ma’am?”

“That’s all. Thank you, Pat.” Janey watched her waitress walk to the back of the café to place her order. *Ma’am*, she thought, *she called me ma’am*. She shook her head, laughing a little. *Do I really look that old?*

Even though Janey had only been gone for one year, many things could change in that time, especially in a city that was always changing in the name of progress. Since her mother’s childhood, the city of Dallas had grown even more modern, its buildings ever taller and sleeker with high tech glass and metal, its many streets and roads redesigned as subterranean tunnels with above ground covers populated with trees and bushes to serve as heatsinks in an ever hotter world. Looking around her, Janey was grateful that this little café still existed as it always was, hidden in plain sight in downtown Dallas’ Commerce Street, within a building that once housed a historic hotel back in the day. With human beings working as hosts, wait staff, and cooks. With tables and chairs made of well-worn wood and napkins made of linen.

She looked through the one-way window, past her image faintly reflected, and towards a cold, rainy December afternoon, the last day of 2059. *Hope the rain stops before tonight’s fireworks.*

“Your order, ma’am.”

Janey looked away from the window and smiled as her waitress set

THE LAST BEATRICE

down the massive dinner plate and the cup of coffee. “Thank you, Pat.”

The cherry cobbler was exactly how she remembered – the top crust caramelized from being flambéed and still tasting like Tanduay rum. Smack in the middle was a large scoop of vanilla bean ice cream, its mounded structure slowly disintegrating into the rum-soaked cherries. This was her grandmother’s favorite dish, along with the black coffee, and for Janey the cobbler meant she had come home. She had already consumed a third of it when she tapped the old-fashioned comm behind her ear. With a quick series of taps, she keyed in a short-cut number.

Ring-ring.

She took another bite of cobbler.

Ring-ring. Ring-ring. Ring-ri – “Hey, doofus, where the hell are you? Are you in town yet?”

She heard through the comm, a bit faint as if the person was nearby and overtly eavesdropping, “Edmund! Is that any way to greet your sister?” and then her brother’s exasperated response, “Miriam, just go – GO over there! Jeez, woman!”

Janey stifled a snort. “And hello to you too, Eddie,” she replied. Her voice was slightly muffled with cobbler, so she took a quick sip coffee. “So Miriam is there. But aren’t you and Isaac setting up her baby shower right now?”

“Eh, you know how she is. Taking charge to the bitter end. I wouldn’t be surprised, six weeks from now, if she tried to order around the labor and delivery team when she gives birth.” Her brother sighed. “But seriously, you’re back in town, right? You’re able to make it

tonight?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” She took a quick bite of cobbler and another sip of coffee.

“So where are you – wait. Are you eating?”

“Yup.”

“You’re back and you’re someplace eating – JANEY!”

She started laughing, imagining her brother’s outraged expression. “You better come on down before I eat all of this yummy yummy cobbler.”

“YOU SUCK.”

“Edmund!” This time Isaac, Miriam’s younger brother, was scolding Eddie as the comm disconnected.

Heb. Isaac and Miriam – the same as always.

Janey ate a few more bites and then set down her spoon, leaving half of the dish remaining for her brother. Just like when they were younger, they had equal shares, as was appropriate for being twins.

Pat returned. “Are you doing all right, ma’am?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Would you like a takeaway box?”

“No. I’d like another black coffee and also one more coffee, but this one with cream and sugar.”

“I’ll get that right out, ma’am.”

“Thank you.” Janey smiled a little as Pat walked away. *Ma’am again.* She guessed her waitress was seventeen or eighteen, perhaps a high school senior lucky enough to secure a job during the school holidays. Being twenty-six, Janey supposed that made her an official adult in Pat’s eyes. She looked at the window again, this time seeing her

THE LAST BEATRICE

reflection. Physically, she was twenty-six, but mentally, well...

“Hey, doofus.”

Janey blinked away her reverie and saw a tall, fit man with floppy dark brown hair, honey-colored skin, and silver gray eyes. In other words, he looked like a young David Babson, their father, while Janey took after their maternal grandmother, Zoey Fitzpatrick, with her shorter stature, darker hair, olive skin, and cobalt blue eyes. In the past, Janey used to be bothered that they looked so dissimilar that people wouldn't believe that they were related, let alone were twins. But such concerns were silly these days, as she saw a man who looked frazzled and overwhelmed with new-found responsibilities, and yet overjoyed with what the future held for him.

“Hey, goober,” she replied, as she stood up and hugged her brother.

“Hmmpf,” he said.

“What?”

“Did you go directly from the airport to here? You didn't stop by the house?”

“Yeah, I was craving Lilian's cobbler. I'll go by the house after. Why do you ask?”

“It's because, Janey-girl, you STINK.”

Janey shoved her brother back as he laughed. “GOD, Eddie, seriously?” She sat back down and watched him sit on the chair opposite of hers, pick up the second spoon from the unused place setting, and start tearing into the second half of the dish.

“That's what I miss this past year – teasing you,” Eddie said between bites. “I mean, I appreciate that you've touched base with us

a couple of times a month so that we'd know that you weren't dead, but no one appreciates my sense of humor."

Janey smirked. "Even Miriam and Isaac?"

"Isaac's okay, but he just tolerates it – doesn't play at all. As for Miriam, that woman takes herself too seriously. For instance, just the other day, I said, 'Hail, Miriam, full of Grace, the Lord is with thee!'"

"YOU DID NOT." Janey knew that Miriam was carrying a girl, and she had already named her daughter Grace.

"And she punched me!"

Janey laughed.

"It hurt!" Eddie pouted, looking like a cross between an aggrieved victim and a little boy, and shoveled more cobbler in his mouth as if it were a consolation prize. "No sense of humor at all."

Janey shook her head, still laughing. "You are such a dork. I can't believe technically you're my older brother."

"Only by ten minutes. You should've been more assertive."

"And I can't believe you're going to be a father."

Eddie paused in his eating. "You and me both."

Janey propped her chin on her interlaced hands as she regarded her brother. "I gotta say, I was surprised when you told me. I was in Greece at the time. Nearly choked on my souvlaki."

"Heh."

"I didn't even know Miriam wanted a child."

"She did. But she kept it to herself until she couldn't anymore. What surprised me was that she wanted ME to be the father."

"Since she's ace."

"Yup."

THE LAST BEATRICE

“And you’re married to Isaac.”

“Yup.”

“Wasn’t that awkward?”

“Not really. Remember, Miriam was my best friend first, and I met Isaac through her.” He paused. “Actually, I fell in love with Miriam before I fell in love with Isaac.”

“Well – DUH.”

Eddie chuckled. “Yeah, I guess that was pretty obvious.” He laughed again. “Just my luck that she only wanted a platonic relationship with me – and just my luck that she decided to set me up with her brother, whom I found absolutely irresistible.”

“So... you and Isaac marrying so quickly earlier this year and then Miriam getting pregnant later on – it’s so that you all three can be related? And Grace will technically have three parents?”

“I don’t think we intentionally planned it that way.”

Janey stared at her brother. “Maybe not you or Isaac, but I bet Miriam did.” She took a sip of coffee.

Eddie shrugged. “You know, you’re probably right.” He smiled, shaking his head. “The analytical vixen that she is.”

Janey nearly choked, stifling a laugh.

“Ma’am, are you okay?” Pat had arrived with a tray laden with a coffee pot, a coffee cup with spoon, and a small saucer with creamer capsules and sugar cubes.

Janey waved her hand as she cleared her throat. “I’m fine.” She saw Pat glance at Eddie with a shy smile, set the cup and saucer on the table, filled up Eddie’s cup, and topped off Janey’s.

“Would you like anything else?”

“We’re good – thank you.”

Pat looked at the nearly empty plate. “How’s the cobbler?”

Before Janey could respond, Eddie replied, “Heavenly.”

Pat’s smile widened a little. “I’ve heard it’s good. I’ve never tried it.”

“Really?” Eddie took the clean spoon from his cup, dried it on his linen napkin, scooped up an untouched area of cobbler, and offered it to Pat. “Here, try it.”

“Ummm....”

“It’s really goo-ood!” Eddie’s voice ended on a sing-song, falsetto note.

Pat stared at Eddie’s silver gray eyes and then shrugged. She took the offered spoon and put it in her mouth. “Oh!”

“See? Delicious, isn’t it?”

“Yes! It really is!” She looked at the plate. “It’s nearly gone, though. Do you want me to take that away?”

“Nope,” Eddie said, beaming. “I’ll just scrape this plate clean. This is food for the gods. It’ll be a sin to waste it.”

Pat giggled. “Your friend is really funny,” she said to Janey.

“He’s my brother.”

“Oh!” Pat, flustered, glanced at Eddie again and then quickly back to Janey. “Ummm, well, just ask if you two need anything else, okay?”

“Okay. Thank you,” Janey replied as Eddie gave a quick thumbs up. Janey saw Pat walk away, this time with a little bounce to her step and a happy, golden glow all around her. She looked at her brother. “Flirt.”

“What? Me? Noooo.”

THE LAST BEATRICE

“And you’re a married man. No more on the side for you – well except for Miriam, but that doesn’t count.”

“That DEFINITELY doesn’t count. Miriam is nobody’s ‘on-the-side.’” As Eddie carefully and meticulously scraped every last bit of cobbler, he said, “When I said that it really wasn’t awkward when Miriam asked me to be the father, I lied. It was awkward in one respect – and you probably know why.”

“Because Miriam wanted to go natural.”

“Yes.” He paused. “Miriam is special. She doesn’t do sex, doesn’t want sex. And I respect her; I know our boundaries. So when she asked me to help her make a baby without medical intervention – and Isaac gave Miriam his support – I realized how much she trusted me. How much Isaac trusted me.” He paused again. “When Isaac went away on a weekend business trip, we were left alone in the house. It was awkward... and embarrassing... and absurd. But it wasn’t awful.” He shook his head, remembering. “Miriam chose this way because it was the simplest. If she hadn’t gotten pregnant this first time, she told me that we’d go the artificial route, and I was okay with that. Lucky for us we didn’t have to try again.” He gathered the last cobbler bits on the spoon, licked it clean, and set the spoon on the empty plate.

Janey slid the plate aside, reached over, and held her brother’s hands. “You’ll be a good father, Eddie.”

“How can you tell?”

“Because you’re already a good husband – to both Isaac and Miriam.”

Eddie chuckled. “I guess you, of all people, would know.”

“Damn right.”

He squeezed her hands. *I know you needed to take off – to get away and just be yourself for a while – but a year without talking like this... that was a helluva long time, Janey.*

She stared at her brother, for he had switched to sending instead of speaking, so she felt and saw everything behind those words. In response, she sent not words. Instead, flowing from herself to him, were memories of the past year as she traveled the world, just one lone woman seeing how Earth's inhabitants lived – and lived with each other.

The gang of children who beat up a mangy, ugly dog and the one little girl who came to its rescue, but too late. The father driving an ancient motorcycle laden with wares one meter high and one meter wide to sell to the night market, humming a song in a language he didn't understand. A group of mothers, their skin wrinkly and distended from several childbirths, enjoying a thermal bath in the nude, away from jeering, lascivious male eyes that would meet them as soon as they left the safe environs of the women's bathhouse. A crackdown of would-be protestors, who had no chance against authorities with powerful firepower and superior algorithmic calculations and yet would return again, even before their dead had a chance to cool in their graves.

These and many others, from small moments to major events, she witnessed and sometimes participated, as she learned how to be Amanda Jane Babson on a planet both beautiful and brutal.

“God, Janey,” her brother said vocally. His silver gray eyes stared widely at Janey's blue eyes, but then he blinked, preventing tears, and cleared his throat. “Don't make me cry in public, you goober.”

“Heh.” Janey released her brother’s hands and shook her head, for after one year, she had become unused to sending, that telepathic and acutely intimate communication of thoughts and emotions that was unique to her family. She picked up her cup and took a long sip. “Drink up before your coffee gets cold.”

“Okay – MOM.” Eddie dropped in two creams and two sugars and stirred with his cobbler spoon since Pat took away the coffee spoon. “Speaking of Mom, you know that Mom and Dad won’t be at the shower, right?”

“I figure,” Janey said, “since it’ll be at Saint Augustine’s.” She pointed up, towards the rooftop bar several floors above the café.

“Even though Isaac reserved the whole space, there’d be no way to keep the shower private if world-renowned physicist Dr. AJ Fitzpatrick was attending.”

“Nobel Prize winning,” Janey added.

“Mother of Quantum Entanglement Communication,” Eddie included.

Janey sighed. “Mom would hate that.”

“We’d all hate that. Anonymity is a luxury these days. That’s why few know that ADE Corporation that owns this building is Miriam and Isaac’s company. They wouldn’t be able to eat lunch in peace at the restaurant named after their grandmother if everyone knew.” Eddie shook his head. “It’s too bad Mom’s work requires her to have a public face wherever she goes.”

“So what will they do?”

“They’ll come when Grace is born, since the birthing center’s a secured place as it is. Also, Mom and Dad already paid for everything

in the nursery, even all the baby care stuff, so we really don't need anything else. Honestly, this shower is more for pre-mom Miriam – one last, late-night adults-only party before the baby is born. Most of the Adebayos are overseas and can't make it, but some of the maternal Martín cousins are local, so they'll be there, as well as close friends of ours from work and the university. Even though Saint Augustine's on the rooftop, it isn't huge, so it'll feel cozy without feeling claustrophobic. And of course, at midnight, we'll have a perfect view of the downtown fireworks over the Reunion Tower."

"Less cheesy baby shower, more casual grown-up get-together, then? That fits Miriam perfectly."

"Exactly."

"Good. I don't think I'd be able to hold it together if I had to do anything with pastel pink jelly beans or rolls of toilet paper."

Eddie snorted. "Miriam would've **KILLED** me and Isaac if we had done anything like that." He glanced at his watch. "Crap. I'd better head back before either Isaac or Miriam badgers me for being away too long. It starts in two hours, and we still have to set up the suya taco bar." He knocked back his now lukewarm coffee, quickly swiped his mouth with a napkin, and stood up. "You're still heading to the house to settle in and wash up?"

"Yup."

"Cool – the passcode's unchanged. Also, don't take too long. Downtown'll get pretty crowded, so you might wanna come early."

"Okay."

"And don't worry about the bill – it's taken care of."

"Eddie –" Janey stood up.

THE LAST BEATRICE

He walked over to her side and hugged her again. “You look really good – I meant to say that earlier.”

“You too. Being a grown-up suits you.”

“Heh!” Eddie pulled away and started to leave. “Oh, heads up,” he said, looking back a moment, “I’ve invited someone. Really cool guy – in town for a morning sound production session at ADE Games. I convinced him to stick around for another day since the session ran long and it’s New Year’s Eve. You two should meet.”

“Wha – what? Are you setting me up on a blind date?”

But Janey only saw him pretend not to hear her as he waved goodbye, walked faster, and then exited the café.

“SERIOUSLY?”

Even though her brother’s house stayed the same, Janey felt weird entering it while its owners were away. This was never her home when she lived in Dallas, as she had her own tiny apartment, which she had let go – along with all of her household possessions – when she set off for her yearlong journey around the world. Technically, it was Isaac and Miriam’s home, a modest three bedroom ranch house originally purchased by their grandmother Lilian, who had passed away several years before Eddie arrived in Dallas to attend their parents’ university alma mater; Janey arrived a bit later. Its ordinary appearance helped secure the inconspicuous anonymity of the Adebayos that Eddie had talked about, and this fact only added to Janey’s sense that she was an intruder in another person’s private space, even though she knew exactly where everything was laid out.

One obvious change, however, was the guest bedroom. It was now

a nursery. Janey took in the cheery, light green walls and ceiling, with a forest themed mural tastefully spanning one wall that reminded her of *Winnie the Pooh*; a minimalist crib and changing table; a rocking chair; and a simple pull-out sofa, perhaps so that if Miriam, Isaac, or Eddie needed to stay with the baby overnight, one of them could simply crash in the nursery. Until Grace arrived, Janey figured that sofa would serve as a guest bed.

Standing in the middle of a beautiful, happy space anticipating a baby, Janey, in spite of everything that she had gone through and had overcome, still felt a twinge of sadness. *Hab*, she thought, *is this what Eddie still saw in me? Is this why he wants me to meet this mystery man?* She shook her head and left the nursery for the hall bathroom. After a short shower, a quick change in a simple button-up shirt and jeans, and her still-damp hair put up in yet another ponytail, she shouldered on her coat, stepped outside, and got into the waiting autonomous car. The vehicle was privately owned, which was one of the few indicators that the Adebayos weren't your typical middle-class household.

The route was already preset, with Saint Augustine's as the terminus point, but Janey added a middle detour. With the familiar hum of an electric car, it pulled away from the curb and sped efficiently through residential streets and then thoroughfares that crisscrossed the metropolitan area that locals still called the Metroplex. Janey leaned back into her seat and closed her eyes, letting her mind drift along to the car's hum. After a short while, it arrived at a rambling nature preserve on the extreme southeast of the Metroplex. It stopped but didn't power down, as if it were a horse that was waiting for its rider to dismount.

THE LAST BEATRICE

The door opened with the hiss of hidden pneumatics, and Janey stepped down. It was early evening on New Year's Eve, and no one was there. It didn't matter. Janey began walking, first across a wide pavement and then a weedy field. Soon enough she found the trail, and after a while, she simply closed her eyes as she walked. When she opened them again, she was where she needed to be.

The old tree was as she remembered – a species that shouldn't have existed in modern-day Earth. Even in winter, without its leaves, it was still majestic, its broad, many-fingered branches gnarled and extending out and up. She walked up to it. Even though it was empty and locked, she leaned forward, her forehead resting against its rough, old trunk.

I miss you, she sent. But the response was only silence.

She wasn't a princess. She didn't need saving. There wasn't a prince, and this wasn't a fairy tale. She also wasn't a kickass superhero. There were no superhuman powers to protect a world that needed saving. There wasn't a supervillain, and this wasn't an epic adventure.

She was just Janey, and she missed her best friend.

After a long, silent minute, she gave an appreciative pat to the trunk and made her way back to the electric horseless carriage that awaited her.

Blind date, she thought, as the little car sped away from trees and dirt, back to metal and glass. She stared out the passenger window, trying to be optimistic. *Third time's a charm.*

2 HIDDEN THINGS

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

“But, Janey –”

“You know I don’t like those things.”

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

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

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

Janey rolled her eyes.

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

THE LAST BEATRICE

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

“Yay!”

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

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

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

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

“Zack!” John, the green guy, replied.

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

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

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

“Come on in!”

John directed them to a spacious living room, where Janey saw a gathering of about a fifty people. Some were in the adjoining open-concept kitchen getting food and chatting. Some were in close groups of three’s or four’s, sitting in various areas of the living room, in animated conversation. But most were crowded around a designated gaming space, spectating and commenting on four gamers in full VR gear playing some sort of horror-meets-dance-party-meets-dungeon-

crawl role-playing game. The gameplay was projected on one entire wall, with the in-game music blaring through wireless stereophonic speakers strategically hidden throughout the living room. Above the din, she grabbed Eddie's arm and hissed in his ear, "You call this NOT THAT BIG? And do you actually know all of these people?"

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

Overhearing Eddie's response, John turned around and asked, "Is something wrong?"

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

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

Janey frowned at her brother. "I wasn't supposed to come?"

"Janey –" Eddie began.

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

"Gee. Thanks."

He laughed. "Hey, be nice to the guy who's feeding you."

"This is your house?"

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

THE LAST BEATRICE

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

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

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

“You like him, huh,” Eddie said.

“What? No! NO!”

“Really? Well, I know he likes you.”

“Why? He just met me.”

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

She punched his arm.

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

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

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

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

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

“Of course.”

Like a newly arrived tourist navigating in an alien country, Janey kept her smile plastered on her face as she nodded and made small polite sounds of noncommittal assent as she grabbed a plate and loaded it with pasta in red sauce, garlic bread, and what Janey suspected was either breaded eggplant or breaded butterflied chicken. Except for a few T-shirts here and there with images of skulls, black cats, or pumpkins, nobody wore anything Halloween-themed, opting for

designer-labeled casual wear. With a plate on one hand and a glass of some kind of tropical punch in the other, she looked for a space to sit among one of three expansive sectional sofas crowded with spectators but saw none. It was so crowded that many were sitting on the floor, their backs against the legs of those sitting on the sofas. From her vantage point, she also saw four players standing before the projected, fast-moving game play. They were kitted in full VR gear of helmet, chest piece, gauntlets, and greaves, and John obviously had parents who could afford to have top-of-the-line, haptic VR gear for all four.

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

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

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

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

“It has alcohol in it – lots.”

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

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

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

John, who was one of the four playing, called out, “He’ll do it once

you're dead, Babs – which is gonna be now if you don't WATCH OUT!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Babs started and, between herself and Eddie, the VR gear was off Babs and on Eddie. In full kit, Eddie looked like some futuristic mecha soldier, which made Janey smile since he was one of the gentlest human beings she’d ever known. Just as she wondered where Babs was going to sit, she saw Babs step enough away from the gaming area but close enough to rejoin if anyone else died in-game. Then she sat down on the floor, her legs crossed, and watched intently Eddie’s gameplay.

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

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

Janey couldn’t even begin to understand the mechanics of the gameplay, as all four players’ first person points of view were displayed as four split-screens, in addition to a general bird’s eye map that showed on the top right corner of the screen and an always-changing

inventory of everyone's weapons, potions, and other items. It was loud, dizzying, and fast-moving. But even with all the visual and aural chaos, Janey could tell that her brother's gaming was superior to the other three. While John and the other two players struggled through each level, and John even died so that Babs could take another go, Eddie continued onward, gaining more power, items, and experience, with little damage. He was good – really good.

Janey frowned.

It wasn't fair.

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

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

Why the hell did you even bring me here, Eddie? She didn't worry that Eddie could hear her thoughts – because he couldn't. No one could. Unlike her parents and brother, Janey couldn't send nor receive any family member's sending. She also couldn't see people's colors, and – in a pained twist of fate – her parents and brother couldn't see Janey's color as well, as if Janey had no color at all.

She felt like a hidden thing in her own family, and it was so stupid

to think this way because weren't all ordinary human beings – isolated and alone unless they spoke up – just like Janey?

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

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

Maybe... just one more.

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

Oh no.

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

Oh no no no no!

And then her sense of balance.

NO!

“Are you okay?” Janey heard, muffled as if spoken through thick

wool blankets. She recognized the voice.

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

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

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

“Oh. OH. You didn’t know?”

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

“Do... do you want me to get Zack?”

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

“Okay.” He sounded relieved.

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

Janey grunted in assent.

“Need anything? Water? Wet washcloth?”

“Nuh uh.”

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

“No.”

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

“M’kay... Sorry...”

“Yeah. Me too.”

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

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

After struggling a bit with the door knob – which alarmed Janey at first and made her wonder if it had locked – she opened the door to an empty hallway. Further down the hall, she found a nearby powder room, got rid of the last bit of alcohol remaining in her body, rinsed her face and neck to get rid of some of the stink, and drank greedily from the faucet. Just as she was about to open the door to leave, she heard someone pass by and, then, back towards the home office, heard

its door opening.

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

From the powder room, she heard the office door quickly shut, this time hearing a definite locking sound, and then footsteps quickly retreating back to the party. Her heart beating fast and hard, Janey thought, *OH NO YOU DIDN’T*. Just as the footsteps was about to pass by the powder room, she swung open the door, nearly hitting the person in the hallway. Stomping towards him, Janey hissed, “WHAT THE FUCK, JOHN.”

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

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

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

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

“You – you wouldn’t –”

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

“JAAAA-NEEEY!” Eddie called out again.

Janey turned away from John, preparing herself just in case he

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Uhhh...”

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

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

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

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

Eddie ate the cookies. Meanwhile, John had returned as well. Janey could feel John’s panicky stare from across the huge living room, and she ignored it. *This is Eddie’s party. These are Eddie’s friends.* At her insistence, Eddie ate more food from the buffet but refrained from the punch, opting for tap water. Her “I’m in public” smile plastered on her face again, Janey made agonizing small talk, primarily saying over and

over, “Yeah – we’re really twins. I look more like our mom’s mom, and yeah – my brother does look a lot like our dad.” She would smirk whenever she replied to a drunken fangirl or fanboy of her father, “Uhhh... yeah, I guess Mr. Babson is kinda hot...”

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

Janey looked at her brother, surprised.

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

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

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

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

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

Janey forced herself to smile. “Bye.”

“Bye.” John quickly looked away.

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

“After I ate the cookies you gave me.”

“But – why?”

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

“What? Nothing happened.”

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

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

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

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

“Tell me what happened.”

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

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

She started crying and was angry that she was crying.

“Just try.”

She looked up.

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

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

THE LAST BEATRICE

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

The next two weeks were hard.

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

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

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

"But Janey, if I hadn't forced you to come in the first place, then —"

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

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

"I know."

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

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

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

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

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

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

He sighed. “Poor puppy.”

“I’m serious, Eddie.”

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

THE LAST BEATRICE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Right,” he interrupted, “puppy.”

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

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

“Huh?”

“Deal.”

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

Downstairs, Janey and Eddie saw their parents before the front door: Mr. David Babson was a forty-eight year old high school math teacher, renowned to being popular amongst his students and

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

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

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

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

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

Even though Janey had seen it every year since she could remember, it was still wondrous to her, that they departed for their Day of the Dead family reunion as if they were going out the door, like any other family of four about to go on a trip. But there it was: her father's silver gray eyes glowed as if white-hot, he made a small twisting motion with his hand, and a doorway-sized portal shimmered before

THE LAST BEATRICE

them. While the family reunions were always special in themselves, her father summoning a portal in the middle of their home's foyer still made Janey feel like she was stepping into a fairy tale, like Lucy Pevensie, who had been hiding in a wardrobe only to emerge into a Narnia locked in snow. For Janey and her brother and parents, they would step out to their destination, thousands of miles away, on a green, idyllic island found on no human-made map.

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

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

The sunlight through the window woke her up.

Still groggy, Janey opened her eyes. *I was asleep?* She saw at first the bright ceiling and then the bed and her surroundings. *This is my bedroom – I'm home? But wasn't I just in the portal?* She lay still, trying not to panic, as she couldn't remember anything between leaving the house for the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Janey stared, as the only time she ever saw her father's hidden

THE LAST BEATRICE

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

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

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

“And then?”

“And then... I woke up here.”

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

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

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

“So I went somewhere else? Where?”

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

“Ino?” Janey replied, using the name for “grandfather” in her

grandmother Cora's language. "Ino saved me?"

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

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

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

She nodded, looking down.

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

She looked up sharply. "Dad?"

"We all go as a family, or we don't go at all."

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

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

"Dad..." Janey understood the enormity of what he was saying. As the chimerical son of a human woman (Ina Cora) and a former Watcher angel (Ino Setebos), her father was, as he would sometimes

THE LAST BEATRICE

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

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

“Because I was sick?”

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

She stared back, not knowing how to respond.

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

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

“It’s all past, sweetie. Fortunately, as the Math Department Coordinator, I found qualified substitutes to take over my classes. And, as I said, I wanted to take care of you.” He paused. “But once I was gone, your brother felt cut off from the family when he was at school, notwithstanding his animosity towards John. So he asked if he could

finish his remaining graduation requirements at home. Since he only needed three credits to complete the minimum requirements, the school granted his request. He graduated this past January and helped care for you.”

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

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

“Don’t – don’t make me cry, Dad!”

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

Janey nodded. “I bet he got angry.”

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

“So, he’s in college?”

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

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

“Yes.” He paused. “Arrived exactly now, in fact. Your mom’s with

him. They drove, and she's helping to settle him in before the semester begins next week."

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

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

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

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

"Yes," he replied. "It'll be even longer since I won't be home until Thanksgiving break."

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

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

"Hey!" Janey retorted.

"Eddie –" her father started.

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

“But –”

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

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

“I’ll miss you, twin,” she said.

“Yeah. Me too.”

“Ah,” her father and mother said.

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

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

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

“Yes.”

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

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

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

“It’s okay,” Eddie interrupted. His voice sounded as measured as

THE LAST BEATRICE

their mother's. "Janey, just... just stay there and get better, okay? I have my comm, so you can talk to me whenever. But right now, it's getting late, and we gotta move my stuff from Mom's car."

"Oh. Okay." Janey tried to hide her disappointment. "I'll talk to you later."

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

"... Janey?" It was her mother.

"Yes, Mom?"

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

"Okay."

"I'll be home as soon as I can. I love you, sweetie."

"I love you, too, Mom."

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

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

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

"You sure?"

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

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

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

"Dad?"

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

"It – it's okay, Dad –"

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

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

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

Janey recoiled, scared. "Dad?"

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

you. And I hate it, too. We all do.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

3 LOST

The first night after Janey came out of her coma, her brother called a few minutes before midnight, saying, “Ummm... hey. Sorry.”

Janey, still awake, replied, “Yeah, way to shut down a conversation, dumbass.”

He sighed. “I’m so sorry, Janey.” She could hear Eddie shake his head. “It was so weird, eavesdropping on you and Dad, him sending like that, and then Mom warning me not to accidentally tell you everything. Got me so paranoid that I didn’t know how to talk normal to you, and what came out was —”

“— garbage.”

“Yeah.” He paused. “Hell, Janey, I’ve never kept a secret from you in my entire life, and now I’m supposed to keep my big mouth shut on THIS? Aren’t you mad?”

“I was. But not anymore. Dad explained why I couldn’t know.”

“What’d he say?”

THE LAST BEATRICE

“That it was for my safety, that I should trust you all... and that I’m too young to know right now.” Janey gave a snort of laughter. “Makes me sound like a freakin’ preschooler.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.” After an awkward silence, Janey said, “You know what? I’m sick of talking about this. How’re you? How’s your first day in college?”

“Ummm... the RA is kinda cute?”

Janey made an odd face and then burst out laughing. “Eddie, you are such a doofus.”

“... Christ, I missed that.”

“You missed what?”

Even with the volume of the house comm speakers turned low, Janey could hear Eddie smile. “Your laugh.”

She stumbled as she tried to find her way, feeling only damp, cool air and hearing her footfalls echo in a space that felt cavernous and desolate.

It was so dark that she almost forgot how to see.

But then her eyes adjusted, and she noticed a cold, blue light faintly above her. Looking up, she saw them – innumerable living dots bathing the darkness – and in that eerie, glowing illumination, she could just make out what had always been there, right in front of her...

Janey woke up, her head hurting. *Ab, not again*, she thought, groaning. She had a feeling that she had a dream, but whatever it was, it was gone, leaving only a faint echo of fear and a dull, annoying

headache. She sat up, reached over to the bedside table, got her bottle of mineral water, and drank.

In the early days after she came out of her coma, Janey would go to bed for the night, and her parents and brother would worry, wondering whether she would wake up in the morning or several months later. But after a month of uneventful cycles of sleeping and waking, their worry faded away, and she didn't have to wake up to her well-meaning, early-rising father hovering on the other side of her closed door, lightly knocking on everyone's behalf, and asking, "Janey, are you awake?"

She set the empty bottle back on the side table, lay back down, and, staring at a ceiling that was still dark, waited for her headache to go away.

When Janey had awoken from her coma, she had felt that only a moment had passed from her stepping into the portal on the day of the family reunion to finding herself in her bedroom; in her head, her last school day was only twenty-four hours ago. So, upon waking, she picked up her where she had left off with her schoolwork – except that she was seventeen years old instead of sixteen. When she realized that, if she stayed at her current pace, she would finish high school two years later, at age nineteen, she declared, "No. No way. I'm going to finish high school this damn year."

"You sure?" her parents asked.

"YES."

Study. Sleep. Eat. Read. Write. Solve. Test. Study more. Sleep sometimes. Eat whenever. Read-write-solve. Test more. Janey practically lived in the house's study room, immobile for hours in front

THE LAST BEATRICE

of the vid screen delivering her schoolwork. Somewhere in the mix, she got some exercise – mostly running at the indoor track of her mother’s university – to remind herself that she wasn’t just a brain churning through academic material like a machine.

Her father helped, even when his leave ended after Christmas and he returned to Janey’s high school. Her mother helped, even when she was away at yet another public engagement (which she never got comfortable doing because it took her away from her family and her lab at the university). Her brother helped, even after he returned to his campus after Thanksgiving Break, even after he adjusted to being a first year college student over a thousand miles away from home.

Any time that Janey hinted that she felt bad for having to depend on so much help from her family, Eddie would remind her, his voice booming through the house comm’s speakers, “You were in a coma for nine months; you’re trying to cram in two years of high school in another nine months. Jesus, Janey, give yourself a fuckin’ break!”

Ab, she thought, her headache finally gone, *it’s getting light out.*

The ceiling started to lighten up as the sun rose on a bright morning, but Janey still lay in her bed. Staring at nothing, she was still a little stunned by last week’s news: she had finished all of her high school graduation requirements. It took twelve months, and there was no formal pomp and circumstance for a lone, late-summer high school graduate. It didn’t matter. Eddie hadn’t attended his own graduation ceremony, not wanting to see John and the rest of the seniors from the ill-fated Halloween party, and Janey felt no emotion whatsoever for her high school alma mater. Still, it felt weird not having to launch herself out of bed, to start the daily schoolwork grind. It felt weird not

knowing exactly what she would be doing next.

Knock knock knock. “Janey, are you awake?”

She smiled. It had been a while since her father checked on her. “Yeah, Dad.” She sat up and swung her legs over the side of her bed.

“You all packed?”

She glanced at her three suitcases next to her night stand. “Did it last night.”

“Okay. Your brother’s already up, and your mom made breakfast.”

“Are there pancakes?” she asked.

Her father chuckled through the door. “There’s always pancakes.”

“Yay!”

He chuckled again. “When you’re ready, sweetie.”

“Thanks, Dad. I won’t be long.”

She heard her father walk away from her door. *Well*, she thought, *here we go*. She stood up to get ready.

Janey didn’t know exactly what she would be doing next. But whatever it was, it would be in Dallas.

Burnt out on school and fighting cabin fever, Janey moved into her brother’s off-campus apartment, intending to take a year off to work while figuring out what she wanted to do when she eventually went to college. But first, she needed to get a job even though she had no idea where to begin since she had never worked for pay in her entire life, least of all in a new city.

Noticing Janey fretting after she had settled in after a couple of days, Eddie said, “Miriam could help.”

“Who’s Miriam?”

He replied as he tapped his comm, placing a call, “She was my dorm’s RA when I lived on-campus.”

Janey frowned, confused at first, but then she remembered. “You mean, the ‘kinda cute?’” She stared at her brother. “Is she your GIRLFRIEND?” she exclaimed.

He gave a small smile but shook his head. “She is cute. But she’s a friend, not a girlfriend – oh, hey, Miriam, it’s Eddie.” He paused. “Yeah... me too. Hey, do you still have the info for that staffing agency you used to work for? Yeah, Omnibus Staffing.” He paused again. “You do? Great!” He gave Janey a thumbs up. “No, not for me. My sister’s just moved into town, and right now she’s an unemployed teenager, and I just CANNOT ABIDE a freeloader.”

“Eddie!” Janey punched his shoulder as he laughed. She heard a little “ding!” from Eddie’s comm.

“Got it,” he said, and he projected from his comm the agency’s contact information as a little holographic business card so that Janey could see as well. “Thanks, Miriam. I owe you one.” He paused, listening. “Yeah. See you later.” He tapped his comm, disconnecting the call. He gave a little exhale.

“So... just a friend?” Janey asked.

He sighed and gestured sharply at the image of a glowing business card floating in front of them. “Woman, FOCUS.”

“Okay, okay.” Janey peered at the information. After a moment, she declared, “Jeez, I’m nervous. I’ve never applied for a job before.”

He patted her back. “You’ll do fine.”

It was only supposed to be a year off for work. But Janey had

settled into a routine of work and home that was so comforting in its predictability that she decided to let college go for the time being – or at least until Eddie finished his own undergraduate studies in Mathematics and Psychology. At first she was worried that their parents would disapprove, but they agreed that, at nineteen, she was old enough to determine what was best for herself.

“Besides,” their mother said, her voice loud and clear from the apartment’s comm, “your brother’s taking enough classes to count for both of you.”

Eddie, sleep-deprived from pulling yet another all-nighter writing a paper, moaned, “Don’t remind me....”

Janey, sitting back with a tall glass of cold, sweet tea after a long day, crowed, “Sucks to be YOU!”

“Janey, be nice,” their mother chided, but she was chuckling.

“Take care of each other,” their father added.

“Of course, Dad,” Eddie and Janey said together.

With that worry gone, Janey resumed her life as her brother’s roommate and a temporary employee assigned to various long-term jobs from her staffing agency’s highly eclectic clients.

When Janey was new at the agency, she would accept whatever assignments her agency offered her. She had donned mascot costumes and waved at apathetic would-be clients at various company events. At one weeklong wedding exposition, she had manned catering kiosks, served food samples, and tried not to punch walls when dealing with entitled, sleazy would-be grooms and fathers-in-law.

Assholes.

In another assignment, Janey was supposed to digitize the paper

THE LAST BEATRICE

archives of a company's private daycare, but she found herself babysitting an entire room of terrified four-year olds because their preschool teacher was out sick. The fulltime employee remaining was the teacher's aide (who wasn't that much older than Janey), who was trying to calm down one particularly out-of-control little boy. He screamed incoherently, flailing on the floor.

Janey began to twitch, as the young aide looked as if she was about to snap, and Janey thought, *Oh God, please don't hit him* –

But then, just in time, a much older teacher showed up to assist. Janey left, relieved that she could return to her original duties, but she couldn't help but look back, seeing the little boy dissolve into sobs as the veteran teacher held him without saying a word. For some reason, the image of that hit her with a keen ache in her chest. *NEVER AGAIN*, she thought. Then and there, she swore never to take an assignment that involved children.

After a number of these unpredictable assignments – *Christ, another one?* – she requested structured, corporate assignments, even though most of those clients preferred college students. The first of those types of assignments was Janey filling in for a woman on maternity leave, whose job was to audit logistical data with statistical analysis because even AI-generated algorithms weren't 100% foolproof.

After two months of that – proving that she wasn't incompetent just because she only had a high school diploma – her next assignment was for the same company, negotiating on-time shipping schedules with freight dispatchers. When speaking to them via non-vid comms, they were convinced that Janey was a hard-drinking, hard-smoking middle-aged veteran of the industry, instead of a teenaged girl with a

head cold.

Janey would still get the other, lower-skilled jobs as well, but it didn't bother her as much anymore. As long as she got paid well enough and the duties weren't illegal, immoral, or demoralizing, then she'd roll out of bed and go to work.

Miriam, who had become a big sister figure for Janey, once asked her, "If you're not planning to go to college, then why don't you look for a permanent position?"

"Maybe... because I don't know what I want to do permanently."

"Are you telling me that nothing you've done has captured your interest? What are you looking for?"

Janey shrugged. "Like I said – I don't know."

Miriam shook her head and shrugged. "Well, you're still young. You have time, I guess."

And after that conversation, nothing had changed.

"Ahhh," Janey sighed, coming home after another long day. She was filling in as a high-level executive's assistant at a financial services company, so she had to wear a skirt-suit set with heels, attire that she despised. Once at home, she kicked off the heels, washed off the makeup, ruffled her hair-do, and quickly changed into a T-shirt and sweatpants. She was about to pour herself a glass of tea when the apartment door opened and in came Eddie, looking exhausted as always, and Miriam, toting a cooler with homemade food, which she did more often these days.

"Miriam, you didn't have to," Janey started, but Eddie interrupted, "Don't bother. You know that she'll do whatever she wants to do." He kicked off his shoes.

THE LAST BEATRICE

“Edmund!” Miriam chided. She closed the door behind her and slipped off her shoes. “Who else is going to make sure you two eat a balanced meal, eh?”

“But tacos are delicious,” Janey said.

“That’s what I said!” Eddie responded.

Miriam exhaled a long-suffering sigh. “One cannot live on tacos and pancakes alone.”

Eddie padded over to the breakfast nook and collapsed into a chair. “Okay, MOM.”

Miriam followed into the kitchen, set down the cooler on the table, leaned over, and kissed the top of Eddie’s head. She never took being called a mom an insult, even though she was a stunningly beautiful twenty-seven year old Afro-Latina who wasn’t married nor had children. “Well, you ARE younger than I am.”

“Only seven years,” Eddie protested.

“You’re younger than my little brother.”

He looked up and held her dark, luminous eyes. “I’m not a kid, Miriam.”

She regarded him and then looked away. “You’re right,” she said. “You are not.”

Janey glanced at Eddie and then at Miriam. Even though she couldn’t see their colors, she could feel the tension between them. “Ummm....”

Eddie closed his eyes and exhaled. “Shit.” He reached up and wrapped his arms around Miriam’s waist. Miriam looked down, surprised. Then her body softened as she murmured, “Edmund,” and that was when Janey quietly yet quickly exited the kitchen and

discretely went to her bedroom.

Janey waited, leaning against her closed bedroom door. She felt herself feel sad and angry, which made no sense to her. So her brother was having relationship problems with Miriam – so what? Yet she had to breathe slowly, forcing her heart to stop aching, to reign in emotions that didn't match her thoughts. *Why am I upset?*, she thought. *Where is this coming from?* After a while, she had calmed down, and then she heard the front door open and close. She peeked out, seeing Eddie alone and unloading Miriam's cooler of her uniquely fusion meals, of Nigerian-TexMex dishes.

He saw Janey and nodded. "Hey."

Janey noticed his silver gray eyes, red-rimmed and puffy. "Ummm... are you and Miriam okay?"

"Yeah." He shook his head. "Sorry about that. I thought we had cleared things up, but – not quite. We're all good now."

"Uh... can I ask what happened?"

He smiled. "It's no secret. You know that I've been dating Miriam's brother Isaac, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I guess we were getting a little too exclusive – no, I know we were getting too exclusive..."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean that we were shutting Miriam out. I was shutting Miriam out. Which is awful because she's the first friend I made when I came here on my first day. Sure, she started out as my dorm's RA and kinda treated me like a kid back then – understandably, because I was seventeen then – but she was a great listener when I felt overwhelmed

with being so far away from you, Mom, and Dad. She may as well be family. Actually... she IS family.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I mean, did you know that Miriam and Isaac’s grandmother was once taught by Lola Zoey?”

“Lola Zoey? Mom’s mom?”

“Yeah. Lola Zoey used to be an English professor here in Dallas, remember? But more importantly, when Mom found out that my best friend at college was Miriam Adebayo, she told me that Lola Zoey leased her townhouse to Miriam’s grandmother Lilian, and when Lola Zoey died, she bequeathed the townhouse to Lilian so that she and her grandkids didn’t have to move. She raised Miriam and Isaac there – in the same home where our own mom grew up – and when Lilian died years later, the property went to Miriam and Isaac.”

“WOW. Were you surprised? That our family knows Miriam’s family?”

Eddie shrugged. “Not really. Weird things have always happened to our family, after all.”

Janey nodded. “That’s true.... But Miriam lived in the dorms when you met her. So does that mean Isaac lives in Mom’s childhood home?”

“GOD, that would be weird.” Eddie made an odd face, but Janey decided not to ask why. He continued, “No, the property value had skyrocketed like crazy, so they sold it. Invested a lot of it, and the remainder Miriam used to fund her schooling; Isaac took his share and traveled.”

“Oh, so that’s why you didn’t meet Isaac until last year.”

“Yes. He came back to town a year ago, and Miriam introduced me to him then. We hit it off really well.” Eddie blushed a little. “A little too well. I was neglecting my best friend, and Isaac was neglecting his big sister, but Miriam didn’t want to ruin anything, so she just kept quiet. And suffered.”

“Which you could see.”

“Which I could see. It pissed me off, that she’d lie that everything was fine. I can’t read minds, Janey, but I can read emotions. And Miriam was hurting. I called her on it, forced her to tell me what’s wrong, and she played the whole ‘I’m older, I know what’s best, don’t worry about me’ bullshit.” He shook his head. “I told her – right here – that I would rather break up with my lover than lose my best friend.”

“WOW.” Janey felt a little twinge in her heart that quickly faded away.

“Yeah,” Eddie replied. “She cried, I cried, it was one crying party. But we cleared the air – finally. I’ll talk with Isaac about it tonight.”

“Will he be mad?”

“Maybe. But if he’s sincere that he loves me... then it’ll be okay.”

Janey nodded. Then she said, “That’s another thing I didn’t know.”

“What?”

“That Isaac’s younger. I thought he and Miriam were twins. They look exactly alike, except one’s male and tall and the other’s female and not as tall.”

Eddie shrugged. “Nah – Isaac’s two years younger than Miriam.”

“So he’s five years older than you.”

“Yup.”

“Cradle-robber.”

THE LAST BEATRICE

Eddie gave a bark of laughter. “Like that story of Mom and Dad’s first date?”

“Hah!” Janey laughed. “God, Mom was a player. And Dad was –”

“Lamb to slaughter. Good thing, though, or else we wouldn’t be here.”

“True.” She opened a container, and the aroma made her mouth water. “We wouldn’t be here, enjoying your not-girlfriend’s yummy yummy food.”

Eddie was quiet. “Janey,” he asked, “if you ever feel that I’m shutting you out, you’d tell me, right?”

She rolled her eyes. “You goober. Of course. DUH. Now let’s eat. I’m starving!”

He grinned. “Okay.”

Looking up, she saw them, and she realized what they were – glow worms. Innumerable glow worms, adhered tightly against the cavern ceiling, illuminating the darkness and the silence.

In their soft, blue glow, she could just make out what had always 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 emanating from their bodies like negatively imaged coronas.

Then one of them raised its head and saw her...

RIIING! RIIING! RIIING! RIII –

Twenty-two year old Janey jolted into waking and yelled, “Alarm off, dammit!” She flopped back, groaning, and tried to recall her

dream. *Jeez, why can't I ever remember?* She suspected that she had the same dream, as she had woken up from her nap with that all-too-familiar feeling: the faint echo of a panic-stricken fear, the dull throb of a slight headache. It annoyed her, that she likely had been having the same dream for several years, but not once could she remember anything once she woke up. *Argh. Whatever.* She sat up, feeling disoriented for having slept heavily on a post-lunch Saturday, and was relieved that she didn't sleep through her alarm. It would have been bad to be late.

After all, her brother was graduating today.

"Ah, that took forever," Janey's mother said in a low voice, gesturing at the closing pomp and circumstance before them. She was wearing a dark wig, large glasses, and barely-there make-up in order to blend in as just another parent, watching her grown children graduate from college.

"It does feel interminable," Miriam, sitting in front of her, agreed, "especially since Edmund walked across the stage two hours ago."

Janey's mother glanced at a direction, down and in front of them where Eddie was likely sitting among the massive throng of black-robed graduates, and then at her father, who sat next to her mother. Janey, sitting on her mother's other side, saw her father nod in silent confirmation. Just by her parents' body language, Janey guessed that they had received a sending from Eddie. Her mother declared, "Let's go before we're caught in the crowds."

Isaac, who was sitting next to Miriam, looked back. "Are you sure, Mrs. Babson?" he asked. He was careful not to say "Dr. Fitzpatrick"

THE LAST BEATRICE

or “AJ” in public but used Janey’s mother’s alias.

“Yes,” Janey’s mother replied. “Eddie’ll meet us at just outside the main foyer.”

As they got up as a unit – her mother, her father, Miriam, Isaac, and Janey herself – Janey wondered if Eddie ever got around to telling Miriam and Isaac about the unique qualities of their family. Ever since she and her brother had moved three states away from their parents, her brother had no pressing reason to make his abilities known, especially since Janey could do none of them and Miriam and Isaac were what Eddie called “normals.” When he and Miriam became close friends and then he and Isaac became lovers, Janey once asked him if he would tell them, and Eddie had replied, “Honestly? I don’t know. I mean, it all sounds pretty crazy to anyone who isn’t us.”

“Eddie....” Janey had responded back then, but she didn’t push it, not wanting to nag.

But Eddie had known Miriam for five years, Isaac for three. He had even invited both to their parents’ house several times, for Thanksgiving and Christmas, when he and Janey would return to California for the holidays. As far as Janey knew, their parents welcomed the Adebayo siblings as extended members of their family, what with the past friendship between the grandmothers Zoey Fitzpatrick and Lilian Adebayo. However, just like Eddie, Janey noticed that their parents never called attention to seeing anyone’s color nor communicating through sending, so she assumed Eddie hadn’t revealed that part of himself to Miriam and Isaac yet. She and her parents seemed to be following Eddie’s lead, trusting that he would inform Miriam and Isaac when it was the right time.

However, sometimes the waiting bothered Janey. It reminded her of herself, trusting that, someday, someone in her family would tell her what exactly happened to her – six years ago.

Has it really been six years?, she thought.

The front entrance doors of the graduation venue opened up, and out spilled graduates and their friends and families. Among them, Janey saw Eddie emerge from the crowds and made a direct bee-line to where she stood. Her brother was bedecked in his doctoral regalia (for he had earned so many graduate-level credits in Mathematics by his second year that he decided to go all the way) and was still holding his ceremonial diploma cover. He looked grown-up, distinguished even.

“Congratulations, you big doofus,” Janey said, reaching out for a hug.

Instead of a hug, Eddie grabbed her and swung her around like a rag doll. “That’s DOCTOR Doofus to you, young lady!”

“Eddie!” Janey exclaimed, laughing. “Put me down, you dork!”

“Don’t you mean, DOCTOR Dork?” their dad said, smiling.

“Hah!” Eddie set her down and hugged her properly. “Thank you, sis,” he replied. Then he leaned closer so that only Janey could hear. “I gotta tell you something – later, okay?”

“Ummm... okay?” she whispered back, and Eddie broke away from the hug. Janey looked on, puzzled, as Eddie went on to hug their mother, their father, and then Miriam, who kissed his cheek and said, “I’m so proud of you, my dear.”

Eddie beamed. “Thank you, Miriam.”

Last was Isaac, who hugged and kissed Eddie, and then, leaning

THE LAST BEATRICE

back a little, said, “Congratulations, love.”

Eddie blushed a little. “Hey, don’t get mushy on me.”

Isaac rolled his eyes, saying drily, “Always the romantic.” He stepped back. “I guess I won’t give you this, then.” From the messenger bag slung across his shoulders, he pulled out a distinctive red-labeled bottle of a rarely-made whiskey.

Eddie stared, agog, and Janey’s father asked, awestruck, “Is that... is that an Abroath Red Reserve?”

“Indeed it is, sir,” Isaac said. “Bottled in 2033 – the year when Eddie and Janey were born.”

Their father – a long-time connoisseur of whiskey who had also been raised near the Scottish town of Arbroath – turned to Eddie and declared, “Son, you must NEVER break up with this man.”

Eddie laughed. “Whatever you say, Dad.” He looked past where they stood. “Oh, hey, the van’s here,” he said, noticing their reserved ride-share vehicle pulling up to the curb.

“Good,” Miriam said, frowning at the increasing crowds and the still-insufferable heat of a May late-afternoon in Texas. “Let’s go home, shall we?”

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?”

THE LAST BEATRICE

“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

THE LAST BEATRICE

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 LAST BEATRICE

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

THE LAST BEATRICE

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

RUFEL F. RAMOS

sent, her spirit angry and triumphant:

I remember – when I was LILITH.

5 THE HEADMAN'S DAUGHTER

Before there was Lilith, there was Zaia.

But before there was Zaia, there was Tiros.

Tiros the Tyrant: the conqueror of Kamret.

A foreign warlord, Tiros had swiftly and efficiently conquered the tiny coastal village of Kamret during the prime of his life. Kamret had been a peaceful haven, valuing harmony and diplomacy above everything else. Technologically more advanced than its neighbors, the native rulers of Kamret chose to perfect its agriculture, developing the black Kamreti wine renown throughout the land, as well as plant-based medicines, both of which Kamret had exchanged with its neighbors for influence and protection. Yet, it was those virtues that were a siren call to Tiros, who came, knowing that Kamret did not have the martial capacity to defend itself.

Killing all the male Kamreti, the Tiroseans (which Tiros' men called

themselves) overran Kamret with their own full-blood women and children and then repopulated fallen Kamret with half-Kamreti children, born from Kamreti women and Tiroasian men. With prior and current conquests in servitude to him, Tiros made Kamret his capital, whereupon it grew into a village-state in its own right as Tiros sought respectability, hosting foreign visitors with its wealthy, albeit small, port and renown black wine, made by surviving Kamreti in service to their ruler. But even wealthy and powerful Tiros had enemies, and Tiros spent his rule defending against like-minded invaders who would conquer him, crushing any would-be traitors within Kamret who would dare overthrow him, and expanding his influence to other local village states.

While Tiros had many children (from his three Tiroasian wives), most of them died in infancy and early childhood. Fortunately for him, his four surviving older children were sons exactly like him – driven and ambitious – so he sought other village-states to send his sons, either as conquerors or matrimonial consorts, to forge alliances with blood ties and to control their rivalry amongst each other. But his last child was his only girl, from his youngest wife who had died soon after the girl was born: Zaia, his favorite. As his only daughter, Zaia was protected and sheltered. Fair-haired, blue-eyed, skin the color of burnished gold, she looked like her mother, and – once she was old enough to join her father in his rare public appearances in Kamret – she served as the shining mascot of the virtue of Tiros' rule.

It was in one of those public appearances that Rifan, the last remaining son of the deposed Kamreti headman, first saw Zaia.

Ewa, Rifan's mother, knew she was pregnant when the invaders

conquered Kamret, and as her husband's ancestral house burned, she hid, unrecognized by the Tiroseans among the other local Kamreti women. She had mourned for her husband Adan and three sons – all barely old enough to fight – who had died defending their home from the outsiders, and she had mourned when Adan's last son was born into hardship and servitude. Anonymity kept her safe; anonymity kept her last child Rifan alive.

But growing up, working in the stolen agricultural fields claimed as part of Tiroseans' land, Rifan chafed under the indignity of being yet another Kamreti knowledgeable in the civilizing technology of Kamret and yet forced into perpetual servitude to his barbarous Tirosean master, who thrived and luxuriated away from the common people. Rifan would think, as he toiled under the unrelenting sun, *If Ma hadn't told me who I am, then I wouldn't care*. Still, he kept his mouth shut, staying true to his mother's sacrifice of keeping him safe, for even though Rifan was full-blood Kamreti, he resembled many of mixed-blood and, thus, could pass as one.

Just like all the other days, he woke up among other men in the workers' compound, one among many that bordered the agricultural fields, far away from the fortified and walled center of Kamret, where the Tiroseans lived. He took care of his morning personal needs without privacy and ate his simple breakfast of bread, eggs, and beer in the communal kitchen. Then, along with other workers, he reported to his assigned area in a vast vineyard, his calloused brown hands gently handling the pruning and grafts of one plant to another. He would work for hours, under the hot sun, only breaking for one brief meal in the fields, before returning to the compound at sun-down.

So he was one of the workers who stood at attention when Tiros, giving a tour of his splendid domain to a foreign lord, arrived, and walking behind Tiros, with her own entourage of half-Kamreti female servants, was Zaia.

Zaia, smiling.

Zaia, laughing.

Zaia, shining like the sun.

For most of his life, Rifan only felt a seething hatred for Tiros and his Tirosians. But on that day, he struggled to understand what he was feeling as Tiros' daughter passed by, and he could smell the scent of her – of ginger and honey. He dared to follow her with his dark eyes before anyone could catch him, and for the first time of his life, Rifan was glad that he was not just a mere commoner but the hidden son of a long-dead lord. But as soon as he felt that, he felt shame, for betraying the memory of his father, his brothers, and his mother, who had recently died, her body prematurely aged and broken down after years of unrelenting, ignominious toil. *Don't be a fool, Rifan*, he thought bitterly. *Forget her*.

Suddenly, Zaia stopped, as a fit of coughing overtook her, and even Rifan started, alarmed. "My lady!" her servants cried out, but she just waved them off as she angrily covered her delicate face, which Rifan saw was turning rose-gold in embarrassment. "It's nothing – it's nothing! Just – just a dry throat. The air here is very dry. Come along!" she ordered, and she hurried to catch up with her father and their foreign visitors.

But, days later, everyone in Kamret would know that it was not nothing.

THE LAST BEATRICE

Sickness swept through Kamret, consuming many young Tiroasian in fever, coughing, and then, for the frail and weak, death. This boggled the Tiroasian physicians, as their medicines did nothing, but what especially frightened them was that Zaia had been the first to be sick. After two weeks of not responding to anything they did, only becoming weaker and sicker, Tiros threatened them with torture or even death if they did not find a cure. In desperation, the physicians made the unusual decision to announce publicly, that if anyone had recovered from the illness to come forward to the headman's manor house, with the promise of a reward if Zaia recovered. But none did, rightly fearing that if they failed to cure the headman's daughter, then they, too, would have the same fate as the physicians.

For all of Kamret saw Tiros as a tyrant, even his own Tiroasians, which was why Rifan kept saying to himself, *You are a damn fool*, as he was allowed entry into the walled center of Kamret for the first time of his life, was gawked at as he walked down a broad avenue towards the gaudily rebuilt, three-story manor house, and was escorted to the dark-paneled main hall, crowded with curious spectators. Before the man who had killed his own family, Rifan stood. But Zaia was innocent; Zaia was not this man, and for the life of him, Rifan could not get the image of her face, rose-gold in its sweet embarrassment, out of his head. So when news of Zaia's dire condition reached him, Rifan had come forward. But standing before the cruel warrior turned aging tyrant, he thought, *This was a mistake!*

"They say your name is Rifan and that you work in my fields," Tiros declared.

“Yes, my lord.”

“How would you know to heal my daughter when my physicians could not?” Tiros demanded.

Rifan inhaled and said, “I have noticed that it has only affected the very young or those who do not mingle much with us lowly commoners. I believe that the sick ones, including Lady Zaia, have been exposed to an illness that they’ve never had before, and because their bodies are unused to it, it has affected them more than anyone else. But individuals like you or me – those who are active outside, surrounded with all kinds of people – may have encountered illnesses like this years before, so we are unaffected when we encounter it again.”

“You have been sick like this before?”

“Yes, my lord. When I was a child.”

“Who healed you?”

“My mother, my lord.”

“Why is she not here, then?”

Rifan tried not to get angry. “Because she died of old age, my lord,” he said, which wasn’t exactly the truth, but it was close enough.

Tiros frowned, considering. “Very well,” he declared, “I will allow you to see Lady Zaia, but under heavy guard. My physicians are already with her. However, if you are lying to me, then --”

“—you will put me to death, my lord,” Rifan interjected, his voice steady. “I understand.”

Tiros, surprised by his calm, replied, “You seem very confident, Rifan.”

Rifan paused, unsure of whether Tiros’ tone was a compliment or

THE LAST BEATRICE

a threat. “As you say, my lord,” he said, and he bowed.

Oh my God.

Zaia, unconscious on her bed.

Zaia, her pale arms stretched away from her.

Zaia, bleeding as two masked and gloved physicians kept open the cuts in her arms, catching the dark red liquid in beautiful, golden bowls.

What are they – what savagery is this?

Zaia, helpless as one masked and gloved physician swung a golden burning censer over her head, noxious bluish-white fumes enveloping her head.

Rifan found himself running. “Stop!” he cried out.

Three masked and gloved figures stopped and turned their heads towards him.

“You’re killing her!”

It had been a week.

The Tيروسians thought he was crazy, as he drove the physicians away from Zaia’s bed, ripped up the bed sheets, and bandaged Zaia’s arms. He commanded the kitchen to find moldy bread or fruit, cut off the moldy bits, and infuse warm water with the mold pieces. He also commanded the kitchen to crush fresh oregano into an oily paste, with some water. Accepting both preparations in Zaia’s bedroom, he unbound Zaia’s arms and soaked them in the cloudy infusion. Afterwards, he daubed the paste into the cuts, forming a poultice, and wrapped her arms again. As for the censer, he disposed of the mercury and the mercury-befouled coals, cleaned the censer, and set it on a

table next to Zaia's head. Then he filled it with cedar wood and set it alight. Leaving the censer's top open, he set upon it a small bowl of water with the oregano paste, and after a time oregano-scented steam and cedar smoke rose up. Sitting bedside, he gently fanned the steam and smoke towards Zaia's head. Sitting bedside, he also gave her, drop by careful drop, the mold-infused water as he, in spite of himself, softly hummed a little tune that his mother used to sing when he was a sick child – like a talisman. Like a prayer.

The Tiroians thought he was crazy, as Rifan did this hour upon hour, day by day, only stopping when he entrusted a half-Kamreti servant boy to fan the censer when he couldn't fight sleep any longer, dropping into fitful naps as he remained, sitting bedside. No Tiroian dared help, as they expected Zaia to die under this commoner's care and didn't want to be seen as accomplices when Tiros put Rifan to death.

It had been a week, and Rifan was asleep, dreaming.

“Why am I doing this, Ma?” he asked. He was sitting on a grassy hill that overlooked Kamret's coast, staring at the dark blue sea glittering in the bright sunshine of his dream.

Ewa, sitting beside him, placed a calloused, brown hand on her son's head and ruffled his long, brown-black hair, which he wore loosely tied up, but she didn't answer.

“I'm doing everything that you taught me, Ma – everything that our people know how to do. But I don't know why! You tell me that these foreign men arrived in Kamret long ago and taught our people wondrous, miraculous things when Grandfather was headman, but not one – not one – piece about defending ourselves – of fighting back

THE LAST BEATRICE

against these invaders, not one damn thing to save us against these savages. And here I am now, saving one of them with knowledge that they don't even believe in – why? Why am I doing this? Am I just crazy?" He turned to his mother. "I'm helping our enemy, Ma – shouldn't you be angry at me?"

Ewa smiled and wrapped her arms around her son's shoulders. "No, Rifan," she said at last, "not when you love her."

"WHAT?"

"Sir!"

Rifan woke up with a start, hearing the servant boy cry out. "What?"

"Sir – Lady Zaia's waking up!"

Zaia stirred and opened her eyes for the first time in three weeks. Her blue eyes met Rifan's dark, staring eyes, and she asked him, her voice barely above a whisper, "Was that you singing?"

From where he stood, Rifan could see the dark blue sea glittering in the bright sunshine, but then he turned his gaze below him. *So many*, he thought, but he still looked for one particular person, although he knew Tiros would never allow it. For, even now, the Tyrant of Kamret still sheltered his beloved youngest daughter from as much unpleasantness as possible.

The Tirosian official was speaking, but Rifan didn't bother to listen. He already knew what the man was announcing: Rifan was sentenced to death by beheading; his declared motive for his so-called crime was revenge for the death of his family. As he tried to ignore the looming presence of the executioner who stood behind him on the raised

platform, Rifan heard a collective gasp, and that was when he paid attention. *Ah*, he thought, *the man came to that part.*

“—for he has lain in hiding, plotting his revenge, as the last son of the vanquished Kamreti Adan. He had hoped to deceive our Lord Tيروس into accepting him into his household, in gratitude to ‘saving’ Lady Zaia from a sickness that he himself has caused and – therefore – could easily cure. But, through the wisdom of our glorious Tيروسian physicians suspecting his malicious motive, we have discovered his true identity through questioning those who would hide him –”

You mean through torturing my mother’s closest friends and my fellow workers, Rifan angrily thought. *And the wisdom of those glorious physicians – bullshit. They were afraid of being seen as incompetents and being where I am now.*

Yet, even with those thoughts storming through his mind, he kept his mouth shut. It didn’t matter. His life was forfeit the moment he was born under Tيروسian rule. With his mother, the last of his family, dead and Zaia, a woman forever beyond his reach, safe in her world, Rifan accepted his death with equanimity.

But as he stood, shackled on the execution platform, the mixed crowd before him seemed to shudder, as one clot of individuals lashed out and another one formed and rose up. He suddenly realized that those of Kamreti blood, full and mixed, outnumbered the full-blood Tيروسians four to one, and he had underestimated the Kamreti’s grief, in losing their hope and their sovereignty. The Tيروسian official beside him screeched to the executioner, “Kill him! Kill him!” but the executioner – as flaxen-haired and blue-eyed as any Tيروسian – lowered his axe and said, “My name is Ord, and my grandfather died defending Kamret.”

THE LAST BEATRICE

Rifan stood, frozen in shock, as he saw the birth of the Kamreti uprising before his eyes, and the cause of that birth was him. Rifan – who had remained calm when faced with an ignoble death – suddenly realized that he had a new role in life, and that was to be Adan’s heir, to reclaim the manor house as the ancestral headman of Kamret. His people would need a leader – and that new reality terrified him.

I can’t do this, he thought, panic rising in him like poison. Who was Rifan but a common laborer, alone and orphaned in the world? But then the image of Zaia – whose face was gaunt and yet able to blush rose-gold when she had learned that he had nursed her back to health, whose eyes flashed with anger and outrage when Tيروس’ physicians accused Rifan of deception and intrigue, and whose enraged cries echoed when Rifan was arrested and taken away by her own father’s guards – Zaia flashed into his terrified mind, and he thought, *I can’t do this alone*.

Suddenly, a small group of Tيروسians broke through the crowd and stormed the platform, swords drawn, and Ord raised up his axe.

Oh God – no!, Rifan thought, terrified in seeing multiple murders committed before his eyes.

Then a new scream arose, as everyone – Kamreti and Tيروسian alike – looked up and then recoiled. Rifan looked at what they saw, and his mother’s voice emerged from his memory.

“My mother used to say that the foreign lords who taught the Kamreti the many gifts of our village looked like men, but they were not men. They were not human at all, but like gods – so pale and tall, with feathered wings like eagles. The Kamreti could not see those wings, yet my mother could when she first saw them, when she was

young. The winged GodKings. Oh – I wish I had been alive back then!”

“They never came back?” young Rifan had asked. These were stories that Ewa would tell when Rifan was sick as a child, stories to pass the time.

“They never did,” Ewa had replied with melancholy. “It almost makes me wonder if they were real at all.”

As Rifan looked upon the sudden appearance of two godlike men, standing in a space cleared out by frightened people and towering above everyone, he thought, *They are real, Ma.*

They were the pale, winged GodKings of his grandmother’s time, even though it shocked Rifan that only he could see their wings.

And they gave back Rifan’s heritage, even though he was reluctant to reclaim it.

“Rifan, this is as it should be,” the one called Baraqel once again reminded. He was the smooth-talking, emerald-eyed one, with hair so blond that it was almost white, and his wings were golden.

“Hmph,” the one called Kokabiel replied, his amber eyes narrowed. His hair was the color of smoke and ash, with wings to match, and he was often contrarian to his partner. He declared, his voice brusque, “We will be leaving soon, Rifan.”

By the time the two GodKings left, Kamret had returned to Kamreti rule, with Rifan as the restored headman. But he felt the keen trauma of a sudden bloodless coup d’etat, as he had discovered that the GodKings had returned out of pure chance, only checking on Kamret because they were nearby. Once they forced Tiros to step

THE LAST BEATRICE

down and discovered that the four sons of Tيروس had infiltrated and usurped village-states that the GodKings had deemed under their care, they also removed Tيروس' sons from power. Father and sons were to be taken away to Tيروس' original homeland, on the other side of the sea, thereby securing Rifan, heir of Adan, as Kamreti's rightful headman.

But the real trauma of the reversal of fortune was with Zaia, whose father commanded, "Come here, child!"

It was the last day of the GodKings' presence. They were in the main hall of the manor house, and Rifan sat in the ceremonial chair of the headman of Kamret. His position still felt too new, as only a week had passed when the GodKings appeared out of nowhere on his execution day.

Zaia stood before her father. Even though she still feared the mysterious GodKings, she no longer feared her father. Her eyes had become open to everything that her father had done to the Kamreti, the other non-Tirosian peoples through her corrupt brothers, and even Zaia herself, when her father allowed her to suffer under the hands of her father's physicians, the same ones whose incompetence allowed her mother to die unnecessarily after she was born. Zaia replied, "No."

Although stripped of power, Tيروس still felt outrage. After all, Tيروس' two remaining wives had obeyed to join him, and they stood behind him, demure in their veils as married women. "I am your father! Do as I say!"

"No."

"What – are you going to stay and marry this DOG?"

Even in his role as headman, Rifan flinched, but Zaia remained unmoved. "I will always love and honor you, Father. But I am not a

child, and my place is here.”

“PAH!” The old man spat in his daughter’s face, and as Rifan rose in anger, Tiros cried out, “You ungrateful BITCH! Just like your mother! Of all the things I’ve done for you – I curse you! I curse you! May you suffer and die in pain! May you, that dog, and any half-breed you whelp go to HELL!”

Baraqel made a “tch” sound, reached over, and tapped Tiros’ shoulder, and the deposed tyrant collapsed on the floor, unconscious, as the two wives of Tiros stifled screams. “So bothersome.”

“Should’ve done that from the beginning,” Kokabiel said, “before he opened that mouth.”

“Zaia,” Rifan said, seeing Zaia wipe her face furiously with her sleeve, her calm, stone-like demeanor gone as she stepped towards her father. He started when she gave a hard kick to his fallen form, and when she reared back to do it again, Rifan pulled her away, exclaiming, “Zaia!”

She twisted towards him and buried her face into his chest, trembling.

For everything made sense now. Her father’s favorite. His only daughter. Fair-haired, blue-eyed, skin the color of burnished gold, the once shining mascot of her father’s rule, looking like her mother. Her father would touch her fair hair, kiss her closed blue eyes, and caress her burnished gold skin, which would blush rose-gold. Zaia, protected and sheltered from everyone, from everyone – except her father. Everything made sense now, and her head exploded with knowledge.

The GodKings took away Tiros and his wives, leaving Rifan and his bride in peace.

THE LAST BEATRICE

Rifan was afraid to touch her. Her scarred arms, her muscle tremors, her remembered abuse – Tiros’ harm left permanent marks on Zaia, and Rifan was afraid to touch her. He didn’t want to hurt her more than she already had been.

But Zaia would have none of that. She grabbed and clung onto her husband, like a drowning woman wanting to live. “Make me feel something else, Rifan!” she cried, her blue eyes wide and shining.

She tasted of ginger and honey and took his breath away.

Nine months later, Lilith was born.

Zaia was a wife and a mother and felt like a failure in both.

The lovely stories that she had of her childhood were gone. All that were left were nightmares, which haunted her in her sleep and left her exhausted and jittery when awake. The painful tremors, spasms, and weakness in her muscles grew worse, instead of better, over time, and she cursed her father’s monsters, for nearly killing her in the name of curing her. She survived, but what were the consequences? Nine years after the overthrow of Tiros, she was a woman who could barely walk and think, a woman whose very presence both Tirosian and Kamreti resented – as a reminder of the tyranny of Tiros. But, regarding Kamret’s future sovereignty, she was a woman who was only able to bear one child whom she could hardly take care of – a daughter, whom she and Rifan loved but whom both Kamreti and Tirosian saw as a useless liability.

For only sons could become headmen in Kamret.

“I will change that law,” Rifan said, but Zaia chided, “Your rule is

tenuous as it is, Rifan. Both Tيروسian and Kamreti traditions acknowledge the legitimate ruler as male. Remember how quick an uprising could happen?”

It was late, and all in the manor house was asleep. In the dark, they could say hard things.

“But... Zaia, you bearing a child again... it could kill you. You nearly died with Lilith.”

She shook her head, unable to respond.

“And those fools insist that if I can’t have a son with you, then I should take a second wife – as if I were TIROS!” Rifan’s dark eyes flashed with anger when he spat out the hated name.

“Those fools are the Council of Kamret. And the majority of the people.”

“They are still fools.” Rifan remained defiant. “You are Lady Zaia of Kamret, I am Lord Rifan of Kamret, and our child Lilith is my heir.”

“They will not accept this, Rifan.”

“Zaia,” he said, “I don’t care if they won’t accept it.”

She was quiet and then said, firmly, “Maybe you should.”

“What? What are you saying, Zaia?”

She paused and then continued, “I should have left – when my father and most of the Tيروسians left.”

“What foolishness –”

“No, Rifan,” she interrupted. “Listen to me. I may be confined here because of my ill health, but I’m not blind. I’m not deaf. The Kamreti will always see me as the daughter of the man who enslaved them, and the remaining Tيروسians will always see me as the woman who betrayed them. Me being your wife – I am poisoning your legacy. Staining your

bloodline with Tiroasian blood.”

“Zaia –”

“You should have married a proper Kamreti woman. Not me.”

Rifan stared at her, speechless. Then he said, “But then we would never have had Lilith.”

At her daughter’s name, Zaia gave a sharp cry. She shook her head. “Our daughter – Rifan, don’t you see that she will have to bear the worst of it all?” She broke down, crying.

“Zaia,” Rifan replied, holding her, “you’re wrong... you’re wrong....”

They hadn’t noticed the tiny figure in the darkness, who had quietly opened their bedchamber door but didn’t come in, frozen by Zaia’s and Rifan’s words. Discretely, the door closed, and eight-year old Lilith, who had been frightened by a nightmare and had sought her parents for solace, leaned against the corridor wall, her heart beating too fast.

“Lilith?”

She yelped with fear, but in the low light of a handheld lamp, she saw her father and his kind, dark eyes.

Hearing her little cry, her mother called out, “Did you have a bad dream, my dear? You can stay with Mama and Papa.”

Leading her by her hand, her father brought her to her parents’ big bed, and she scrambled up and over, to the open arms of her mother, who kissed her gently on the forehead. Lilith felt her mother’s face, still damp with tears.

Her father joined them on the other side of the bed, setting down the lamp and then turning off the light. In the warm comfort of

darkness, he sang a soft lullaby, and Lilith let her parents' confusing and scary words go. Then her father kissed her on her forehead. "Sweet dreams, child," he said and turned over to sleep.

Nestled safely between her parents, Lilith nearly missed her mother's whispered words as she felt herself be lulled to sleep: "Forgive me, my girl."

The next day, Zaia began to drink the black Kamreti wine at night, "to help me sleep," she would say. It was also helping her fall farther and farther away from Rifan and Lilith, as it not only dulled the never-ending pain in her body but also the pain in her mind, leaving an emotionless, apathetic calm. Whether Zaia had intended that or not, neither Rifan nor Lilith could tell back then.

When she was old enough, after making sure no one was paying attention to her or was needing her presence, Lilith would put on servants' clothes and slip away through an unused servants' side entrance. It was located in a closed area of the manor house that she had discovered when she had searched for a way to leave the manor house undetected. On the cobblestone streets of Kamret, her brown hair gathered and tied up, a cap pulled low to obscure her blue eyes, she looked like any half-Kamreti youth. As long as she looked as if she belonged there, walking with purpose and not stopping to gawk, then no one paid attention to her. In that way, she saw what she needed to see, as Rifan's declared heir, as Zaia's only child.

One early evening, but before the official dinner time, Lilith discretely returned home. She turned to close the door behind her.

THE LAST BEATRICE

“Lilith.”

She flinched, her hand still on the door handle. Swallowing hard, she remained silent as she calmly shut the door and turned around.

They were in a small access room, which connected to a hidden passageway of private rooms that used to be for a larger manor house staff, when Tيروس was Kamret’s headman. The door to the passage was partially open, and her father stood, palely illuminated by the passage’s half-light. He said, “You’re not in trouble.”

“I’m... not?”

He sighed. “You’re not a child,” he said, “and I know you’ve heard of what’s happening in Kamret, even within the confines of these walls. But I also know you would want to see for yourself, even though _”

“You forbade it,” Lilith said, keeping her voice as emotionless as possible, “because you say it’s dangerous for me to be on my own outside. But that’s only if they know who I am.”

“Which is why you slip away in disguise,” he said, “although it’s hardly enough.”

“No one has suspected so far, Father,” Lilith said.

“On that, you’re wrong,” he replied. “Ord recognized you almost immediately.”

Lilith frowned. *Ah*, she thought. *Of course, Ord – the head of Kamret’s watchmen.*

“Also, you have been fortunate so far. Yes, you’re not a child, but I would be irresponsible as your father if I had let you wander unprotected in the streets. When Ord recognized you, he asked me what I wished to do. I asked him to watch over you – but keep his

distance.”

“Why didn’t you stop me, then?”

He sighed again. “Because you’re right. As my heir, you need to know for yourself – but if you went out as yourself, even with a simple attendant, our people would not act how they really are.” He paused. “So what did you see, Lilith?”

Lilith inhaled, and her breath shook as she exhaled. “I have seen a group of young half-Kamreti men surround and nearly kill an old Tiroisian who had accused one of them of stealing from his shop. I have seen a Tiroisian man dragging a young half-Kamreti girl from his home for being with his son. I have seen a Tiroisian boy collapse on the street, and everyone – Kamreti and Tiroisian – ignoring him because he is just a beggar. I have seen Tiroisian loyalists insulting you, me, and Mother, and I have seen just as many Kamreti nativists do the same, saying similar insults – that Mother is an interloper, I am a half-breed Tiroisian, and you are... weak. That I be replaced... or you.” She stopped, unable to continue.

Her father nodded his head.

Lilith stared. “You’re not surprised?”

“No. I’m not.” He shook his head, “So have you not seen one good person in all of Kamret?”

Lilith frowned. “I – I don’t remember. Maybe. But the bad ones –” She paused. “They stay in my mind.”

“They stay in your mind because such good people are becoming few and far between these days,” he said, “drowned out by those you’ve heard and now seen.”

She asked, exasperated, “Why, Father? Why is that?”

THE LAST BEATRICE

Her father shook his head. “Your mother and I only want Kamret to have peace. But Tiros gave Kamret a taste of power – and even those who were oppressed by that power find power to be more seductive than peace. I wish –” he paused. He saw his daughter dressed in Kamreti servants’ garb and remembered when he was merely Tiros’ slave – and Ewa’s beloved son.

Lilith looked at her father, waiting.

He looked up, as if finding an answer. “I wish the GodKings hadn’t left.”

Seventeen-year old Lilith, who had no appetite at all, glanced up at the head of the table and saw her father take up his water glass for a sip – and nearly drop it as they all heard the scream. Shortly thereafter, one of her mother’s maidservants rushed into the dining hall, crying in hysterics, “My lord, my lord! Lady Zaia won’t wake up!”

Her father stared at the servant, as if confused by what she had just said, but then sprang up.

“Father,” Lilith began, but he barked, “Stay here!” She saw him sprint out of the dining hall, to make his way to his and Zaia’s bedchamber.

Lilith, sitting alone before the dining table set for the breakfast meal, stared at her plate, avoiding the still-shocked gaze of the maidservant and the other servant who had been attending them. *Don’t cry*, she thought. Lilith’s fists, hidden under the table and in her lap, curled so tightly that her fingernails bit into her palms, leaving little pink crescents indented in her skin. *Don’t you dare cry*, she thought fiercely. Then she pushed herself away from the table and stood up.

“My lady,” the dining attendant nervously said, “your father said to stay here.”

Lilith’s eyes flashed. “I know what he said.” Ignoring their stares, she quickly made her way upstairs. From just outside her parents’ bedchamber, she heard her father command, “Get the physician!” and then saw another maidservant rush out. Peering through the doorway, she saw her father sitting on the bed, embracing her mother’s small and limp form, saying, “Don’t do this, Zaia – don’t do this to me...”

No, Lilith thought, *no, she isn’t* – and she stopped her thoughts as she stifled a cry.

Hearing her, her father said, “You disobeyed me.” He gently set her mother back down and turned to the doorway. His dark eyes burned with anger and grief as they bore into Lilith’s eyes, which were the same blue as her mother’s.

“Is she – is –”

“Your mother is still alive,” he answered, his voice wavering. “Come here, Lilith.”

Lilith hesitated, but knowing that her mother wasn’t dead, she forced herself to relax her jaw and fists. She joined her father at her mother’s bedside, choosing to remain standing. Her mother was shrunken and ashen, and it pained Lilith to see her.

“Lilith –” he began, but stopped when the physician arrived.

Suddenly shy, Lilith hung back, retreating as far away as possible while still being in the same room. She observed her father and the physician examine her mother. It was odd, this feeling – knowing that, since her mother was still alive, her jagged fear had faded away and was replaced with a dull weariness. It was a familiar emotional swing

THE LAST BEATRICE

between extremes that she had lived with for nine years. Was this normal, feeling everything and then nothing, as her mother often had drunk herself so much into a stupor over the years that her difficulty waking up in the morning was not only frighteningly expected, but routine? That the reason she drank was to distance herself from her and her father so that, when she died, it wouldn't hurt as much because she had mentally and emotionally left a long time ago?

Lilith was young, but she wasn't a child, and she knew what she needed to know – even though she wished she didn't.

So she was prepared to see the physician shake his head, prepared to see her father fall to his knees before her mother's side, prepared to feel nothing.

But she wasn't prepared to feel this angry.

Even though Lilith didn't attend the public court of the Council of Kamret, she heard through the manor house gossip what the Kamreti villagers had said.

Not one was Tيروسian, and they had said awful things.

“When Lady Zaia dies, we Kamreti should kick out the last of the Tيروسians – good riddance!”

“When Lady Zaia dies, Lord Rifan must remarry and have a son – a proper heir!”

“When Lady Zaia dies, Lord Rifan must remarry a full Kamreti woman, to keep the bloodline pure. Do we really want the blood of Tيروس rule over us?”

“When Lady Zaia dies –”

“When Lady Zaia dies –”

“Father, are you not bothered by what they are saying?” Lilith asked, her rage barely held in check. “Are you not angered that only the Kamreti are saying these things?” She found him where he always was these days, when he wasn’t obligated to sit in the headman’s chair, hearing the villagers speak their grievances before the Council of Kamret. He sat, unmoving, by her mother’s bedside, and his face had begun to take on an unnervingly calm appearance.

“Why would I need to spare my thoughts to them,” her father replied, “when Lady Zaia will surely recover?”

“What are you saying?” Lilith asked, surprised. “Has there been a change?”

Her father turned to her, but his eyes seemed to focus to a place beyond her, far away. “The GodKings will come. Whenever Kamret needs them, they will come.”

Lilith stared at her father. “You – not you, too!” She threw up her hands, fighting the urge to grab her father’s shoulders and shake off his apathy. “First Mother running away with drink, and now you running away with these FANTASIES –”

“They are real, Lilith.”

“I know they are real!” Lilith snapped. “But they are like a storm – or an earthquake! You can’t predict them, you can’t rely on them!” She shook her head, “But you – YOU are the Lord of Kamret! We rely on you to do your duty, Father!”

“And what is that, Lilith?”

Lilith’s face grew incredulous. “To be a LEADER!”

Her father flinched, and Lilith was saddened to see that reaction. It reminded her of that story, when he stood before his people on his

execution day, and what terrified him was not death but the thought that they were looking for him to be the uprising's leader. Only the thought of her mother – when she was only the Tyrant Tيروس' daughter – kept him from running away. He was lost without her then; he was lost without her now.

What are we to do? Lilith thought, afraid and angry that she was afraid, and she saw her father regain his placid visage and turn his gaze back to his wife. *What am I to do?*

Not too soon after, Rifan stopped appearing before the Council of Kamret, leaving the headman's chair vacant. He sat vigilant before her mother's bedside, softly singing a Kamreti lullaby that his own mother used to sing to him when he was sick. Lilith knew that story, too: when her mother was ill when she was young, she woke up, remembering that her father had sang to her as he nursed her back to health. But it was utterly useless now, merely the delusion of a man grown mad with grief. His singing and his murmurs that the GodKings would surely return and perform another miracle only confirmed the people's belief that Rifan was incompetent as their headman.

After several days of this, Lilith attempted to appear in place of her father, even though she was reluctant to do so. She declared, "As my father's successor, I should stand in his stead while he attends my mother."

Miraz, the lead advisor of the Council of Kamret, stood in front of her. Behind him were the closed double doors of the main hall, and on either side of him were two guards, half-Kamreti like Miraz himself. "Our apologies, Lady Lilith," he replied stiffly, "but we cannot allow you to enter."

She stared at him. “Do you speak on behalf of Lords Belis, Uvilan, Arim and Erlian?” she asked, naming the other four advisors who comprised the Council of Kamret.

“I do, my lady.”

“Well then, why am I not allowed to enter, Lord Miraz?” she demanded.

He peered down at her, barely hiding his patronizing sneer. “Need we remind you, my lady,” he replied, “that as long as Lord Rifan is alive, he is Kamret’s headman, not you?”

Such a flippant response infuriated Lilith, as the Council’s beliefs – that Lord Rifan needed to be replaced as headman, yet he was still headman so Lilith could not replace him – left her powerless to do anything. She could feel Miraz’ contempt: for the fact that she was Tiros’ grandchild, that she was young, that she was female. “But –” she began to protest.

“My apologies, my lady,” Miraz interrupted, not hearing her, “but I must return to my duties.” He gave a curt bow, and the guards opened the doors for him, revealing the four advisors already hearing the grievances of three villagers. Yet again, they were Kamreti, as if Tirosians had given up speaking before the Council. Miraz returned to the main hall, leaving Lilith shut out.

The next day, after the Council of Kamret rebuffed her a second time and after she checked on her parents—nothing had changed – she tried to calm herself in the privacy of her bedchamber.

“Aaaargh!” she exclaimed after a while. “I can’t stand it!” Disguising herself in servants’ garb again, she left the suffocating confines of the manor house. Knowing the terrain of Kamret better

than anyone else, thanks to her father, she traveled to a place where nobody went anymore: a lonely, seaside hill, where her father's execution platform once stood. Standing on that hill, she cried out, "My father believes in you, you damn GodKings! If you care for us at all, then DO SOMETHING!"

She stood, waiting.

She was met with silence.

After an uncomfortable amount of time, she snorted in disgust. *I'm a fool*, she thought. *A damn fool*. She turned around and began her trek back to the center of Kamret.

In her frustration, she had neglected to cover her head. She was suddenly startled by the cry, "Lady Lilith, what are you doing?" Looking around, she saw Ord, the head of Kamret's watchmen, his disapproval obvious that she had carelessly revealed herself. Lilith frowned, seeing him as yet another constraint of the manor house, and of the Kamreti people as well, even though she knew she wasn't being fair to her patient guardian. "I am fine. I just went for a walk – cannot the headman's daughter go for a walk?" she said, not stopping, but she wasn't surprised when she felt two junior watchmen follow her, becoming escorts as she returned home. She felt the hostile stares and furtive whispers of the remaining villagers who were still out, but she kept her own eyes forward, as nothing she would say would be heard.

It's all so useless, she thought.

It was late in the evening when Lilith returned to the manor house. Foregoing the secret entryway, she marched through the main doors, waving away the attendants and servants, who were shocked at her lowly and sudden appearance. She wasn't surprised when her father

didn't come down from his and her mother's bedchamber to scold her, not breaking the spell that was his vigil at her mother's side. Having no appetite whatsoever, skipping a supper in which she would have dined in silence and solitude, she returned to the confines of her own bedchamber. For a long time she lay in the dark, finding it difficult to sleep. Her thoughts spun and reeled, her heart aching with anger and sadness. A memory of her father singing her to sleep rose up in her mind and, feeling unwanted and powerless, Lilith allowed herself a moment of self-pity.

Why was I even born?

But she angrily shook her head, both shamed and disturbed by that thought, and eventually drifted into a fitful slumber.

Sometime in the night, a still-sleeping Lilith arose from her bed and began to walk. As she walked out of her bedchamber and into a dark and empty hallway, she dreamt, and in the dream she was an invisible, silent presence who wandered and witnessed and learned a new word. In a voice none in the dream could hear, Lilith spoke that new word as if struck by an epiphany – a bewildering revelation.

“Angels.”

6 THE FALLEN ONES

The first time Kokabiel heard music was at his initial duty station, on the first day of his existence.

On that day, he opened his amber eyes, finding himself reclined on a narrow bunk among other bunks filled with creatures of his kind in a dark barrack. Like the others, he knew by instinct what he was and what his purpose was: a Virtue-ranked Sentry created to guard, patrol, and defend as a member in the angelic host. Silently, he slid off his bunk, pulled on his silver-gray gear, joined others in a briefing room to receive their orders, and reported for duty in a far-flung containment room on the edge of timeless space.

He was made to serve, made to follow orders, and he did so without question.

Yet, as he stood in the perimeter of that cold, metallic room, serving as impersonal watch, he was distracted by the Celestial Engineers' work. Even with his eyes forward, he could sense Ariel,

their leader, standing in the center of the room, surrounded by subordinates working in quick and dizzying concert, and soon picked up what they were doing.

Alpha Omega's raw code for the creation of material spacetime tumbled before the Celestial Engineers' monitors, filling the entire room with a resounding cacophony of bell-like ringing. Then the subordinates worked on their sequence of code, stitching together individual lines of track, and Ariel – conducting the process – merged the tracks into a unified piece. What resulted was a melodious harmony that began to emerge from the chaos, an organic unity that matched the growing creation that was spacetime, glowing in the middle of that cold, impersonal room. Finally, after a pregnant pause, Ariel made one finishing adjustment. Suddenly, the glow collapsed and then exploded outward in one, brief piercing note, and spacetime shone brightly, fully formed, with a haunting harmony that made Kokabiel's eyes widen with wild surmise.

He was hearing music for the first time in his short life, and it was beautiful.

While some Sentry members cycled off and on watch over the next few days, Kokabiel chose to remain at his station, to listen to the complex music of spacetime as the Celestial Engineers refined the code behind the music. On one of those days, unusual movement made him glance sideways. There, he saw Ariel approach a startled member of his cohort, a female Sentry whose name was Miranda, and engage her in conversation. This surprised Kokabiel, as he had thought Celestial Engineer and Sentry kept to their own since their duties didn't mix. But what surprised him even more was when Ariel conferred with

the dual CO's of the containment room, and both Ariel and Miranda vanished together, portaled into the glowing, hovering mass that was spacetime.

Kokabiel, like the rest of his fellow Sentry on duty, remained outwardly unfazed by this break in routine, but he saw one member of the Celestial Engineers blurt out, "You can do that?" In response, two neighboring Engineers commented with mild sarcasm to his naïve surprise. Inadvertently eavesdropping, he learned the first one's name was Setebos and the other two were Arakiel and Baraqel. Kokabiel suppressed the urge to roll his eyes at the display of petty friction between members who were supposed to be peers and fellow teammates. It spoiled his enjoyment of the spacetime's crystalline music enough that, when given the opportunity to rotate off watch, he took it.

After a brief respite in the barracks, Kokabiel joined a cohort of Sentry out on the exercise fields in the busy interior of Heaven. There, he focused on performing various martial drills, overseen by the team lead. It was good to be active outside, moving in complicated, aggressive unison with his fellow Sentry.

Yet he was distracted by the clear, poignant sound of the Musicians practicing in the open-aired pavilions.

The Musicians were the closest to what Central and Alpha Omega were: makers of the tangible out of the intangible. But unlike their coeval rulers, who made out of nothing, the Musicians made out of existing firmament, to join and shape unique forms that hadn't existed yet as variations to Central's foundational work; thus, Central and Alpha Omega had the ultimate say to whether their pieces was final or

not. In consequence, the Musicians were as rigorous in their practice as the Sentry were, and – even distant as they were – Kokabiel could hear their music, an interplay of layered voices that formed images in his mind of beings not yet created. *Unicorns?*, he thought, pleasantly amused. But the images remained as images, for the Musicians would either leave incomplete their compositions or have one note slightly too sharp or too flat, so as not to inadvertently create something before its acceptable time.

“Kokabiel! Get your ass over here!”

Hearing his team lead’s voice, Kokabiel snapped at attention. The singing had so pulled at his attention that he had missed a cue, a call for sparring. “Yes, sir!” He jogged over to another part of the exercise fields, where he joined his sparring partner. He was Sentry, and he enjoyed his purpose as such.

And yet... and yet...

Later that day, as he lay in his bunk, he thought, *What’s wrong with me?* Kokabiel shook his head and was about to turn over to sleep when a Heaven-wide alarm sounded, loud and clear in his head. He stared, stunned into paralysis at first, before he, like the others, sprang out of his bunk and quickly pulled on his gear, forcing himself not to think what Code Crimson meant.

For it meant war had come to Heaven.

Who would win and who would lose was never in doubt.

Even though Seraph-ranked Lightbearer was the noblest and strongest of the heavenly host, he was still a creature, even with having a third of the host standing with him in his revolt against Central. Even

though Seraphim, the highest ranked angels, made up most of Lightbearer's army, whose combined strength was equal to the remaining loyal two-thirds of the host, none could defeat those who had the providence of Central's power.

Kokabiel saw this power first hand, when he, Miranda, and other Sentry members witnessed the Archangel Michael nearly cleave Lightbearer in half. Lightbearer's ichor – previously golden but now polluted with an ink-like substance that marked his fallen nature – poured out onto the slick, befouled battlefield. Lightbearer's army only managed to evacuate him to safety as they fell back in retreat because Michael, the Sentry's highest commanding officer, allowed them to escape.

“Why?” Miranda dared to question Michael, her violet eyes wide with battle-lust.

Kokabiel glanced sharply at Miranda and then at Michael but kept his mouth shut.

“Central's orders, Miranda,” Michael responded, letting go the insubordinate tone of a Sentry member several ranks lower than he was. “We need to prepare for the War's end.”

Soon after, Michael and Samyaza, the Celestial Engineers' CO, gave orders for ten Celestial Engineer members to form a temporary squad, whose sole purpose was to create a penal dimension to house Lightbearer and his army, and for ten Sentry members to safeguard the Engineers and the dimension while being constructed. The Engineers formed an initial pocket dimension, still within timeless space but outside Sacred Space. Then they gathered the dark, oozing, toxic substance that erupted wherever Lightbearer and his army made camp;

they contained it in stasis field packets, which they portaled to the empty dimension. Once they had enough construction materials, the two squads portaled to the place that was designated “Hell.” The Celestial Engineers began the unsavory work of creating a prison for ethereal creatures that were once the paragon of angels. The Sentry secured the perimeter and stood by, watching the nascent Hell come into being.

At his station, Kokabiel fought disgust and loathing as the dark substance molded and spread out around him. It took on an inflamed, sick color as it formed and hardened into bare plains, stone mountains, and desert valleys under a red sky thick with sulfurous clouds crackling with electricity. The substance’s exothermic reactions created a stifling, stinking heat, and he marveled that the Engineers were able to finish their work without anyone breaking down.

“We’re done,” Kokabiel heard a grim voice declare through his comm, which he recognized as Baraqel.

“Oh, thank God,” he heard Setebos’ relieved voice reply.

“Scared were you, Setebos?” Baraqel asked, forcing his voice to be light.

“Baraqel,” the deep alto voice of Miranda pointed out crisply, “you’re on the all-band.”

“Ah!” Setebos said, sounding embarrassed.

“Well, then,” Baraqel replied, “I confirm that we are done, Sentry Miranda.”

“... Copy,” she said.

When both squads returned to Sacred Space, Kokabiel observed, in the silent faces of both Sentry and Celestial Engineer – even Baraqel,

whom Kokabiel could see his clenched jaw in spite of his breezy demeanor – that the time spent creating Hell perhaps did more psychic damage than any battle fought in the War in Heaven.

But there wouldn't be many battles left, once Hell was waiting for Lightbearer and his army. On the last day of the War, Central's Son, Alpha Omega, drove Lightbearer and his army out of Heaven, into a massive portal opening that split Heaven's horizon into two. Everyone saw the rebels fall through, banished into Hell. Witnessing their screaming fall, Kokabiel trembled uncontrollably. He knew their punishment was just. He knew that he and the others who stood by Central were on the right side of the War. Still, he couldn't stop his shaking, as their screams of fear, hate, and despair became the soundtrack to the image of Hell that was permanently in his memory.

He wanted to forget, but he knew that was impossible. Angels were sentient intelligence; they never forgot. Yet Kokabiel wanted to forget the screams, for they drowned out the memory of music that made him happy once upon a time.

When the humans fell shortly after their creation, Kokabiel was assigned to a newly constructed platoon called the Watchers, whose mission was to safeguard the humans from future incursions from Lightbearer and his ilk, especially to protect a rare sub-set of humans called Beatrices, whom Ariel and other high-level Celestial Engineers predicted would maintain some pre-Fall abilities of the original humans – although none had been detected yet. The broad mission required an indefinite deployment to Earth, but since Kokabiel was made to serve, made to follow orders, he accepted the new assignment

without question.

Yet, as he stood in the containment room of his first duty station, waiting to portal to Earth, Kokabiel noticed that the Watchers had one characteristic in common: they had all served in the creation of Hell during the War, with the exception of Samyaza, the Watchers' newly appointed CO. The mission briefing did not explain that commonality, but Kokabiel knew it wasn't coincidence. One notable difference, however was that – unlike the prior mission when Sentry and Celestial Engineer worked separately – two-person teams of one Sentry member and one Celestial Engineer member comprised the Watchers. The Engineer, designated the team lead, was to spot any anomaly, and the Sentry, following the Engineer's lead, was to neutralize any hostile action.

Kokabiel's partner and team lead was Baraqel. While he accepted that command structure, he felt the aloof coolness between himself and an angel whom he didn't know personally but had seen work at a distance. Baraqel was competent and efficient, but he could be cocky as well. Kokabiel still remembered Baraqel's flippant attitude to Setebos on the last day of their deployment in Hell, as well as on his first, long watch in the containment room, when Setebos was surprised by Ariel taking Miranda to a pristine, unfallen Earth. At that memory, Kokabiel glanced behind, seeing Miranda and Setebos stand awkwardly next to each other since they were each other's partners. *I wonder what they're thinking?*, he thought. Just moments before, Ariel – newly promoted to Samyaza's previous position – had brought Setebos from the other side of Heaven and had kissed Miranda farewell before stepping away. Everyone knew that Ariel was Miranda's lover and

Setebos' mentor, but Miranda and Setebos were merely friendly acquaintances to each other.

"Eyes front, soldier," Baraqel said.

Kokabiel turned sharply towards Baraqel, who simply nodded in front of him. Kokabiel saw the portal before them.

"Time to go," Baraqel said, a now-familiar forced breeziness in his voice.

Kokabiel noticed and, because they were partners now, said in a low voice, "You don't want to go, do you."

Baraqel's green eyes twitched, but he didn't reply.

When he was high enough so that any ground-level human who looked up in the sky would mistake him for a large bird of prey, Kokabiel switched from ethereal to material so that he could hear the wind as he flew. His wings, the color of smoke and ash, blended in with the high clouds as he twisted and turned, spiraled and sped, the wind a constant roar in contrast to the rhythmic beating of his wings. Even after several yottaCalends on Earth, flying freely was his favorite part of his day, when his patrol would come to an end and then he would return to home base.

Truth be told, he was reluctant to return to home base, as he knew Baraqel was there – sulking.

Baraqel had been sulking as soon as they had seen their first human conflict from their mountain vantage point, and he had declared, "It's not Lightbearer's doing."

"But they just slaughtered each other."

"Yes. But it's not anyone from Hell." He turned away, dismissive

of the small field of dead bodies below them. “The humans are fallen now; they don’t need Lightbearer’s help to act shitty with each other.”

Back then, Kokabiel observed, “You’re angry.”

Baraqel turned back to Kokabiel, replying, “Of course I am! Earth was perfect – PERFECT – and they fell and mucked it all up. And we’re just overglorified babysitters for these humans.” He gestured curtly below them. “Actually, we’re not even that – since there’s nothing we can do except watch them act like crazed animals with each other.”

Kokabiel stared at his partner. “So our orders then? Looking out for Lightbearer and his lackeys among the humans? Finding these mysterious humans called Beatrices?”

Baraqel gave a dismissive hand wave. “With Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, and Uriel monitoring as eyes in the sky and the Edenic Cherubim guarding the Tree of Life? Who needs twenty lower-level operatives crawling around the planet when you have those heavy weights serving as the Panopticon up there?”

“So – you think our role is useless? Then why have the Watchers at all?”

Baraqel frowned but didn’t answer.

“Or do you think that we’ve been deceived, that this is some kind of ruse to get us out of Heaven?”

Baraqel, realizing what treacherous territory Kokabiel was exploring, shook his head vehemently. “Forget it. Just forget it.” He sighed. “Look, I’m a Celestial Engineer, Kokabiel. I’m meant to design and FIX things. But my current duties – watching humans and then alerting when I see Lightbearer’s activity amongst them – none of that

fits my purpose. None of that fits who I am.”

Kokabiel frowned. “What do you propose we do instead, Baraqel?”

Resigned and sullen, Baraqel replied, “Nothing. We follow our orders.”

And he had remained sullen ever since.

As Kokabiel approached a stand of trees that served as their temporary home base, he could feel his shoulders tense up, in preparation for dealing with Baraqel’s frustrated sulking yet again. But then he saw an unexpected golden blur appear from the tree tops, and it took a moment for Kokabiel to realize that Baraqel had flown up to meet him. “What is it?” he asked, surprised.

For Baraqel, instead of his usual grouchy gloominess, was animated. Even his green eyes looked as if they were shining out of his golden-haired head. “Samyaza’s called for an emergency meeting. All teams are to convene now.”

“For what purpose?”

“No clue. But it’s not even the next yottaCalend, so something important must’ve happened.”

Switching to ethereal to match Baraqel as they traveled, Kokabiel asked, “What if it’s bad news?”

Baraqel’s cheery mood didn’t waver. “Doesn’t matter. It’s something new. As far as I’m concerned, anything new is good news.”

As Kokabiel stood among his fellow Watchers in the natural amphitheater east of Eden, hearing Samyaza, their commanding officer, speaking before them, he wasn’t sure if he shared Baraqel’s optimism as he heard Samyaza’s briefing.

Lightbearer wasn’t even bothering with the humans, choosing

instead to block the orbiting Archangels from communicating with the Watchers. Meanwhile, several Watcher teams, faced with the frustration of seeing meaningless human death around them, had chosen to “save” some humans that they had personally deemed worthy. One of those teams was Setebos and Miranda, which was unexpected and caused some uproar amongst their fellow Watchers. But what astounded Kokabiel was that Samyaza, unable to confer with the Archangels, still decided to amend the Watchers’ mission: from direct action only when Hell-caused activity was evident, to direct action to aid the humans at the discretion of the individual Watcher teams.

After another brief round of uproar, they quieted down, and Samyaza declared before twenty stunned Watchers, “We must ACT because the humans have lost their way, but we can guide them back. After all, we are ANGELS.” Kokabiel forced his face to remain still as Samyaza continued his motivational speech, assured that their new mission was still true to their purpose on Earth. He even gave any one of them the choice to opt out as a conscientious objector – but none of them did.

Kokabiel glanced at Baraqel standing next to him. He was taken aback to see his partner’s thoroughly delighted grin, as it was the first time he’d ever seen Baraqel smile since they had departed Heaven. *Of course*, Kokabiel thought, still not knowing what to think of the new orders. *He finally gets to fix something.*

After their dismissal, but before the teams left to return to their assigned respective regions, Baraqel approached Setebos, saying, “I didn’t know you had heroics in you, saving that human girl from

drowning – and curing her brain cancer!”

Miranda looked up, scowling. “That’s not why he saved Cora –” she began, but Setebos placed a hand on her shoulder, saying, “It’s okay, Miranda.”

Kokabiel, in a less obnoxious tone, asked, “Then why did you save her, Setebos?”

Setebos sighed. “Honestly? Because Cora had so completely lost hope that she was letting herself die – and I couldn’t let a little girl die like that, feeling utter despair.” He peered at Kokabiel and then at Baraqel. “We all remember what it was like, to be in Hell. That was where Cora was – in a human-made Hell. It swallowed up her soul. So how could I not pull her out of that?” He shook his head, remembering. “How could I not give her a second chance to have hope again?”

Miranda lightly touched his arm and declared, “It’s getting late, Setebos. Let’s go.” She gave a short, acknowledging nod to Baraqel and Kokabiel and took off, her blue-black wings quickly bringing her high into the sky.

“Take care,” Setebos said, and he followed his partner, his expansive wine-dark wings swiftly lifting him in five, long beats, catching up with Miranda, who was waiting for him.

Kokabiel was still looking at their colleagues’ departing figures when he heard Baraqel exhale hard. He turned and saw that Baraqel’s manic mood had dropped away, although he wasn’t sullen. Instead, Baraqel looked – puzzled? Sad? Kokabiel couldn’t tell. “Are you okay?”

His partner’s eyes met his. For the first time on Earth, Kokabiel

saw trepidation in Baraqel's eyes as Baraqel carefully replied, "I'm fine. It's just —" He paused and then looked up into the sky, as if searching for an answer. "I hope we do this right."

Several years had passed since the meeting east of Eden.

Kokabiel and Baraqel had resumed their patrol of their assigned region, assessing the humans from a discrete distance. But with their changed mission, their engagement with the humans had increased exponentially: whenever they saw any instance of toxic misery flowing out of a community of humans like a stab victim bleeding out, they entered the populace without notice. It was easier that way — putting the humans off-balance before they had a chance to protest. Suddenly appearing as foreign travelers, Kokabiel and Baraqel gave assistance to whomever was the leader of the settlement — provided that the leader wasn't the cause of the misery. If that was the case, then they aided in either rehabilitating the immoral leader or removing the leader and installing an ethical one. To ensure the security of the settlement, they also taught the residents how to care for themselves, with the tools of medicine, diplomacy, and appropriate technology. After making sure the settlement was stable and thriving, then they left as quickly as they had arrived, resuming their patrol.

Over time, the humans developed and shared stories about the mysterious men who would appear, perform wonders, and vanish. Kokabiel, still uncomfortable around humans, would let Baraqel do the talking, so the humans identified Baraqel as the leader of the duo. In their stories, Kokabiel was the Warrior (this Kokabiel didn't mind) and Baraqel was the GodKing.

“Aren’t you bothered by that at all?” Kokabiel asked as they approached a small coastal village. Based on a quick surveillance, they knew its name was Kamret, just another human settlement that needed angelic help. “It’s as if they’re worshipping you.”

Baraqel wrinkled his nose in slight disgust, but then he shrugged. “Like I said before, it’s harmless. Once the humans’ civilization mature, we won’t be needed as much, and they’ll outgrow such superstitious behavior. We’ll just be imaginary stories passed down to their descendants.”

“Hmph.”

“What?”

“Us not being needed as much. Remember when you once said we may as well be babysitters for the humans? But aren’t we just that these days? Cleaning up their messes, making sure they don’t hurt themselves and others. And yet that village we had departed from two days ago – that was our THIRD time we had to restore order there. These humans – they don’t learn. I don’t see evidence that they’ll outgrow their own self-destructive tendencies.”

“But – okay, their fallen nature is a handicap. That’s true. But while alive, their souls still orient to Central, as originally intended, even with internal and external distractions trying to sideline them. Like Setebos realized, as long as they’re not in a microcosm of Hell when they die, then we’ve fulfilled our mission’s orders.”

“Even when they still confuse you for a god?” Kokabiel demanded.

Baraqel shrugged again. “Well, do YOU want to explain to them exactly what we are, then?”

Kokabiel frowned at that. “No.”

“Well, neither do I. I mean, they feel overwhelmed just understanding germ theory. So, Kokabiel,” Baraqel said, “patience. Everything will be sorted out in the end.” He glanced down, seeing the community in panicked disarray. “There’s the largest house – it should be for the headman of this village.”

“Situational assessment unchanged?”

“Yes. Ergot poisoning.”

“Natural causes. Good. Then we won’t have to go all ‘warrior’ on them – dammit, spoke too soon.” Kokabiel saw a group of men emerge from the headman’s house, pulling along an emaciated girl who was crying out like an injured animal. “Humans and their scapegoats.”

Baraqel made a “tch” sound.

“You still think they’ll never need us, O GodKing?” Kokabiel asked wryly.

“Whatever,” Baraqel replied crossly. He squared his shoulders. “Standard HC.”

“Copy.”

All business now, they performed Standard HC. Still ethereal so that no living eye could see them, Kokabiel, performing the “hold” from above, spread a stun-and-stasis field around the entire village that froze every living thing in place. Meanwhile, Baraqel, performing the “cure” of the plan, scanned for those with ergot poisoning, which was the majority of the village. For each one identified, he dropped down to ground level, often phasing through walls, and cured the individual, clearing out the ergot toxin and even restoring body parts if the ergotism had caused gangrene to set in. Then Baraqel joined Kokabiel hovering above and, through the stun-and-stasis field, Kokabiel sent

out a “find-and-destroy” command, which disintegrated all ergot from the village, whether in food, grain stores, or in the fields. Standard HC completed, they dropped down to ground level before the village headman’s house. Leaving their wings ethereal, both Kokabiel and Baraqel materialized, wearing regional clothing recognized as aristocratic members of a class-based, hierarchical military, and Kokabiel shut down the field.

Immediately, the village came alive again, but this time the humans felt a drastic change, as mortal panic turned into mass confusion. The girl choked back a scream as she saw two intimidating strangers loom before her; the men who had dragged her away for her execution fell back in fear. Even terrorized as she was, having been accused of witchcraft and cursing her village because she was the only commoner one who didn’t get sick, she didn’t run away but remained where she stood. She blinked back tears as she looked up, seeing two incredibly tall strangers shining like the sun and the gigantic beauty of their eagle-like wings.

Kokabiel noticed the girl’s awestruck eyes roving immediately behind and above both himself and Baraqel. *Wait*, he thought, *can she see our wings?*

In the assured voice of a commander, Baraqel boomed towards the doors behind her, through which the frightened men had escaped, “We request an audience with your headman.”

Baraqel and Kokabiel stayed for two weeks in Kamret.

Under their watch, the Kamreti learned botany, medicine, and safe agricultural practices. Also under their watch, they learned fair legal

practices, including justice for the girl, an orphaned beggar named Lilith, whom the Kamreti nearly killed out of blind, irrational fear. For the only reason that she didn't get sick was that she was so poor that she couldn't afford to eat bread made from the ergot-infected grain.

"On behalf of Kamret, we are heartily sorry!" the headman had said on that first day, making public his apology for all to hear. On seeing the stern eyes of the two strangers standing on either side of Lilith, he added, "Of course, we will make reparations for your suffering."

Her eyes downcast, she spoke how she always spoke to others: in a raspy whisper, barely loud enough to hear. "Thank you."

By the end of a fortnight, Kamret was transformed, with a council vetted by Baraqel and a level of technological advancement that would prevent the irrational fear that had spurred Kamret into nearly murdering their own. Per their usual practice, Baraqel and Kokabiel left under cover of night, but – unlike the other times – they had a witness. Newly installed as a ward of the headman's wife and unable to sleep that night, young Lilith looked out her window and saw the miraculous men that her people had called GodKings. She saw them take flight in the sky.

Thank you, she thought to them.

As he phased into ethereal, Kokabiel started, hearing a bell-like two-note harmony in his head. *What was that?*

They hadn't intended to come back. Baraqel was certain that Kamret had rehabilitated and advanced enough that returning was unnecessary. Still, for due diligence, Kokabiel sent out a cursory eye-in-the-sky as their patrol brought them back again to the vicinity of

that tiny coastal village nearly eighty years after their initial contact. One glance at the virtual vid screen made him swear.

“Dammit,” Kokabiel said, quickly assessing the man standing before a crude executioner’s block.

Baraqel studied the live-fed image floating above them.

“You’re seeing what I’m seeing, right? It’s that girl’s descendent.”

“Yes. Based on DNA percentage, it’s her grandson.” Baraqel zoomed out the image. “Hmmm. Ethnic mixing in the spectators. And a riot’s about to start.”

“OF COURSE a riot’s about to start. Dammit.” Kokabiel sharply waved away the vid screen as they veered left, bee lining for Kamret. “Why won’t these humans ever learn?”

Arriving at the location of the public execution, the two angels remained ethereal when they touched down. As the gross matter of human bodies went through their airy substance as they moved forward, they overhead the humans’ angry and fearful murmurings, gathering information. Thirty years ago, invaders who called themselves Tiroians conquered Kamret, slaughtering the males and enslaving the females. Therefore, the males in the crowd were either Tiroian or half-Kamreti, but the man who stood on the execution platform was full Kamreti – Rifan: grandson of Lilith, son of Lilith’s daughter Ewa, and the surviving heir of Ewa’s husband Adan, the slain Kamreti headman. Accused of planning a coup d’etat, Rifan was seen as an enemy by the Tiroians and a liberator by the Kamreti women and the half-Kamreti, male and female. Regarding the silent, resigned man that was Rifan, Kokabiel and Baraqel saw that he was neither enemy nor liberator but another innocent person, caught in the crazed

frenzy of a mob, just like his grandmother seventy-seven years ago.

By the time they reached the center of the public viewing area, the crowd had devolved into riotous chaos, as Tيروسian and Kamreti turned against each other. Enough space had cleared that Kokabiel and Baraqel could stop and drop on one knee. With wings still ethereal, they materialized, at first without immediate notice – until they stood up to their full, towering height. As they had intended, the humans ceased their violent aggression against each other as they screamed in shared terror.

Kokabiel sighed. *Predictable*. But then he noticed Rifan staring in an unexpected way, as human eyes roved from himself to Baraqel, and Kokabiel was struck by its familiarity. *Like his grandmother*, he thought, recalling Lilith's eyes, like an owl's in a face skeletal in its hunger. *Can this human really see our wings?*

Unlike the first time, rehabilitating Kamret only took a week. After all, Kamret's infrastructure and technological advances were already in place and had actually advanced in spite of the Tيروسians, and the majority of the populace readily accepted Rifan as their new headman.

However, that shortened time still felt interminable, as Kokabiel and Baraqel had to deal with the ugly mess of the once powerful Tيروسian ruling family. Clearing the toxic influence of the Tيروسians, they removed Tيروس' tyrannical sons from power in Kamret's nearby village-states. While witnessing as a neutral party Tيروس abusing his daughter in front of Rifan and the newly re-activated Council of Kamret, Baraqel had to intervene before violence erupted between Rifan and Tيروس.

Later, they settled Tiros, his two wives, his four grown sons, and a small retinue of six sycophants in a ship, whereupon – to ease the relocation – Kokabiel placed another stun-and-stasis field. Within that field, Baraqel wove a Lethe sleep, knocking out the humans as well as softening their memories so that they wouldn't be able to locate Kamret again. Powered by Baraqel and Kokabiel, who became ethereal, the ship swiftly sailed across a small sea to the native homeland of Tiros and his people. Once the humans were safely on shore and the ship was deconstructed to timber, they deactivated the stasis field and woke up the humans.

Bleary at first, they regained consciousness and looked around, stunned. Tiros' wives, sons, and lackeys began to sob bitterly. Angered by his loss, Tiros screamed and cursed at them for their failings. When he rose his hand to strike the younger of his two wives for sobbing the loudest, Kokabiel moved to fly down, but Baraqel said, “No – we're done here.”

“Can you seriously say that, Baraqel?” Kokabiel retorted, gesturing below them where Tiros' wife cowered, her pale, slender arms covering her head. But then one of the sons ran forward and knocked away Tiros' hand. Even as high as they were, they could hear Tiros' and his son's overlapping screams of anger and blame.

“Yes,” Baraqel said. “This is now an intrafamily affair, Kokabiel. Besides, we've overstepped our jurisdiction. We're on the other side of the boundary into Arakiel and Turiel's region.”

Kokabiel's eyes burned, reluctant to let Tiros remain with the ability to terrorize, even if only towards a small group of his own people.

“You forget, Kokabiel – I'm still team lead. Must I give you an

order to leave?”

Kokabiel inhaled sharply but checked his anger. “No... SIR.”

“Good.”

They flew back in silence, faster than before since they didn't have to tow a ship filled with sleeping humans. Once on their side of the sea, they made camp at the nearest stand of trees, choosing the largest one as their roost. As they settled in for their nightly recharge, Baraqel said, “Sorry for pulling rank on you.”

From his cot on the other side of the room, Kokabiel shook his head, replying, “Nothing to apologize for. You were right.” He lay back, facing the ceiling. “I forget sometimes. That we're part of a platoon – that we have teammates out there, spread out all over this planet.” He sighed.

Baraqel regarded his partner's profile – the only other angel that he had seen since Samyaza's meeting, hundreds of years ago. “I know what you mean,” he replied. “It's like we're forgetting how to be part of the angelic host – when we're dealing with the humans' never-ending problems.”

“Different day, same old shit. ARGH!” Kokabiel rubbed his face with his hands. “It doesn't help that we feel like we're on half-rations all the time. Why do we feel so wiped out at the end of the day? Are some of humans' weaknesses rubbing off on us?”

“What? NO. Impossible.”

“Why impossible?”

“You don't know?”

Kokabiel sighed again. “I'm tired, okay? HUMOR ME, O GodKing.”

THE LAST BEATRICE

Baraqel shook his head but was glad that Kokabiel was in a better mood. “It’s because humans and angels are two completely different creatures, originating from two completely different planes of existence. Saying the weakness of a human rubs off onto an angel is like saying the weakness of a beast rubs off onto a human. If anything, it’d be the other way around – we’d rub off onto the humans, like how a human domesticates an animal.”

Kokabiel frowned. “Are you saying that we’re trying to domesticate the humans?”

“Well...”

“Because didn’t Alpha Omega personally create the humans, instead of giving the specs to you Engineers? So they’re more than just animals.”

“True, but – think back to Tiros.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Kokabiel –”

“Okay, okay. I got that waste of carbon in my mind. Now what?”

“He’s egocentric – a pure narcissist. He even treats his own family like tools to break if they don’t do what he wants. But Alpha Omega didn’t create humans to be that way – they’re meant to be social, interdependent, and empathetic. They’re meant to take care of each other. But humans fell away from that, resulting in a painful estrangement that they try to fix by haphazardly satisfying selfish desires that can never be satisfied.”

“So Tiros is an extreme example of fallen humanity. What does that have to do with domesticating the humans?”

“Well, a fallen human like Tiros is like a wild, unrestrained human,

right? Since that natural pull towards peaceful interdependence got corrupted, we have to patchwork that back in them through guardianship and direct intervention. That's what I mean by us 'domesticating' them."

Kokabiel made a face. "Still... I'd rather not think of us Watchers as human herders."

"Okay, so my metaphor's bad," Baraqel admitted. "But my point is, it's impossible for a human to affect us. We're just too different. Makes sense?"

"Makes sense," Kokabiel said. But he noticed that his partner's tone had that familiar supercilious manner that reminded him of Baraqel back then, when his partner misjudged Setebos with his breezy smugness because he had incomplete knowledge. Kokabiel thought, *You don't know what I've seen.* "Baraqel."

Baraqel, who had turned over to sleep, grunted, "Hmm?"

"I have something to tell you."

Kamret was never far from Kokabiel's mind.

Seventeen years had passed when Kokabiel and Baraqel had restored Rifan's position as headman. In that time, the two Watchers had continued their patrol, but an uneasy awkwardness had returned between them since that night, when Kokabiel shared his certainty that Rifan and his grandmother Lilith were able to see their ethereal wings.

Baraqel had dismissed it, saying, "Your SOLE proof was how they looked at us?"

The memory of Baraqel's words intruded Kokabiel's thoughts as he flew high in the early evening sky, and he shook his head as if

avoiding a pesky mosquito. Flying freely while materialized was still his favorite part of his day. His solitary patrol had come to an end for the day, and he was returning to the designated nightly roost, where he would reconvene with Baraqel. But the memory of his partner's open skepticism was ruining Kokabiel's enjoyment, and he found himself slowing down his flight and then stopping. Hovering in mid-air, he surveyed the land below him, an area of scrubby grass and jagged mountains very far east of Kamret, and then he looked west, seeing Earth's sun dipping below the horizon line, making the entire sky explode in a palette of darkening orange, pink, and blue.

The human's fallen home was still beautiful, and it made him miss Heaven even more.

You're wrong, Baraqel, he thought. *You're wrong about the humans. We're more alike than you think.*

Then he heard music.

What was that?

It was a faint, lonely tune, a melody of echoing bells. It resonated in his mind, and it came from the west. Even though it was late in the day and Kokabiel was exhausted, he switched from material to ethereal and flew again, his curiosity driving him towards the source of the music. Only when he saw a familiar coastline did he realize that he was approaching Kamret.

It's coming from here? He touched down on the outskirts of the village-state but then immediately collapsed, as the music suddenly cut off. *Shit!*, he thought. He tried to stand but fell down again, an enervated shimmer on the ground.

"Idiot."

Kokabiel looked up and stared as a golden blur, shining in the darkness, touched down next to him.

“How did you...” Kokabiel stopped; even his voice sounded thin and weak.

“You did a sending. So I’m wrong about the humans, huh?”

“I’m sorry —”

“Skip it.” Baraqel crouched down, slung Kokabiel’s left arm around his shoulders, and stood up. “You’re almost to nothing. Why did you fly out here even though you were already low on energy?”

Kokabiel shook his head.

“Right.” Baraqel did a quick scan and spotted the largest nearby tree. “Over there.” Quickly, before his own low energy level dropped further, Baraqel dragged Kokabiel to the base of the tree, whereupon both Watchers flowed into the tree as their resting roost.

Like with all arboreal-based roosts, they had arrived at a spare room with cots on either side of the room. The calm glow of the tree’s energy came through the ceiling, walls, and floor, casting the space in a soft, green illumination that enveloped the two Earth-confined angels in its gentle, restorative power. Baraqel set Kokabiel on a cot and then went to his own, lying down heavily with a loud grunt. After a few moments of lying in silence, Baraqel said, “Whatever it was that brought you back here, you should’ve waited till morning. What with the power issues we’ve been having, it’s reckless to miss a recharge session, especially when you were likely already hitting a low before you came out here.”

Having recovered enough, Kokabiel sighed. Then he said, “So... I unintentionally sent what I was thinking. So you also know what I was

feeling.” He paused. “Are you angry?”

Baraqel shook his head. “I didn’t follow you all the way here, just to tell you I’m pissed off. Yes, I was angry at first, but I’d be a poor leader and teammate if I let that get to me. I mean – I know that I can be an arrogant asshole, Kokabiel.”

Kokabiel let out a snort of laughter.

“Occupational hazard. Except for Setebos, I think all of us Celestial Engineers are like that.” Baraqel yawned. “We really need to sleep. You can tell me tomorrow about the humans and why you’re back in Kamret.”

“Okay.”

“And Kokabiel? Next time you think I’m full of shit, just call me on it. That’s an order.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sometime after midnight, Kokabiel started, fully awake. The music had returned in his mind, but drowning out the original tune was a shrieking dissonance that made him angry. *What is this?* He glanced across the room. Baraqel was in deep slumber, and Kokabiel was loathe to wake him. *I’m sorry*, he thought, quietly slipping away from the roost and leaving his partner behind.

Following the music, Kokabiel arrived at the main gates of Kamret’s center and stopped. *Dammit!* He kneeled down, not so much to see the rapidly cooling pools of blood around the two slain watchmen but to check an inky, sticky trail that flowed from the bodies and continued into Kamret. Human eyes would not be able to see the trail, but Kokabiel could. Even though it was human-based, he

recognized it for what it was – for the first time he had seen it was in the War in Heaven, when the darkness of sin contaminated Sacred Space. He began to shake, and it angered him that he was afraid. As in spite that fear, he prodded investigative fingertips into the dark trail.

The music in his head exploded into a deafening cacophony as he saw the three men who had slain the watchmen in his mind – fellow Kamreti – and knew their intention. He suddenly sprang up and raced towards the headman’s house. *They’re going to get her*, his thoughts raged, *they’re going to –!* Images of the men and what they wanted to do with the young woman that was Rifan’s daughter tore through him, and even though he was still not even a quarter recovered, Kokabiel fully materialized, including his wings, as he arrived at the pried open door of an obscured area of the manor house, just as the three men emerged with a young woman who was dazed, as if still asleep. As they stared at Kokabiel, shocked into confusion, Kokabiel realized that the music was coming from her.

The beautiful tune and the painful discord interwoven in that tune – she was the source.

And these men.

These men.

They were nothing.

What Kokabiel would do to them, then, wasn’t immoral – merely simply cutting away rot, culling diseased cattle. He struck them down, one by one, his mind droning coldly, *This. Is. Nothing.*

But Kokabiel had sent, and it awakened the young woman, who responded to his murderous coldness with a keening scream.

Startled, he kneeled down, exhausted yet again. But as he placed

one hand on the heap of bodies to stand up, he suddenly felt recharged, as the potent biochemical energy of the freshly killed men flowed into him. Feeling intoxicated and giddy, he thought, *Cattle, you say, Baraqel. Heb – time for slaughter.*

No!, Rifan's daughter cried out.

Kokabiel turned towards her and then laughed in manic delight. *You can send! A human can send! Tell me, since you know best, who are the unworthy ones, who are the ones responsible for these MONSTERS, for I will not leave until Kamret is CLEAN.*

She stared up at him, and even in the dark, he saw her eyes – so wide and so blue. She knew him – how she knew him, he would find out later – but what he saw most was her fear. She feared him, and even though it fed into a blood lust that he hadn't felt since the War in Heaven, even though he felt the need to drink more the intoxicating power of human life force, he didn't want her to fear him.

The beautiful, aching music that brought him back to Kamret came from her, and he didn't want her to fear him.

Please, he sent, beseeching, *TELL ME.*

As all of Kamret awoke in disarray, panic-stricken by Rifan's daughter's scream, his wild amber eyes met hers, and he saw her give a small nod. With that assent, he grinned and whipped around, facing all of Kamret.

Without thinking, without stopping, Kokabiel strode through Kamret. His tunnel vision dictated by the woman several feet behind him, he grabbed his chosen prey, struck them dead, and absorbed their biochemical energy as their bodies hit the ground. He was barely aware of the screams around him and the vocal cries of Rifan's daughter

warning those not in his sights to stay back, as he only paid heed to her frantic sending, *That one! That one! That one!*

With each sending, he received an emotionally charged snapshot of why the target was unworthy: An abusive father. A tolerated rapist. An unrepentant maligner. And more. The identities of so many more, thinly hidden underneath the veneer of respectable members of a sunny coastal village-state, popped into his mind like poisonous mushrooms emerging from rotting flesh. They took so much, certain of their power, that taking their literal power for his own felt like justice.

Kokabiel's sending before he took their lives – *DO YOU REPENT?* – was the sole remnant of his caretaker role, as Rifan's daughter strained to reign in his single-minded destruction of the unworthy humans before his path.

That one! That one! That one!

It was well into late morning when Kokabiel became aware of Baraqel's presence, when Baraqel materialized before all of the humans, grabbed him, and commanded, "Stop this!" But Kokabiel, overcharged and high with the human's energy, laughed, "Ah, you found me!", and shook him off. He stumbled and, unseeing, nearly fell onto Rifan's daughter, but she stopped his manic motions, as she declared loudly for all to hear, "My lord, my lord, you are done. Please _"

"Are you SURE?"

"Yes, my lord. My village is... is cleansed. I thank you."

He grinned, his amber eyes wild and intoxicated. "You are welcome. What is your name, young woman?"

THE LAST BEATRICE

“It’s – it’s Lilith, my lord.”

“Lilith.” The familiar name made Kokabiel grin even more as he saw Baraqel’s startled expression. “See? Why can’t all humans be this GRATEFUL?” But as he said this, he suddenly felt Lilith’s fear of him overwhelm her, which angered him. *Don’t fear me, woman*, he sent, but his words were violent, and he saw Lilith flinch. Unable to stop his growing anger, he looked above himself, declaring, “I think I’ll fly around a bit,” and launched himself fast and high into a bright, cloudless sky, to distance himself as much as possible from himself and fragile young woman below.

In a dense forest at the foothills of a nearby mountain, Kokabiel took out his rage onto the trees. He flew over and through the thick canopy, exploding massive branches that lay in his path. He felled more and more treetops until he had burned through the overdose of human energy, and his anger dissipated, leaving a hollowed-out emptiness. When Kokabiel touched down in a clearing, exhausted yet again, he collapsed onto the ground. He barely registered the presence of Baraqel, who had followed him, touched down next to him, and asked, “Why did you hide your path to Kamret from me?”

Struggling to stay awake, Kokabiel sought out Baraqel’s green eyes.

Baraqel, his leader.

Baraqel, his partner.

Baraqel, his only companion from Heaven for all of these years.

“My friend,” Kokabiel whispered, his body phasing to ethereal, “she is a Beatrice... and we are fallen – can’t you feel it?”

Baraqel stared, feeling Kokabiel’s shame and grief in the sending behind the words. He let out a pained sigh and then, switching to

ethereal, lifted Kokabiel off the ground. Finding the nearest, largest tree, Baraqel set Kokabiel at its roots, bound him with the tree's lifeforce, and gave a short-acting Lethe sleep as he placed his hand over Kokabiel's closed eyes. "Rest, old friend," he said.

Within the security binding, Kokabiel's unconscious body relaxed.

Baraqel sat down heavily and stared up into a sky still bright and cloudless in the waning day, as if looking for an answer. He wanted to deny what Kokabiel had said.

But he would be lying.

7 THE REGENT OF KAMRET

Baraqel sat, witnessing Kokabiel sleep.

Angels seldom sent to each other. The preferred method of long-range communication was through their hard-wired comms, and Baraqel was no exception. Whether in Heaven, Hell, or Earth, Baraqel had never sent to a fellow angel. Even through the years as Kokabiel's partner, he had never sent. Doing so would involve a level of vulnerability that Baraqel found uncomfortable.

But Kokabiel had sent, when he whispered, "*We are fallen.*" He laid bare his entire existence, as a duty-bound, yet conflicted, Sentry on one hand, and then as a creature who felt so ashamed of his desire to follow a human that he had tried to keep his sojourn to Kamret secret from a fellow angel. He shared the pleasurable high of the bodily execution and then life-force consumption of sinful humans – but also the painful shame and guilt of doing so as he compelled that same human to check his morbid need for slaughter, her sending shaken with fear, *That one!*

That one! That one!

“She is a Beatrice. We are fallen. Can’t you feel it?”

Baraqel was unsure of what to think, what to do.

He needed time – to process the reality of his and Kokabiel’s situation, to work through the rising waves of anger, fear, and self-loathing that threatened to overwhelm him. His mind clamored, searching for the event that led to their current state. *We never should’ve interacted with the humans, you bastard Samyaza*, he thought, hostility towards their absent commanding officer washing over him. Then his rage expanded as he thought, *We never should’ve come to Earth. It’s all fallen, and its curse spread to us because of these humans – these humans, Goddammit –*

Baraqel dropped his head into his hands, as he realized where his dark thoughts were going. *No. They’re not to blame*, he thought. *Not the humans. Not Kokabiel. Not even Samyaza. Samyaza gave us the order, but we all knew that he was cut off from the Archangels. We could have said no. But we said yes. Yes. That’s where it started. Oh God.* He rubbed his face. *Fallen angels trying to save fallen humanity! We should – we should stop. Just go away –*

“Lilith,” Kokabiel murmured in his sleep, “please don’t fear us.”

Baraqel blinked. He suddenly remembered how he left Kamret: the young woman’s legs buckling underneath her as she had stared at the destruction around her – the bodies, the screaming, the wailing. All she had said was “Oh my God. Oh my God.”

“I’ll be back to help you,” he had said to her. “Lilith, I’ll return. Okay?”

And she had turned to him, her blue eyes wide, barely comprehending and yet trusting. “Yes,” she had responded softly, and a mild shock had passed between herself to him.

THE LAST BEATRICE

He stared at his hands. He expected to see the dark, sticky ooze of the fallen, but instead he saw an unfamiliar fluorescent blue, the tell-tale sign of another's energy signature flowing in him. He then noticed that he didn't feel exhausted, even though his night-recharge period had been cut short when a voice had awoken him from his sleep. He suddenly recognized that voice had been Lilith's, the moment when Kokabiel had arrived before her in the dead of night, and she had screamed.

Her sent fear awoke me, he realized. She also... transferred some of her energy to me? How is that even possible? He stood up, realizing that too much time had passed. *I left her alone – oh God.* He was a Watcher, and he had left an innocent woman in danger. Although reluctant to leave a still-sleeping Kokabiel alone, Baraqel had a promise to keep. He leapt up and gained speed.

Kamret had erupted in violence.

Fearful of Lilith, the people of Kamret turned against each other instead, as if the GodKings' arrival had ignited an explosion of hidden secrets. The enablers of the slain fought with the slain's victims, who celebrated with macabre triumph their predators' deaths. But while Kokabiel's executions left bodies that looked as if his chosen quarry were merely asleep, the humans were crude and messy. With fists, clubs, and knives, they left gashed wounds, broken bones, and spilled blood.

Lilith's father Rifan, who had emerged from his stupor only to scream and wail as Kokabiel wrought death and destruction, sunk to the ground, shocked, and not even Lilith's cries of "Father! You need

to stop this! Father!” could rouse him as he murmured, “Why would the GodKings do this to us? Why?”

Hours later, as the sky turned to dusk, the survivors’ fear of the headman’s daughter faded as they saw her helplessness, and their need for a scapegoat fell upon her. Lilith found herself surrounded by a mob who seemed more beast than human. “No! Please, listen —” she began but was cut off as a stone hit her shoulder, and she yelped in pain, like an injured animal. Her cry spurred the mob, who began to pelt stones at her, and she cowed low, her slim, brown arms, slick with blood, shielding her head. *Father*, she sent, *Father, help me!*

Rifan started, as if he himself had been struck. But he only shut tight his eyes in pain and fear.

PLEASE, Lilith begged in her sending. Suddenly, she felt a shadowy presence above her, and she cried out, but then strong arms encircled her, and a healing warmth covered her with the softest of feathers.

“ENOUGH,” Baraqel said.

Lilith buried her face into the angel’s chest, her blood smearing crimson against his silver-gray cloth.

“This girl saved your lives,” Baraqel declared, his green eyes flashing with anger, “but from what I see, none of you deserve mercy.” From underneath his golden wings, he could feel Lilith tremble, and still she didn’t cry. “Go and bury your sinful dead.”

Under the darkness of his wings, Lilith sent, *Thank you... for coming back.*

I said I would, Lilith. He kept watchful eyes as the mob dispersed. *Rest for now.* He felt her warm body relax into his as he watched the

other humans gather the dead in carts and wheel them away. Meanwhile, he searched through her mind, following the latent history of her energy signature, to confirm Kokabiel's belief.

Go backwards, Baraqel thought. *Go backwards in time*. Lilith had shared some her energy to Baraqel as thanksgiving. *Before*. She had directed Kokabiel through sending. *Before*. She dreamt of Kokabiel's memories and felt his repressed desire to have been created a Musician instead of a Sentry. *WHAT – no. Focus*. She had called for them on a lonely hill beside the sea, with the memory of an ancient family song in her heart. *Before*. She heard the song from her father Rifan, who had recognized what Baraqel and Kokabiel were before she was ever born. *Before*. He had heard the song from his mother Ewa, who had learned it from her own mother Lilith, who had recognized what Baraqel and Kokabiel were. *Before*. The elder Lilith had learned the song from a long line of ancestors whose names were lost in time, yet all originating from humans of the very beginning. *Ob...* They had opened their innocent eyes amidst the celestial music of Creation – and saw Alpha Omega smiling like an overjoyed new father.

Oh my God.

Baraqel shuddered with recognition, and his initial reaction was to push her away, fearful that his fallen status would hurt her. Yet, he felt her wounds heal under his safety and care, and when he carefully lifted away his wings, he saw that she had trusted him enough to fall into a fitful sleep.

As if broken from a spell, Rifan darted forward and kneeled down in supplication, his prematurely grayed head bowed low. "Take her," he said, his voice ragged.

“What?” Baraqel asked, startled.

“You are right – my daughter saved us, while I did nothing. No one is worthy of her, my lord.” Rifan looked up. His brown eyes were large in a face hollowed from self-neglect and fear. “I cannot protect her,” he declared, loudly enough so that several Kamreti who were within earshot could hear. “My lord, please take her – before someone kills her out of envy.”

“I –” Baraqel began.

But then Lilith awoke, hearing the last part of her father’s words. She stood up on pained, wobbly legs, stumbled forward, and slapped her father’s face. “I am not cattle to be traded,” she declared, her voice strained with contained fury. Her mind blazed with the image of the limp bodies of the kidnappers who had taken her when she was helpless in her sleep-walking: Miraz, Belis, and Uvilan – the three senior members of the Council of Kamret.

Baraqel was taken aback. As his green eyes met Lilith’s fiery blue ones, he was reminded of Lilith’s mother Zaia, who had violently forsaken her own father Tiros, all those years ago.

“If it’s to be,” she said, “it will be MY choice.” She added, *Right?*

Lilith’s sending unnerved Baraqel, and his heart beat hard and fast. *Yes*, he replied, unsure if what he was saying was right or wrong.

With that response, Lilith sunk down and buried her face in her hands.

My child... thank you.

She looked up, astonished, for it was her father’s voice in the sending. She stared, unmoving, when he reached out and embraced her, murmuring through his tears, “I’m sorry, my child... I’m so

sorry.” But then, suddenly, he collapsed.

No, she thought.

Her father was heavy, slumped unconscious against her.

NO!

She saw Baraqel pull her father off her and do a quick health assessment. *DAMMIT!*, she heard Baraqel’s thought in her mind. Desperate to have a shred of privacy after a night of exposed secrets, she scrambled to her feet, saying, “To the manor house! Please bring him to the manor!” She began running, and Baraqel, carrying her father, followed her, all the way to the manor house, all the way to her parents’ bedchamber.

Over two-hundred people died that day, when the GodKings returned. The dead, which included the Head Watchman Ord, had been buried in a hastily-dug mass grave on the outskirts of Kamret during the darkness of night, but when the sun rose on the next day’s morning, Baraqel declared that the slain – whether by Kokabeil’s hand or human hands – have proper burials. Whether guilty or innocent in life, in their death they would have fair treatment. The survivors obeyed, for they were terrified of a GodKing to whom many knew – through fast-spreading gossip – Rifan had given his daughter before taken ill.

Sitting by her parents’ bedside, Lilith felt empty. Except for her parents, she was alone in their bedchamber, as the house attendants were too terrified to be in the presence of a woman who kept company with the dreaded GodKings. But Lilith had been in the GodKings’ minds, as they had been in hers, when she had inadvertently

summoned them. The exchange of memories and intentions was raw and shocking. Thus, even in a short time, she had realized they were not all powerful beings but creatures just as flawed and conflicted as she was.

Exhausted after overseeing the progress of the burials, Baraqel came into the bedchamber and said, “You’re still here.”

Without even turning to look at him, Lilith nodded her head.

“Did you get any sleep at all?”

She shook her head, and before Baraqel could respond, she asked, “Did you?”

He walked forward, until he was standing next to Lilith, and crossed his long legs, sitting down. Baraqel was so tall that, even on the floor, he was nearly eye-level to Lilith. He regarded the two sleepers. “When Kokabiel wakes up and comes here, we can try again –” he offered, but Lilith only shook her head again.

“You already physically cured them – both of them. There is no material reason that my father and mother aren’t awake except that they don’t WANT to be awake.”

“Lilith –”

“Isn’t that what it means to be fallen? That what we think are the right choices are actually the wrong ones? ‘It doesn’t take much for fallen humans to act shitty against each other.’ That’s what you said. So what does it matter if they are related to each other?”

He gaped at her. “That’s terrible – to think that your own mother and father would be that way. Especially from a Beatrice –”

“Stop it. You’ve never felt what it means to be abandoned by your parents because they think it’s best for you. I have.” She clenched her

hands in her lap. “What good is it to be a so-called BEATRICE when my own people hate me? When my mother won’t wake up, no matter how much I have begged and prayed, despair eating at me every day since I was a little girl? When I’ve had to fight against hating my parents, for abandoning me? Even my father – him not waking up just makes physical what he’s been like emotionally, for years and years.” She stared at her hands, and with her newly awakened sight could see the fluorescent blue energy emanating from them. “How can I save others, when I can’t even save myself?”

Baraqel responded softly, “I’m sorry. I didn’t understand.”

She looked up and saw Baraqel’s green eyes, startled to see them bright with tears. “I – I can’t handle this right now.” She sprung up and began to stride away.

“Where are you going?”

“To my room. To sleep,” she replied curtly, and she left her parents and Baraqel behind her. Lying on her bed, she tried not to think of the past nor the future. *Breathe*, she thought. *Breathe*.

She heard a knock on her door and, seeing the dim quality of light in her bedchamber, was alarmed that she had been asleep for several hours. “What is it?” she responded, leaving her bed and slipping on a dressing gown.

“Lilith.”

She froze. Then, steeling herself, she went to the door and swung it open. She looked up and saw the sad, amber eyes of the ashen-haired fallen angel before her.

Without preface or pleasantry, he asked, “Are you afraid of me?”

She stared, not moving.

Kokabiel shook his head. “I’m sorry,” he said and then began to turn away.

Suddenly, Lilith realized the truth of him – that he was afraid that she saw him as a villain. “Kokabiel.”

He stopped. He turned to look at her.

She replied, “I’m not afraid of you.”

He frowned, unsure whether to believe her or not. “Why not?”

She gave a small, sad smile. “Because I’m more afraid of me.”

With their wings carefully hidden, Baraqel and Kokabiel stood by Lilith as she oversaw the rebuilding of Kamret. But not even the powerful influence of the GodKings could restore the trust that lay in tatters as everyone’s secrets had been laid bare. The remaining two members of the Council of Kamret were no exception.

Lilith shook her head in disbelief, as the young page kept his eyes downcast after giving two sealed documents. “So Lord Arim and Lord Erlan will not even give me the honor of relinquishing their positions face to face,” she said, “that they have a messenger boy do the deed instead.”

“I – I am s-sorry, m-my lady,” the page replied, his voice shaking and avoiding the gaze of the two GodKings, who stood at a discrete distance, on one side of the headman’s chair.

“You’re not at fault, young man. You can leave.”

“Th-thank you, my lady.” He made a hasty bow and left the main hall.

With the young page gone, only the GodKings and Lilith were in the main hall, as Lilith had suspected what Arim and Erlan’s response

to her summons would be, and she didn't want any gossiping mouths around her. She let her stern face slacken as she folded with care the two letters of resignation.

"Cowards," Kokabiel said in a low voice.

"Gently," Baraqel chided.

"No. Rather than face the shame that they had been swayed by Miraz to side against Lilith and her parents, they run away and hide."

"Yet they knew nothing of the kidnapping plot," Baraqel reminded Kokabiel. "If anything, Rifan knew that he was at fault, for so neglecting his duties that Miraz could overpower the Council."

"Still," Kokabiel asked, "are these two men so broken that they can't face Lilith and at least make peace with what happened?"

Lilith responded softly, "Sometimes men's pride is a hard burden to bear, Kokabiel."

He rolled his eyes and gave a dismissive "Tch."

"Especially when they are afraid," she added.

Kokabiel frowned but didn't deny it.

"I... had hoped," Lilith carefully began, her eyes on the two letters in her hands, "that some part of the Council would remain. My father once told me that Arim and Erlian had been there, when he stood on the execution block. They were among the many half-Kamreti who rose up. They were the youngest two on the Council, while the other three were the most senior." She glanced up, eyes flashing with accusation. "You – you two were THERE, when Miraz joined the Council of Kamret!" But then she sighed, letting the anger go. "This must be what my father felt back then – when everyone in Kamret was afraid and turned to him to be a leader – and he was the most afraid

for failing them.”

“Lilith,” Kokabiel started, his tone apologetic.

“It’s not your fault,” she interrupted, “that they still fear you. You weren’t in your right mind that night. But...” She paused. “I know that at some point you two will have to leave. You have other responsibilities – I know that. I just... need to be ready when you do.”

Both angels stared at her, unsure of what to say.

She shook her head. “ARGH!” she suddenly exclaimed. “Enough of this! It’s late – I should have my dinner. And shouldn’t you two be readying your nightly roost?”

Baraqel blinked. “Ah – yes,” he confirmed.

Lilith stood up, tucking the letters in the folds of her vestment. Shrugging with a half-hearted grin, she said, “After all, I’m a Beatrice, right? I should be fine.”

“Of course,” Kokabiel replied.

Accompanying Lilith just outside the main hall, Baraqel and Kokabiel watched her walk to the dining area, attended by nervous maid servants who met her farther down the hall. Once the two angels left the threshold of the manor house, they switched to ethereal before taking flight, and Baraqel declared, “We have to fix this.”

Receiving the sending behind Baraqel’s spoken words, Kokabiel replied, “That’s... major.” He paused. “The commitment required for this and the consequences – are you certain?”

“No. But do you have a better idea?”

“No.”

“Well then.” After flying in silence, Baraqel said, “Look, it’ll also be a big commitment on your part, so if you have any objection –”

“I’m in, Baraqel.” Kokabiel glanced at his partner. “You sound worried.”

Baraqel gave a small smirk. “I’d be a fool if I weren’t.”

As Lilith marched towards a broad, canopied tree that lay on the outskirts of Kamret, her mind raced with what she had experienced since she had awoken that day.

The manor house maids and attendants were calm and cordial, greeting brightly, “Good day, Lady Lilith,”

After breakfast, she overheard one of the attendants whisper to another, “Amazing, isn’t it – to be betrothed to a GodKing! Hopefully, he’ll be able to heal Lord Rifan and Lady Zaia.”

She came down to the main hall and stopped short, seeing Arim and Erlan at the Council table, who rose upon her appearance and bowed in greeting.

“My lady,” Arim – the older of the two – declared, “we are surprised to see you today! Aren’t you and Lord Baraqel still in conference, finding a solution to Lord Rifan’s malady?”

“Ah,” Lilith stammered, “of... of course. How... are you and Lord Erlan carrying on?”

“All is quiet, my lady,” Arim replied.

“Yes,” Erlan agreed. “After the violence and turmoil that had happened, we are thankful for the peace and order that have returned to Kamret, Lady Lilith.”

“And we will do our best, to honor your father’s sacrifice, my lady,” Arim added.

Boggled, yet forcing her face to stay neutral, Lilith replied, “Thank

you, Lord Arim, Lord Erlan.” She nodded towards the two councilors. “I – must meet with Lord Baraqel now.” Turning away from them, she thought, *What is going on?*

Although reluctant to return to a space that still filled her with dread, Lilith went to the secret servant’s room, disguised herself into commoner’s clothes, and slipped outside. Walking about during a bright, busy morning, she listened and observed. Still undetected, she had arrived at the gates of Kamret itself and was not surprised to see them unguarded. She slipped out and began to march towards Baraqel and Kokabiel’s designated home base, on the far outskirts of Kamret.

In her mind’s eye, Lilith’s memories of what happened were still fresh and painful. Miraz, Belis, and Uvilan planned to kidnap her, forcing her father to relinquish his title as headman to Miraz. Lulling Ord and another watchman into dropping their guard, they murdered them and – with years of serving in the manor house – knew the manor house’s weakest entrance was the hidden side servant’s door. Lilith had sleep-walked there, so they didn’t have to move too far inside to take her away with them. But then Kokabiel had arrived, heeding the call that Lilith had made hours earlier through her awakened abilities as a Beatrice. His rampage began, barely constrained by Lilith, a rampage that incited deadly violence amongst the Kamreti in the streets until Baraqel arrived. Then her father, for all to see and hear, gave her to Baraqel before collapsing, and Lilith endured the subsequent weeks of rebuilding, under the atmosphere of fear and hostility by her own people.

But those memories were not what her people remembered, when Lilith woke up that morning. To her people, they remembered that

THE LAST BEATRICE

Lord Rifan collapsed during a meeting of the Council of Kamret. In the subsequent power vacuum, Lord Miraz usurped the title of headman, with Lords Belis and Uvilan on his side. However, loyal to Lord Rifan were Lords Arim and Erlan, and Kamret erupted in civil war, with many casualties on both sides. The fighting had even come to the manor house, and though still ill, Lord Rifan tried to protect Lady Zaia and Lady Lilith and would have been slain if not without the miraculous return of the GodKings. Like their intervention seventeen years earlier, they ended the coup d'état and, in the subsequent weeks, helped to rebuild Kamret and to reconcile its people. In gratitude, Lord Rifan, before his health worsened, betrothed his daughter to Lord Baraqel. Honoring Lord Rifan's earlier decree, Lords Arim and Erlan recognized Lady Lilith as his heir, and they would serve as the remaining Council of Kamret while she ruled Kamret as regent, Lord Kokabiel protected Kamret, and Lord Baraqel sought a way to cure Lord Rifan and Lady Zaia.

When Lilith had walked, listened, and observed that morning, she reconstructed what her people believed to be true of what had happened. They were memories of betrayal and heroism, all having a happy ending – and their memories infuriated her because they were not true. Except for her two sleeping parents and Lilith, all of Kamret were living a false belief, stemming from changed memories, and she knew who changed them.

Arriving at the foot of a massive tree, she slammed a closed fist against its trunk. *I can't believe you did this! WHY?*

Suddenly, Lilith felt a strange floating sensation, and she found herself staring from outside her physical body for a brief moment.

Then her ethereal self slipped into the trunk, and Lilith stumbled into a small room bathed in a low, green light. Her eyes darted around, first at Baraqel, who lay in deep sleep in one cot, and then at Kokabiel, who had sprung from his cot on the other side of the room as soon as he had heard her sending. She began to exclaim, but he put a finger to his lips. Quickly, he pulled on some clothes (for he was wearing very little) and motioned her to follow him. A narrow, spiral staircase emerged from one corner of the room, and they went up until they arrived at a smaller room with two floor cushions before a low table – more an enclosed patio than anything else, as the entire space looked like green-colored glass, through which Lilith could feel the warmth of the sun.

“Are we still in the tree?” she asked, sitting down when Kokabiel settled down on one of the cushions.

“Yes,” he said. “We’re in the canopy.” He regarded her. “I should be surprised that your ethereal self was able to enter here. But you’re a Beatrice. So....” He tapered off.

“Well, I’m surprised.” She stared at her still solid-looking arms, bathed in diffused, green-tinged sunlight. “It’s unsettling, feeling that my body is outside while the me that feels like ME is in here.”

“Yet here you are. Angry. So you know what Baraqel and I did.”

Kokabiel’s blunt words brought Lilith back to the reason she came there in the first place. “You changed their memories. You changed EVERYONE’S memories! Why would you do that?”

“To keep you safe.”

Again, his direct words took her aback. “Safe? SAFE? What about my people? Going into two thousand brains and tampering with them – changing my people’s perception of reality – would you call that

SAFE?”

“No. I call that risky.” Kokabiel held up a hand as he saw Lilith rise up, about to yell. “But not for your people. Did you notice that Baraqel is still asleep while I am not?”

Lilith settled back down. “Yes,” she replied, grudgingly.

“He shouldn’t be. Baraqel is a master of Lethe sleep, which lulls minds and, when needed, softens memories. There’s a reason we usually approach humans disguised as human beings. It’s not good for people to know we Watchers exist. Usually, if he or I accidentally reveal our true selves to a few humans, Lethe sleep is a simple, quick task. We become like a dream to them.” Kokabiel paused, sighing. “But I created the worst case scenario when I came to Kamret, and Baraqel had to do damage control. We only wanted to alter enough of what happened, so that our true identities would remain hidden and you and your parents would be safe in a stable environment. And even though tweaking two thousand people’s memories is a massive undertaking, it should not have been too difficult.”

“But...” Lilith said, expectantly.

“But Baraqel underestimated the strength of human free will.”

Lilith exhaled in exasperation. “Of course he did.” She shook her head. “What went wrong?”

Kokabiel sighed again. “While I secured the perimeter of Kamret, so that only those within that boundary would be affected while sequestering you and your parents, Baraqel sent out a global Lethe sleep command, which would remove and replace the identical pieces of memory from everyone, all at once. Doing so required that everyone to behave like one mind, one brain, one will. But Baraqel encountered

a handful of spontaneous resistance to the command, which would have jeopardized the whole venture.”

Lilith frowned, confused.

“What I mean is – if any one person remains unchanged, then the entire Lethe sleep command falls apart. And because these rogue minds could spread its resistance to the already-linked minds, Baraqel had to add patches to the original global command. This required more memory manipulation, which cost more time and energy on his part. But that’s when he and I realized – that in order to maintain the permanence of the change, Baraqel would have to remain in close proximity to Kamret, to refresh the Lethe sleep.”

Lilith stared, aghast. “Kokabiel! Why didn’t you stop him?”

He replied, matter-of-factly, “We were nearly done at that point, and Baraqel accepted the constraint.”

“Of all the – ARGH!” She threw up her hands. “Is that why everyone has this expectation – that Baraqel and I are getting MARRIED – as cover for why he can’t leave?”

“Yes.”

She sprang up.

“Where are you going?”

“To give Baraqel a piece of my mind!”

Kokabiel reached over and grasped her arm. “Please don’t.”

“WHY?”

He exhaled, deeply. “Because he’s recovering. Because he’s exhausted.”

“I don’t care if –”

“Because he’s still grieving.”

Lilith stopped. She looked down and saw Kokabiel, and for the first time she realized that he was grieving, too. “Why?”

“You were in my head, Lilith. You know why.”

She sat back down, and Kokabiel released her arm. They sat in silence for an uncomfortable moment before Lilith asked, “Does it hurt that much? To be fallen?”

He shook his head. “You fallen humans,” he said, sounding like Baraqel. “You’re used to it – even a Beatrice like you, you were born into it. It’s like asking a fish if it’s wet. How would it know unless it knew what it felt to be dry?” Kokabiel gave a mirthless chuckle. “Heh – Baraqel and I are like fish out of water.” He looked at her. “I guess you can say – it feels like suffocation.”

“... I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he replied with a shrug.

“That’s a lie.”

“Right,” said a tired voice. “But what can you expect from fallen angels who made an entire village liars?”

Lilith glanced up and saw Baraqel stepping off from the staircase. His face looked care-worn and sunken, and he winced, as if in pain.

“Baraqel,” Kokabiel began, rising.

But Lilith sprang up again, reaching Baraqel first, and placed a hand on his arm, a fluorescent blue blooming from within her. The blue rushed outward, from her hand to Baraqel, who gasped sharply. She stumbled back, feeling a little dizzy, and she felt Kokabiel catch her.

“Why did you do that?” Baraqel chided, his voice sounding much stronger.

“Feeling better?” she asked in response. She regained her footing,

and Kokabiel loosened his grip.

“That’s beside the point – HEY!” Baraqel exclaimed after Lilith lunged forward and punched him hard on the chest.

“THAT’S for meddling with my people’s memories without my permission, you arrogant asshole!”

Kokabiel, regarding both Lilith and Baraqel, burst out laughing.

Turning to Kokabiel, Lilith, still angry, marveled. “How can you even laugh?”

Kokabiel shook his head, laughing so much that he couldn’t talk. He doubled over, as if in pain, tears streaming from eyes. But then the tears wouldn’t stop, as the hysterical laughter turned to gulping sobs, and he dropped to the floor, his body shaking.

Dismayed, Baraqel crouched down and placed a hand on his partner’s shoulder.

Standing before them, Lilith felt Kokabiel’s tears wash her anger away. “Don’t,” she commanded.

Baraqel looked up, bewildered.

“Lethe sleep won’t help. It just covers up the pain. You know that.”

But, Baraqel sent, I don’t know what else to do. He himself was on the verge of tears. I – I don’t know what’s right or wrong anymore.

Lilith took in the sight of them: the one curled and trembling on the ground like a wounded animal, the other wide-eyed and frightened like a child. Both of them reminded Lilith of herself, and she thought, *They want to protect me – but who’s going to protect them?* Softly, she fell to her knees. Even with her small arms, she was able to embrace them both.

For she was their Beatrice – and they were her fallen angels.

THE LAST BEATRICE

I'm here, she sent to both of them. *I'm here*.

The problem was the stubbornness of human free will. Specifically, the hardened stubbornness of Rifan's free will and Baraqel's inability to break through it.

Baraqel sat before Lilith's sleeping parents, his elbows resting on his knees. He sent again to Rifan, *Just let me in – please, just let me in*. But he felt his sending bounce off, as if Rifan had built a wall around himself.

In a way, he had.

As far as Baraqel could tell, Rifan had slipped away from consciousness in order to find Zaia on his own. Rifan had some nascent abilities of a Beatrice, so perhaps he could do it, connected as they were as husband and wife. But, as Baraqel knew from his service in the War in Heaven and his service as a Watcher, fallen creatures couldn't be saved unless they wanted to be. Zaia had chosen to fall away from her family, so even if Rifan found Zaia, Zaia may not want to come back with him. Knowing how single-minded Rifan's love for his wife could be, he wasn't going to come back without Zaia. Thus, they were at an impasse.

I could help you, Baraqel sent. *Just let me in*. But he felt the psychic barrier and the silence, and Baraqel rubbed his eyes, frustrated that he didn't have enough strength to breach that barrier. *I can't do this by myself*, he thought. *Maybe if Kokabiel was still here....* He stopped that train of thought, sighing.

For Kokabiel was not in Kamret, having left a month ago to resume his patrol of his and Baraqel's assigned Watcher region.

At first, Baraqel tried to convince Kokabiel to stay, as their fallen condition seemed to make the resumption of his duties pointless, even dangerous.

But Kokabiel said, “If we were like Lightbearer and his ilk, then we would already have fallen straight away into Hell. Or, at least, the Archangels would have come down and put us in quarantine.”

“So?” Baraqel replied.

“So, our time here on Earth HAS affected us so that we are more like the humans – fallen humans. Since Central grants humans a grace period, until their death, to navigate through their fallenness, then that grace period might extend to us as well.”

“But we’re immortal,” Baraqel pointed out.

Kokabiel shrugged. “Okay, perhaps it’s when our deployment ends – I don’t know! But I’m restless, having stayed in Kamret far longer than any other human settlement that we’ve been. And even with their memories altered, Lilith’s people still find me threatening. I’ll always be the ‘Warrior’ to them.”

Baraqel sighed but didn’t dispute Kokabiel’s words.

“Also, since you figured out that we fell after Samyaza’s meeting ages ago,” Kokabiel continued, “then we were already fallen when we resumed our patrols, helping the humans. After all, Lilith wouldn’t have been born unless we had intervened in Rifan’s execution. So would you still say that my Watcher duties, even while fallen, are pointless?”

Baraqel frowned at the thought of Lilith not existing. “All right,” he said. “But what if you revert back to what you were that night? Lose control, slaughter humans, and feed off of their fading biochemical

energy?”

“Well, it’s not as if they’ll need it once their souls separate from their bodies.”

“Kokabiel.” Baraqel gave him a stern look.

Kokabiel shook his head. “All I can say, old friend, is that you just have to trust me. Thanks to Lilith, I’m aware of who I am and what I’m capable of doing. So I’ll spare those who deserve sparing, but if justice requires their death, then I’ll do what I did that night.”

“Ask if they repent?”

“Yes. Thus giving them the chance to avoid eternal condemnation.”

“Still following your angelic orders, even now.” Baraqel exhaled. “Lilith won’t be happy about you leaving.”

“No doubt,” Kokabiel replied, and when Lilith found out the next day, she punched his shoulder. “Ah,” he said.

“But I thought you were tired of being a Sentry,” she pointed out. “Didn’t you want to be a Musician?”

Kokabiel snorted. “It doesn’t matter what I want, Lilith. Even fallen, I’m still Sentry, and I have my duties.”

“Yes, I know,” she said, “but... it’s not fair. You’ll be all alone.”

Kokabiel only shrugged, and Baraqel shook his head.

“When are you leaving?” she asked.

“Now,” Kokabiel replied.

“WHAT?” Lilith looked at Baraqel. “Did you know this?”

But Baraqel looked gobsmacked as well. “You didn’t tell me it would be today.”

“I know,” Kokabiel said. “That way, you two won’t have time to

convince me to stay.”

“Kokabiel –” Lilith began, but she stopped when he reached out and embraced both of them.

“Take care of each other,” Kokabiel said, his voice soft.

“My dear –” Baraqel began.

But Kokabiel quickly let go and left before he could change his mind.

Baraqel remembered seeing Kokabiel’s dark form recede into the sky. It was the first time, in his entire existence, that he was isolated from any other angel for more than a day, and he didn’t know what to feel, being left behind. Whatever that unfamiliar feeling was, he was glad that Lilith was there, standing next to him.

But, as he stared at Lilith’s sleeping parents, he started to feel useless.

Kokabiel was on duty, patrolling in his role as Sentry. Through his comm, he had notified Baraqel that – now that they knew that they were fallen – he had noticed that he had continued radio silence from Samyaza and the other Watchers. “Central may not be quarantining us,” Kokabiel said, “but we seem to be unconsciously self-quarantining each other – keeping our fallen status private. If the other teams are like us, then I know why.”

“Why?”

“We have something of our own to protect. We’ve become territorial.” Kokabiel paused. “Should I initiate contact with the others?”

Baraqel heard the trepidation in his partner’s voice. “No. Continue

as you were.”

“Copy.”

So Kokabiel continued his duty, protecting Kamret.

Meanwhile, Lilith spent her days in the main hall, engaged in duties as Kamret’s regent. She would hear the grievances of the members of Kamret and consider the counsel of Lords Arim and Erlan. It would have been good, if Baraqel’s Lethe sleep command had made the people of Kamret kinder and more virtuous. But a mere memory change of events couldn’t change the fallenness of human nature. The calm, peaceful Kamret of the first few days reverted to petty squabbling and seething personal resentment. The secret scandals that had burst open on that catastrophic night were private once again, and while the dead stayed dead, the living resumed their old, self-serving habits. So Lilith was busy.

But she fought a creeping cynicism, as she once asked Baraqel, sitting within the canopy patio of the angels’ home base, “Do you regret it, you maintaining the lie that Kamret had gloriously survived a civil war, even though my people are no better morally than they were before?”

“No,” he had replied, “because you’re safe.”

At that response, she had sighed. “You keep saying that. But what about you?”

“I’m fine,” he had said.

As Baraqel sat before Lilith’s parents, however, he realized that he wasn’t. What was his role? If he couldn’t cure Lord Rifan, as some Kamreti began to grumble, what use was he to Kamret? “What kind of man is Lady Lilith’s fiancé anyway? Was Lord Rifan a fool to choose

this so-called GodKing to be his daughter's husband? Won't he just leave us again, just like the other one?" some said in whispers and poorly-hidden gossip, as his continuing presence bred tactless familiarity.

ARGH!, he thought, *enough of this*. He was suddenly reminded of Lilith's words, weeks ago, when she had faced Arim and Erlan's resignation, frustrated with how powerless she felt. He felt that now, for his role had reversed, from self-assured Celestial Engineer, Watcher, and leader – to a power-constrained fallen angel with nothing to show his worth. He shook his head. *Need air*.

He was ethereal when he left the manor house, but he didn't return to his home base. Instead, he flew to highest top of the manor house and perched there, like an invisible bird. There, he surveyed people still crowding the main center of Kamret, even at the end of the day. Half-Kamreti, a few full-Tirosians, man, woman, old, young, and everyone in-between.

What could he do to show these people that he was worthy of Rifan's trust?

As he let his eyes rove through the crowd, Baraqel slowly soaked up the photonic energy of the late-day sun. Between the biochemical energy of the tree that served as home base and the solar energy of Earth's star, Baraqel had reliable recharging sources. But they were too slow and not potent enough to restore him to full capacity in the way that being connected to Central had been when he was unfallen. And even though Lilith's energy transfusions were similar in quality to Central's (if not in scale), the two or so occasions that she had done so had made her so ill that – even though Lilith, seeing his persistent

energy deprivation, would again offer – Baraqel had refused every time.

But that refusal left Baraqel too hamstrung to do his duty for Kamret.

“Nadia!”

Twin cries caught his attention, as he saw a young man and woman darting through the crowd, both crying out a girl’s name. “Nadia! Where are you?”

Baraqel watched, as the man and woman asked one person and then another, whose responses were either a dismissive head shake or obvious avoidance. Finally, just as their desperation reached its peak, they heard a high-pitched voice cry out amongst a sea of legs, “Mama! Papa!” A little girl darted out, obviously lost in the crowds on a busy market day, and the woman received the girl with open arms.

But the man exclaimed, “We told you to keep close, Nadia! Why must you always disobey us?” When the girl began to cry, he grabbed the girl’s arm and shook it, yelling, “Stop crying! It’s all your fault for frightening your mother like this! Now stop being a brat and behave!” Then he let go of the girl’s arm and, without even a backwards glance at the woman and girl, he began to stride forward, as if his wife and daughter were mere annoyances in his day.

As Baraqel witnessed this little drama, he thought, *What kind of man is this?* For it was clear that the man had been as frightened about his lost daughter as his wife was, and yet, instead of relief and joy at finding his daughter, he showed anger and condemnation, as if his pride prevented him from doing otherwise. *If I had a child, I would never do that,* he thought, as he saw the woman and girl follow the man in sad silence.

If I were a husband and father, I would –

He stopped, as he realized where his thoughts were going.

Rifan had chosen him to be Lilith's husband, but not once did Baraqel consider what that truly meant.

Instead of thinking of her as a Beatrice, he thought of Lilith as a wife; he was surprised as his heart began to beat hard and fast. He remembered the first time she shared her energy, her glowing blue eyes matching the fluorescence that flowed from her to him – and then the second time, only so that she could hit him without feeling guilty. He smiled at that. He recalled the touch of her small arms, when she clung to him after her stoning and then when she held him and Kokabiel together, when both of them broke down. He remembered the way her face and gestures looked when she was angry. Frustrated. Sad. Happy. Triumphant. Amused. Then he thought of Lilith as a mother, and his eyes widened in wonder, as he imagined what that would mean for himself, Lilith, and all of Kamret.

Baraqel activated his comm. "Kokabiel," he declared, "I have a question for you."

It had been three weeks since Lilith had seen Baraqel, and she was furious.

What are you doing?, she demanded. *You won't come to the manor house, and yet you forbid me from going to your tree? What the hell is going on, Baraqel?*

I'm sorry, he would reply. *But just wait. You'll see.*

By the end of the third week, when Lilith's patience had run out, she woke up to Baraqel's voice in her head, *I'm outside.* She started, seeing it was still night time, and saw a golden glow coming from her

window. She pulled on her dressing gown, went to the window, and opened it wide.

Fully materialized, Baraqel hovered in front of her.

“What the – do you know what time it is, Baraqel?” she exclaimed, her voice so low that it sounded like a hiss.

“Yes,” he said, matter-of-factly. “That’s why I can be embodied without anyone seeing me.”

Lilith sighed. “But WHY?”

“It’s a surprise.” He held out his arms. “Come with me.”

She stared at him. “NOW?” She looked down, seeing the ground three stories down. “From HERE?”

“I promise I won’t drop you.” He saw her hesitation. “You don’t trust me? Or are you scared?”

She rolled her eyes. “You are infuriating.”

“I know.” Baraqel adjusted himself as Lilith hoisted herself over the window sill and then, her arms wrapped around his neck, eased herself onto his arms. Just as he remembered, she was light and so very small, compared to him. Once secured, he turned around and, with two great wingbeats, took flight. The whole time they were in the air, Lilith clung tightly, her eyes mostly shut with a keen fear of heights. But then Baraqel slowed and descended, and once he set Lilith on the ground, he said, “We’re here.”

Lilith opened her eyes then. “What – what is THIS?”

Before her was a towering rocky edifice, with a massive gated double-door, spiraling small windows, and inlaid leafy branches running parallel with the windows. With her ability, she could see a soft green glow shot through the entire structure, and recognizing the

color she exclaimed, “That’s your tree! Yours and Kokabiel’s! Your tree!”

“Yes,” he said.

“But – but WHY?”

“Well, first, your people can see that Kokabiel and I aren’t going anywhere – that this is our permanent home. Second, you won’t have to separate your ethereal self from your body whenever you come here. Now, you can walk in, just as you are.” He ran a nervous hand through his golden hair. “I’m sorry that it took so long. I didn’t consider how being half-powered would slow the process, interweaving the rocks with the tree so that our home base would be permanently embodied.”

“That’s why you were gone so long? That’s why you kept me away? Because you were making THIS?”

“Yes.”

Lilith’s eyes roved around, taking everything in with wonder. Then she abruptly asked, “Wait – does Kokabiel know about this?”

Baraqel made a “tch” sound. “Of course.”

“Well... okay then.”

He shook his head but was smiling. “Let’s go inside.”

Walking forward, the door automatically swung inward, and Lilith saw that the interior had the familiar green glow of the existing tree. The interior was simple, with the first floor being a massive open space with a high ceiling. Following the stone-and-tree staircase, they came upon sleeping quarters, more open spaces, the glass-like dome of the closed patio, and finally an open-air deck at the very top, which Lilith gasped when she saw just how high up they were.

“What do you think?”

THE LAST BEATRICE

“It’s amazing,” she said, “but we are so... very high.”

Baraqel chuckled at that. “Well, there’s one more place I’d like to take you.”

“Oh God, we’re going to fly, aren’t we.”

Fortunately, the trip was short, as they arrived at a plateaued area of a nearby mountain. There, lying side by side on a blanket that Baraqel had previously spread out, he and Lilith looked at the stars, shining clear and bright that late night.

“I helped make that,” he said, as he pointed out one star cluster and another and another.

Noticing his wistful tone, Lilith asked, “Do you miss it – being a Celestial Engineer?”

“Of course,” he said. “But if I were still one, then I wouldn’t be here with you.” He paused. “And I think I’d miss this more.”

Lilith stared at him. “Why did you REALLY transform your tree, Baraqel?”

“Ah,” he said, still watching the starry sky. “Because – I wanted to make a place for you to belong. Not just as Rifan’s daughter or as Kamret’s regent, but a place where you can be you. Without prying eyes and wagging tongues.”

“Why would that place be your tree?” she asked softly.

“Well,” he said, nervous, “it’s because you can be you – with me... if you want.”

She was silent.

“Lilith –” Baraqel began, worried, but stopped when she had moved so that his green eyes stared into her eyes, glowing blue in the starlight.

She smiled. “Yes,” she said, and she reached over to pull him close.

8 THE IMMORTAL AND THE FOOLISH

Two young men waited, under the cover of the close-growing trees on a full-moon night. Soon enough, their prey – an older, self-assured man – appeared, traveling alone down a heretofore secret path. The two men glanced at each other with acknowledgment. As soon as their prey passed in front of them, the smaller of the two shot a small dart from his blowgun, the dart embedding in their prey’s exposed forearm. The poison being quick-acting, their prey began to stumble, and they jumped out. After a brief struggle, they dragged him away from the path, farther and deeper into the darkness of the forest. There, they bound their prey’s mouth and hands, but he was still conscious, fully aware of who these two men were – just as the two men wanted. While silent so as not to call attention, their eyes blazed with rage and triumph as the dart blower held their prey still and the other raised up the ax.

“Please don’t do this,” a sonorous voice boomed around them.

The two men started and looked wild-eyed around them, seeing

nothing.

“Won’t you reconsider?” Suddenly, an impossibly tall, silver-garbed man appeared before them, glowing faintly in the darkness.

“ARRRRGH!” The ax-wielder swung at the stranger and stared, dumbfounded, as the ax passed through the stranger as if he were smoke.

“So that’s a ‘no,’ then,” the stranger said, as massive ash gray wings rose behind him, illuminating the darkness in a blinding light.

The two men gasped in terror and began to flee, leaving their prey and their ax on the forest floor, but they abruptly froze and fell down, as they felt a paralysis hit them. Only their wide, panicked eyes could move. Atop the forest leaf litter, they saw the stranger unbound their prey, and they silently wept at the injustice of it.

Freed, their prey cried out, “Thank you, sir, thank you!” He stood up but wavered, as the poison still affected him.

“Ah,” the stranger said. “Do you know why these two men would want you dead?”

“No!” he exclaimed in outrage. “I have never seen them in my entire life!”

“Is that so?”

Then all three men stared in horrified wonder, as the stranger twisted a hand in the air and a little, illuminated window appeared, floating before them. There, they saw moving images. They saw the older man leading a boy away from their village down a secret path, with promises of honest, paid work, and – in a place of solitude and privacy – saw the older man do unspeakable things to the boy before paying him and swearing him to secrecy. They saw the boy attempt to

THE LAST BEATRICE

kill himself out of shame and guilt, and his older brothers – the dart blower and ax wielder – stopping him before he jumped. They last saw – before the window faded away – the boy, trembling and sobbing, describe the older man to his parents, but they refused to believe him as the older man was a respectable member of their village.

Witnessing his deeds exposed, the older man – unconstrained – recoiled, fell, and then scrambled to stand up. He began to flee but abruptly stopped, as if an invisible hand had grabbed the scruff of his neck and threw him backwards to the ground. He stared up and saw glowing amber eyes looking down.

“Do you still deny all this?”

The older man struggled to break free.

“Do you repent?”

He refused to respond.

“Then I can do nothing for you.”

The boy’s two brothers stared as the stranger touched their prey’s forehead. The older man gasped once – and stopped moving. Then, still shocked at what they had witnessed, the two brothers realized that they were no longer frozen, but they were too afraid to move.

The stranger turned his face to them – his amber eyes glowing so brightly that they may as well have been on fire. “I’ve spared you the sin of murder,” he said, his voice hoarse. “Go. And care for your brother.”

Warily, they stood up, as if expecting the dangerous stranger to attack them. And then they suddenly turned around and ran.

Ab, Kokabiel thought, they didn’t even bother to thank me. He glanced down. They even left their ax.

Unlike Baraqel, who would've disintegrated the body cleanly, leaving no trace of the man's earthly existence, Kokabiel made a deep grave to bury the body, so that its decay could feed the plants, animals, fungi, and bacteria around it.

But Kokabiel would not be one of those creatures to feed, as he refused to absorb the body's energy, unlike his earlier self.

His earlier self would assess every human settlement, and whenever he saw that it needed intervention, he engaged. Staying ethereal until he isolated the criminals, he would deal with them, fully embodied: capture, questioning, and execution. Then, without hesitation, he would consume the criminals' biochemical energy as recompense for dealing with the worst of fallen humanity. Soon enough, the mysterious disappearances of those criminals became a warning in the humans' minds, where Kokabiel was an unnamed eldritch monster, a mythical deterrent used by humans to keep themselves on the path of virtue.

But then, one day, Kokabiel began to fear that they were right – that he was indeed a monster. Like a cannibal or vampire, feeding upon fellow intelligent creatures, Kokabiel had felt the exhilarating high of consuming the criminals' energy – and it shook him.

As if he had become addicted to it.

As if he had actually looked FORWARD to capturing another human just so he could feed.

Disgusted with himself, he abruptly quit consuming the criminals' energy and suffered three, harrowing days of withdrawal, ensconced in a tree very far away from any human settlement. He lay curled on his

side, shaking, nauseated, and dry-heaving. But by the end of the third day, he slipped into a deep sleep, and when he woke up, he was able to return to his pre-Kamret recharging protocol: absorbing the energy of the largest tree he could find wherever he would make camp.

Thus, even though Kokabiel was exhausted the night that he stopped two men from murdering an old man who had raped their brother, he buried the old man's body without once being tempted to absorb its energy.

After the burial, Kokabiel destroyed the ax, breaking the wooden handle into splinters and reducing the ax-head into small lumps of metal, and scattered the debris. Afterwards, he trudged further into the forest, where his temporary base camp was, to return to his cot. He had actually retired for the evening when he had sensed the disturbance outside. Grudgingly, he had emerged, scanned the three interlopers, and dealt with them. When he once again returned to his nightly roost, he stripped and collapsed into his cot, feeling the gentle, restorative power of that particular tree.

However, tired as Kokabiel was, the knowledge of the older man's crimes still left a sour taste in his mouth, and he struggled to get to sleep. Even after a year back on patrol, he never adjusted to being alone, in spite of Baraqel periodically updating him via comm about events in Kamret. He turned towards the other side of the room, seeing the empty spot where Baraqel would have been. Feeling the heavy weight of isolation, Kokabiel suddenly recalled a memory of questions that maybe would have been better left unanswered.

A month into Kokabiel's resumption of his patrol, Baraqel had contacted him, asking, "I have a question for you."

"Shoot."

Baraqel got to the point. "Did you already know how I'd feel for Lilith?"

"... Yes."

"Is that why you left so quickly?"

"That's two questions."

"Kokabiel."

Kokabiel had been flying when Baraqel had contacted him. It was nearing the end of another patrol day, and Kokabiel was embodied, high in the sky, feeling the rhythm of the wind on his body. It was still his favorite part of the day, and he didn't want to ruin it with sad thoughts. Yet he stopped his flight, alighting on a mountain tree-top, and perched like a dark bird of prey. "Yes, Baraqel," he said. "That's why I had to leave so quickly."

"But – Lilith and I wanted you to stay," his partner said. "We still do."

"I know," Kokabiel replied. "But Rifan chose you to be Lilith's husband. It'll be complicated as it is – with you and Lilith figuring out what a marriage between an angel and a human entails – without me being there."

"There's no protocol for this, Kokabiel, so how could you say that your presence would make things complicated?"

Kokabiel stared incredulously into space. "Do you really not know?" he exclaimed.

Baraqel was silent at first. Then he said, "Yes, I know you love her,

too.”

Kokabiel exhaled. He asked, “Can you still say that THAT wouldn’t cause complications?”

His partner gave a frustrated sigh. “But it’s still difficult as it is, Kokabiel – you being away. We angels weren’t meant to be isolated like this.”

“We weren’t meant to be fallen and fall in love with humans either, yet here we are.”

Hearing the bitterness in Kokabiel’s voice, Baraqel said, “Lilith was right. You shouldn’t be alone out there.”

“That can’t be helped. You’re tied to Kamret, but someone still has to patrol.”

“But perhaps – perhaps – with my marriage... but I don’t even know if Lilith feels the same about me the way we feel about her.”

“She does.”

“WHAT? Did she tell you?”

“No.”

“Then –”

“She’s been in my head, Baraqel. And I’ve been in hers. I know her. She loves you.”

Baraqel paused again. “You say she loves me. But she loves you, too.”

“I doubt that. She was terrified of me.”

“Right. And she saw me as sweetness and light back then as well,” Baraqel commented, sarcastic. “If you’ve been in Lilith’s head, then you should know she loves you, too. Lilith sees herself as a Beatrice to both of us. She loves us both – equally.”

“But there can only be one husband for Lilith. So all the more reason for me to be out here.” Kokabiel made a dismissive shrug. “Can we move on? You contacted me saying you had one question, and you’ve asked three.”

“Look who’s being an asshole this time.”

“Tch.” Kokabiel shook his head. “But you interrupted yourself. Something about your marriage. What was it?”

“Ah.” Baraqel exhaled deeply. “While there’s no protocol for a fallen angel being married to a human female, I can speculate what my role would be. First, I’d have to provide a home, right? So I need to reengineer our home base so that it can accommodate Lilith.”

“You’re making it embodied as a human habitat?”

“Yes – if that’s okay with you.”

“Why would it matter if it’ll be okay with me?”

“It’s your home base, too, Kokabiel.”

Kokabiel didn’t reply.

“Kokabiel.” When his partner still didn’t reply, Baraqel said, “Wait – were you planning not to come back? Why –” but then he stopped. “You know what? It’s only been a month. So whatever shit you need to work out in your head as you’re out there, you have plenty of time. But know that there’ll be a home for you when you decide to come back. You got that?”

“Yes, sir,” Kokabiel replied curtly. “Thank you, sir.”

“Hmph. Don’t ‘sir’ me. We’ve been beyond traditional command structure since Lilith’s come into our lives. Which brings me to another role in this nontraditional marriage.”

“What’s that?”

“Being a father.”

Kokabiel paused. “Do you think that’s possible?”

“More than possible. Especially since my classification was – and still is – Celestial Engineer. I was created to make things, if you recall.”

“Right.” Kokabiel frowned, hearing a little bit of the cocksure Baraqel of old in his partner’s voice. “But... angel-human hybrids? What would they even be like?”

“As I said, I can only speculate. But they’ll likely have the potent energy of both me and Lilith, so I’d have to ensure that Lilith would be able to bear our children safely.”

“That’s only if Lilith would even want to have children,” Kokabiel pointed out.

“Ah. I hadn’t thought of that.”

Kokabiel felt a flash of anger. “You have better not force her –”

“HEY,” Baraqel interrupted, “you know I would never force Lilith to do anything she herself wouldn’t want to do. For God’s sake, who do you think I am?”

“Okay, okay.” Kokabiel sighed. “As for Lilith bearing your children safely – well, she’s a Beatrice. I mean, we’ve felt her ethereal self – she’s stronger than both of us.”

“I know.” He paused and continued, his voice sounding nervous, “I just hope – I do right by her.”

“Baraqel,” Kokabiel said, reassured to hear the arrogant tone of the old Baraqel gone. He saw the sun set and heard the distant explosion of bird call in the beginning dusk.

“Yes?”

“You will.”

Remembering that conversation, Kokabiel stared at the spot where Baraqel would have been. He thought of Baraqel's updates of their rebuilt home base – "It was harder to do than I thought" and "Lilith's decided to live here." He thought of them trying to have children – "She wants to be a mother" – and the idea of his partner and their Beatrice having a physical relationship made his stomach lurch again, as if the ground had suddenly dropped away from him. Was it fear? Anger? Jealousy? Kokabiel didn't know. Nevertheless, he had kept in contact with Baraqel but had maintained silence with Lilith, knowing that hearing her would weaken his resolve to stay on patrol.

Not even a year had passed, and so much had changed in Kamret. In the solitude of his faraway nightly roost, Kokabiel didn't know where he fit anymore.

"It's not fair," Lilith had said, on the day that he had left them. "You'll be all alone."

Kokabiel closed his eyes. *You were right*, he thought, as regret washed over him. *Ab, Lilith, I'm lonely.*

That was when he heard it – a faint, lonely tune, a familiar melody of echoing bells, resonating in his mind – and a firm voice chiding, *Then come home, you stubborn idiot.*

Kokabiel's eyes flew open as he sat up, not realizing that he had sent his thoughts until Lilith had sent her reply. However, he also felt, in her sending, an energy transfer that wasn't only hers but Baraqel's as well, blended and amplified into something new. He stared at his chest, seeing the intertwining energy strands of blue and gold expanding to the rest of his body and feeling a recharge much stronger

than he had had in centuries. *How did you –*

It's the baby.

Baby? He stared, astonished.

Come home, my dear friend. You're my family, too. She paused. *I'll be waiting.*

Kokabriel sprang out of his cot, pulled on his clothes, and phased out of the tree. Energized, he took flight, speeding towards Kamret, until he could see the very top of the permanent home base. There, at the top-most deck, was Lilith, shining like a beacon in the darkness. He landed before her and, awed by the power emanating from her, fell to his knees. “You’re pregnant,” he said.

Lilith, who wasn’t even showing yet, nodded. “Yes. Does that make you angry? Will that make you run away again?”

Kokabriel shook his head, realizing that that was what he had been feeling and doing, all that time. He had met Lilith first, yet it was Baraqel whom Rifan had chosen. “I’m... so stupid,” he replied.

“Idiot,” she said. She stepped forward, took hold of his hands, and wrapped his arms around her waist. Kokabriel leaned down, into Lilith’s abdomen, and he could hear the rapid rhythm of a tiny heartbeat and feel waves of energy in concert to that rhythm. At that position, Lilith was taller than Kokabriel, and she leaned forward and kissed the top of his head, as if giving a blessing. “Welcome home.”

“Thank you,” he said. His eyes closed as he held her, feeling the thrum of energy taking his exhaustion away, feeling the soft warmth of her body fitting with his. Then he asked, “Where’s Baraqel?”

“Asleep.”

“Ah.” He started, feeling a twinge of guilt, and pulled back a little.

But Lilith gave him a quick knock against the top of his head. “Stop that,” she said. “You called out to me, not Baraqel – remember? Of course, I’d wake up to that.” She huffed. “Actually, that’s a nice change, since all this time you would ONLY talk to Baraqel, not me.”

“I’m sorry.” He turned his head to look at her.

She smiled down at him, her blue eyes meeting his amber ones. “Idiot.” But then she yawned.

“You need to get back to sleep, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she said. “Ironic, though. You don’t since I charged you up. But I’m human – it doesn’t work that way for me. I’m just –” Lilith searched for the right words “—a vessel.”

“The energy signature is the baby’s?”

“Yes. And the further along my pregnancy gets, the stronger it’ll become.”

“Will you be okay?”

Lilith nodded. “Baraqel has already planned for it.”

“Of course he did.” Kokabiel frowned. “Wait, why isn’t HE charged up then? Shouldn’t he be awake?”

“Between maintaining my people’s altered memories and trying to bring my father out of his coma, Baraqel still needs the downtime at night, even with using the energy that the baby is generating.”

“Oh. That makes sense.”

Lilith shook her head. “You forgot all that already? That’s what happens when you stay away from home too long.” She yawned again.

Kokabiel unwrapped his arms from Lilith and stood up. He patted her back gently. “Go back to bed, Lilith,” he said. “I’ll see you and Baraqel in the morning.”

“Okay.” Lilith turned to go back inside, but she paused and looked back. “You won’t be lonely up here?”

Kokabiel smiled. “I won’t be lonely.”

But Lilith knew he was lying.

Lilith at first tried to continue her role as Rifan’s regent, sitting in the headman’s chair during the business of the Council of Kamret. But once her pregnancy began showing, Lilith’s people – through whispers and silent judgement – pressured her to step away. Tolerating a half-Tirosian young woman as regent was one thing; accepting the pregnant wife of a strangely powerful foreigner as regent was another. She resisted at first, but after a week of no one showing up before the Council of Kamret except for herself and Lords Arim and Erlan, who sat in awkward silence, she yielded to her people’s expectation of who should govern them.

On the day she stepped away from her position, it was too early to leave the manor house for home. Kokabiel was still on daily watch, patrolling all of Kamret. Baraqel was still with her parents, checking their physical health while trying to break through her father’s his self-induced coma. Having been worn by despair from past visits with them, Lilith had avoided her parents for months, even though she felt guilty for doing so. “Don’t be, Lilith,” Baraqel would say to her. “You need to take care of yourself, too.” But that day she felt angry and alienated from her own people. She craved the company of Baraqel and Kokabiel and just wanted to go home.

“Baraqel?” Lilith softly called out. Entering the bedchamber, she saw Baraqel sitting still, having leaned forward with his elbows in his

knees. From the outside, it looked as if he was trying to will her father to awake, and after a long moment, he sighed and leaned back. “Baraqel?” she said again, but what she noticed was that her parents looked healthy – the healthiest she had ever seen them. They just needed to wake up. She reached out to touch her father’s hand.

Baraqel looked up then, his eyes widening with surprise. “Lilith, wait –”

Nausea hit Lilith as she stumbled from acute vertigo. She cried out, her eyes shut tight as she flung out her arms to catch herself from falling. Unexpectedly, she didn’t fall very far, bumping into something hard and cold, and she opened her eyes.

An icy wall, as high and wide as far as she could see, was in front her. She looked behind her and saw a barren landscape made of black rock, under a sickly red sky. *Where am I?*, she thought. Turning back to the wall, she rubbed at the surface, trying to see through it. She could just make out two shapes through the ice, and she worked more at the ice, her hands becoming numb with cold. But then the two shapes came into focus, and she cried out, “Father! Mother!”

Her mother, incased in ice, was curled on the ground, unmoving. Her father was pounding at the ice, with no effect, and yet he would not stop. He would never stop. Neither of them heard their daughter, on the other side of the ice wall.

“Father!” Lilith screamed. She began pounding at the ice wall. “Mother!” She willed the ice to melt, for her hands and body to become heat, to become fire. Lilith felt a sharp, searing pain, as if her body was burning, yet she wouldn’t stop trying to break through as her screams echoed across the dead landscape.

THE LAST BEATRICE

Suddenly, she felt something pull her away, and she writhed and flailed to break free as she saw the wall recede farther and farther away.

LILITH!

“NO!” she wailed. “NO!”

LILITH! And then, “LILITH!”

Kokabiel was there now, having been called by Baraqel. He restrained Lilith in a “hold” field, as Baraqel struggled to stabilize the runaway energy pouring out of the nephil growing in Lilith’s womb. The level of power was massive: it allowed Lilith to slip through her father’s coma, but it also triggered a grand mal seizure in consequence. After a frightening couple of minutes, Lilith’s seizure passed, and Baraqel succeeded in dialing back and containing his unborn son’s power within Lilith’s womb.

“What the hell happened?” Kokabiel demanded, holding a limp and unconscious Lilith in his arms.

“I’d made pinpoint portals for myself, onto Rifan’s inner space. But I could never get through. But Lilith’s already connected with her parents and – powered by our son – she accidentally got through. I think she tried to pull Rifan out, but she can’t harness that power without hurting herself. Maybe even...” Baraqel trailed off. One hand was still on Lilith’s lower abdomen, while his other one was on her forehead.

“Killing herself,” Kokabiel finished. “Accidentally.”

“Yes.” Baraqel dropped his hands. “I never meant... I never imagined.... Oh God, I never should’ve tried to have a child.”

“Hey,” Kokabiel said, “it’s not just you. Lilith wanted to have a child, too. She wants to be a mother.”

“I know, but –”

“What’s done is done.” Kokabiel could feel Lilith’s calm, even breathing. “She’s stable and, as far as I can tell, back to normal. What now?”

“I’ll shut down those pinpoint portals, to prevent another accident like this. Can you bring Lilith home?”

“Of course.”

Baraqel exhaled deeply. “God, I don’t know what I’d do without you, Kokabiel.”

“Panic and be an idiot, I would imagine. With Lilith hitting you a lot.”

Baraqel gave a shaky laugh. “Yeah.”

Six months after he had returned to Kamret, Kokabiel stood on the home base’s top-most deck, listening to Baraqel have a breakdown, as a shower of meteors streaked across the cool, night sky. *Humans call those falling stars*, he thought. *Well, isn’t that apt.* Still hearing his partner weeping heavily, Kokabiel found himself irritated, thinking, *Stop it, already. Good God, you were the one who told us what to expect.* But he knew he wasn’t being fair, and he put to words his partner’s unspoken raw emotions. “We can try to make a home here, Baraqel, but it’ll never be enough. We can try to create some semblance of Heaven here, but it’ll never be enough. We can try to pretend to be like the humans, but it’ll never be enough.” He raised an imaginary glass, in a toast. “Welcome to the world, little boy.”

His breezy, light tone was enough to snap Baraqel out of his crying jag, angering him. “You’re not helping, Kokabiel.”

“I never said I was.”

Shortly thereafter, Kokabiel left Baraqel alone to compose himself. He went back inside, going downstairs, and entered the room where, earlier that evening, Lilith gave birth to Aleph. *Ab, she's asleep.* Noticing that the baby was also asleep, Kokabiel carefully lifted him from Lilith's breast, adjusted her loose blouse to cover her, and tightened Aleph's swaddle. He sat down beside Lilith's bed, a chair materializing under him, and regarded the tiny new creature in his hands, perhaps the only one of his kind in all of Creation. Even through thick swaddling, Kokabiel could feel the heat radiating from Aleph's body; even through Baraqel's protective binding, he could feel the energy expanding from the boy's core, barely controlled.

Child, he thought, you have certainly made your parents' lives complicated.

Aleph yawned and blinked awake. Blue eyes – Lilith's eyes – squinted up at Kokabiel.

Their lives and mine.

Sensing the lightness of her chest and the presence of another, Lilith woke up. Without moving, she opened her eyes, seeing Kokabiel at her bedside, holding Aleph and gazing into her son's eyes. Kokabiel had been outside, guarding their home, as Baraqel guided Lilith through the birthing process. Through it all – from Aleph's actual birth to Baraqel stabilizing the baby's energy field and healing Lilith's post-birth body – Kokabiel stayed away. Only when Lilith brought the baby to her breast to nurse did Baraqel step away. Alone with Aleph, Lilith had allowed herself to cry a little before succumbing to sleep. Now awake, she gazed at the fallen angel – who had felt it wasn't appropriate to witness Lilith give birth – gently holding her son, his eyebrows

furrowed as if deep in thought. She cleared her throat.

At the sound, Kokabiel looked up, still cradling the baby. “You’re awake,” he said, and he moved to give Aleph back to Lilith, but she gestured that he continue holding the baby. He settled back into the chair.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“Of what?”

“The baby.”

Kokabiel again looked down at Aleph. He replied, “He’s beautiful, Lilith.”

She smiled. “Yes. He is.” She paused, and her smile wavered. “It’s... incredible to think that he’ll grow so fast, when he’s this tiny.”

He shifted his gaze to Lilith. “And yet he will. He’ll look like a four-year old human by year’s end.”

She shook her head at that. “So fast. It’s absurd.” She paused again and then admitted, “This should be the happiest day of my life... yet here I am, trying not to cry because my baby won’t be a baby for very long.”

Kokabiel didn’t know how to respond to that.

What was there to say? That angels, by nature, had never been babies nor children, so of course Aleph, being half-angel, wouldn’t be a child that long? That he would age four times faster than humans, reaching full maturity when his human counterparts were only five years old? That the energy signature within him would grow so exponentially that, unless he learned how to control it, he would harm all mortals around him, including his own mother? That the reason, by year’s end, Aleph would have to leave home was for his mother’s own

safety?

That while Lilith's son was immortal, she was not?

Kokabiel said, "Lilith... just cry."

She shook her head again. "No. Enough of that. I want to appreciate every minute I have with Aleph while I still can. I don't want his earliest memories of me be sad ones." Lilith gave a smile that was more of a grimace. "Where's Baraqel?" she suddenly asked.

"Out on the upper deck," Kokabiel replied, "getting —"

"—air," she finished. "He always does that when he's stressed." She gave a soft chuckle. "So the terror of becoming a father has finally hit him."

Kokabiel stared at her. "Yes," he said. "Lilith, are you okay?"

Her blue eyes met his amber ones. "No," she admitted, laughing a little, "not really." Then she sent.

"Lilith —" he began, but then Aleph started crying.

"Give me my beautiful baby," she said, smiling. She received Aleph carefully, loosened her blouse, and scooped the baby's mouth to her breast. Aleph latched on and began suckling greedily.

"Ah," Kokabiel said, not sure if he should be seeing this.

Lilith's head bowed down, her long, mahogany brown hair loose, her blue eyes hooded as she smiled softly, cradling her newborn son. Aleph, his face buried into his mother's breast, had worked his little hands free from his swaddle, and one of them had grabbed onto Lilith's fingers. She bowed her head even more and kissed his little hand. Then she kissed his small, perfectly round head, which was covered in a light fluff, like a baby bird, and inhaled his warm, newborn smell.

Kokabiel suddenly remembered the night he had returned to Kamret, when he had knelt before Lilith, hearing Aleph's heartbeat for the first time within her small body, and she had kissed the crown on his head. He recalled Lilith's sending, just a moment ago: *I just wish I had more time... to be a better mother than my mother was to me.*

"Lilith," Baraqel said.

Kokabiel looked up, startled, for he hadn't noticed that Baraqel had returned. He began to stand up, but Baraqel clapped a hand on his shoulder, saying, "Stay. You need to hear this, too."

Lilith remained as she was, looking down at the baby as he nursed.

"I can't give you more time with Aleph, Lilith," Baraqel said. "It's too dangerous."

Oh, Kokabiel thought. *She sent to both of us.*

"But," he continued, "I can give you more time to be a mother."

Kokabiel frowned, confused.

Lilith looked up then. "What are you saying, Baraqel?" she asked carefully.

Baraqel sighed. He crouched down so that Kokabiel and Lilith were on either side of him. "You're right, Lilith. Kokabiel and I are celestial creatures, and you and your people are human, but Aleph is neither – and it's not right for him to be the only one of his kind."

Kokabiel was still confused. "What ARE you saying, Baraqel?"

"I'm saying," his partner replied, "that Lilith's right. Aleph needs a brother and a sister."

"Wait – what? WHAT?" Kokabiel exclaimed. "But what about the energy issue? It's already risky to Lilith with Aleph, but more nephil children could really hurt her –"

“Kokabiel,” Lilith interrupted.

“WHAT?”

“Don’t talk about me as if I’m not right here.”

Kokabiel stared at her. Without a word, he began to stand up.

Baraqel firmly placed one hand on Kokabiel’s knee, forcing Kokabiel to sit back down, and set his other on Lilith’s. Turning to Kokabiel, he said, “I’m scared, too. But between you and me, I trust that we’ll be able to figure out safeguards and fail-safes. And if Lilith believes she can handle more children, then we should trust her. Right?”

Kokabiel looked at his partner. After an uncomfortable silence, he sighed, “Right.” He turned his gaze at Lilith. “I’m sorry. Whatever you choose to do – I’ll be there.”

Baraqel also turned to Lilith. “Me, too.” He lightly squeezed her knee. “And I’m sorry too – for being a damn coward when I said no.”

Lilith shook her head. “You two,” she said, but she was smiling. “Why do I always have to be the brave one?”

Aleph fussed, unlatched, and yawned. He stared up at Lilith, his blue eyes exactly matching his mother’s.

“That’s okay,” she said. “I can be the brave one.”

But as Kokabiel saw the little family of father, son, and mother, he thought, *You shouldn’t have to be, Lilith.*

Out of all of Lilith’s children, Aleph was the most like her. Perhaps it was because he had her blue eyes, brown hair, and light brown skin. But perhaps it was because he was able to stay with her the longest, before he had to leave after his first birthday.

No one had to tell Aleph the reason he would have to leave. Like his siblings after him, he was born with his father's knowledge preloaded in his head, just like when his father woke up to his first day of existence, with a Celestial Engineer's knowledge preloaded in his head.

But unlike his father, Aleph's newborn brain was too undeveloped to understand what that knowledge meant. For the first three months of his life, he slept in the same room as his mother, until he was weaned and could walk on his own. Then he moved into the upper level of the home base, into a large room with walls heavily fortified with lead shielding. There, every morning, his father siphoned and captured his nephil energy, reducing it to safe radioactive levels, which allowed him to leave the room to be with his mother. With his mother, he ate his meals, learned the lore of Kamret, and was able to be her little boy.

But as he grew over the next nine months, even with the daily energy siphoning, his presence with his mother began to decrease day by day, week by week, to minimize her exposure to Aleph's energy, and when he wasn't with his mother, he would be with his father.

His father would bring him back to the shielded room, and there, his father taught him how to understand the knowledge that was hardwired in his brain. He learned what was relevant to him, like sending and performing Lethe sleep, and what was not, like flying (which he couldn't do since he didn't have wings) and becoming fully ethereal (which he also couldn't do because his body was permanently materialized). However, even with his father's thorough instruction, he was unable to control the nephil energy that flowed unabated from his body, and he would see the impatient frustration in his father's green

eyes.

One afternoon, his father's patience ran out. "You should be able to control this, Aleph," his father scolded. "You are my son, right?"

"I'm trying, Father," Aleph replied, his voice small and still very young.

"Try harder!"

At that moment, the person whom Aleph saw as his uncle appeared. From the doorway, Aleph heard him say, "Leave him be, Baraqel."

His father made a "tch" sound. "I need to check on Lilith, anyways," he said, his tone brusque, and left.

In the ensuing silence, Aleph looked down at himself, seeing the twining energy of blue and yellow flow out from him. "I really am trying, Uncle," he said softly.

"I know," Kokabiel replied. "You're young. Give it time."

"Father is very angry with me," Aleph said.

Kokabiel shook his head. "No – he's just afraid for you."

Aleph looked up. "I – I don't want to hurt anyone." His first birthday was yesterday, but he looked like a four-year old boy. "Is it time for me to leave, Uncle?"

"Yes," Kokabiel said. "Let's say goodbye to your mother first."

Now it was Aleph who shook his head. "I did this morning." He paused. "I don't want to make her cry again."

His uncle's amber eyes suddenly looked sad. He nodded. "Okay, then. Let's go."

Aleph trained with his uncle, as he learned how to siphon and

capture his own unceasing waves of nephil energy and struggled with dialing down its strength. He trained and lived in the same place: a second home base, far on the opposite side of his parents' home and far away from the human residents of Kamret. Engineered by his father, Aleph's home was built out of a mountain and was entirely shielded in lead. Far more massive than Aleph nor Kokabiel needed, both knew Baraqel designed it with Aleph's future siblings in mind.

Even so, they were both surprised when a pregnancy announcement arrived only one month after Aleph had left, and even more surprised when they learned that Aleph would have triplet sisters.

In the vid screen floating before Aleph and his uncle, his mother's belly looked huge as she lay, bedridden for her and the babies' safety.

"Are you excited to be a big brother, Aleph?" she had asked, beaming, as Aleph's father stood beside her, worry working its way through his pale, handsome face.

Trying not to gawk at the image of his mother's belly, Aleph still didn't know what to feel. "Yes, Ma," he had replied, but he wasn't sure if what he said was a lie or the truth.

As was his wont when Aleph and his mother spoke to each other, Kokabiel stood aside and was silent. As soon as the vid screen winked away, he saw the young boy trembling, upset, trying not to cry. "Aleph," he said, "let's work on your energy control."

Aleph looked up and nodded. "Yes, Uncle."

When Aleph's sisters were born shortly thereafter, they were all identical to each other, all three staring into the world with their father's green eyes. Six months later, when they looked like two-year old humans and Aleph's appearance was of an eight year old boy, Isa,

Dala, and Tallo moved in with Aleph and Kokabiel, for the three nephilim's unconstrained energy had already overwhelmed their mother well before the one year mark.

Kokabiel accepted his additional wards without question, feeling duty-bound to Aleph's parents.

But when another pregnancy announcement arrived scarcely a month later, this time with twin boys, Aleph could feel his uncle's barely controlled agitation.

That night, after a fitful couple of hours, Aleph woke up, alone and in the dark. Then his eyes adjusted as his body illuminated his bedroom with a cool, blue glow. At first he wondered why he woke up until he heard, faintly, voices coming from the commons room. Carefully, he left his bedroom, following the sound of the voices which, the closer he got, he realized were his uncle and his father, speaking from a vid screen.

"Kokabiel –"

"NO," his uncle interrupted, "I call BULLSHIT. Aleph – Aleph I understand. But triplets and now TWINS? Dammit, Lilith hasn't even had the chance to fully recover from her last pregnancy!"

"It's not as if we had planned all this."

"Well then, isn't it a FUCKING miracle – having all of these babies with so little sex, eh?"

His father's face twisted. He looked as if he was about to explode in anger, but then Aleph's mother appeared, setting her hand on his father's arm. "Let me speak to him," she said.

His father stared at her. He exhaled deeply, nodded, and stepped away, off-screen.

Aleph's mother looked to the side, as if waiting for his father to leave the room. After a few moments, she faced the vid screen. "Kokabiel," she said.

"Why do you let him DO THIS to you, Lilith?"

She peered at him. "Let him do what?" she asked carefully.

"Let him make you into a babymaker!" he sputtered, outraged.

She stared at him. "Of all the foolish things you have ever said, Kokabiel."

"Lilith, I'm serious –"

"SO AM I." She threw up her hands. "Have you forgotten who you're talking to? Have you gotten so caught up with whatever the hell you're doing that you assume that I've become STUPID or something?"

"Lilith –"

"SHUT UP," she cut him off, angrily. "I'M NOT DONE YET."

Kokabiel shut up.

She exhaled deeply, regaining her temper. "I am many things, things I don't have a choice to be. A half-breed. A daughter. A regent. Even a Beatrice – I don't even have a choice in that." She pointed to herself, at the place where her heart was. "But I CHOSE to be a wife and mother, Kokabiel. Baraqel would have been fine, just being my husband but never a father. He left the decision to me. And I chose to have children."

"But – why so MANY? So QUICKLY?"

She sighed again before answering, "It's because I'll die someday."

He stared at her confused. "What?"

She shook her head. "You and Baraqel – all so caught up with me

being this mysterious Beatrice. But you forget that I am human, and humans are mortal. We are fragile creatures. We live in a world where, through accident, illness, the actions of evil people, or even just simple aging, human beings die –” she snapped her fingers, “– like that. And when I held Aleph for the first time, I realized that someday I will be gone. I will leave behind a child who will never die and, therefore, will forever miss his mother.” She paused. “How could I live, knowing that he would have to bear the burden of grieving for his mother all alone? But with Isa, Dala, Tallo and – later on, Dalet and Limeh – then Aleph won’t have to shoulder that grief all by himself.” She paused again. “And whenever they miss me – whenever you and Baraqel miss me – you and they can take comfort that a little bit of me lives on in my children.”

Kokabiel frowned. “That’s not the same as you being here, Lilith.”

“I know,” she said, “but that’s all I can do for you all.”

“Lilith –”

“My immortal children and my two foolish angels – can’t you see that I’m trying to leave a bit of me when I’m gone?”

He gave a sharp sigh of frustration. “Dammit, Lilith, can you stop talking as if you’re dying?”

Aleph’s mother gave a wry smile. “But do you understand? It’s not Baraqel’s decision – but mine?” she asked, undeterred.

He sighed again. “Yes.”

“Good.” She looked down at her belly, which had only begun to soften. “If it’s any consolation, this is my last pregnancy.” She saw his surprised expression. “I’m not naïve, Kokabiel. I know that having nephil children harms my health, despite Baraqel’s preventative

measures. When the twins leave me, I'll return to my father's house."

"Why?"

She gave a small smile, at the innocence in his question. "Minimizes the risk. Baraqel wasn't lying when he said we didn't plan to have so many children so soon – they just happened. I'm a very fertile woman, Kokabiel."

"Ah."

She chuckled at Kokabiel's obvious discomfort. Then serious, she asked, "How are my babies?"

"Your babies – they aren't babies anymore, Lilith. Especially Aleph. He looks like a nine-year boy. He'll look like a man soon enough."

Aleph's mother shook her head, incredulous. "Too fast. They grow up too fast." She sighed, wistful. "If only I could be there...." She trailed off.

"Do you regret it?" Kokabiel asked. "Meeting Baraqel and me, getting married, having nephil children, only to have them leave you – would you change your mind, knowing what you know now?"

Aleph's mother began to respond, but from the vid screen, she paused, looking beyond Kokabiel. Following her line of sight, Kokabiel twisted around, and his amber eyes and her blue eyes both met the blue eyes of the nephil boy standing in the dark, silently peeking around a corner on the far side of the room. Both nephil and angel heard her answer.

"No," she said. "Never."

9 A FAMILY AT THE WORLD'S END

Separated evenly along the perimeter of Baraqel and Kokabiel's region, Lilith's children resided in solitary, shielded bunkers.

Their physical appearance belied their true age. At first, they looked much older than their actual age. But as the years passed by, they looked much younger, as their bodies didn't grow any older, even as they achieved full maturity of their nephil power. However, they were never able to dial down the potent energy continuously flowing out from their bodies to human-safe levels, so their father harnessed it, powering the advanced technologies created to benefit the humans under their care.

Looking like four year olds, the twins Dalet and Limeh were housed together and powered a defensive shield around the region. Looking like a ten-year old, the youngest triplet Tallo powered the extensive network of electromagnetic vehicle paths. Tallo's identical sisters, Isa and Dala, powered the general energy grid, although they were

physically separated from each other.

Appearing like a sixteen-year old, Aleph, the only child who had inherited Lilith's blue eyes, powered an observatory with advanced optics. It was the only structure that was not essential to the physical well-being of the humans. While his father assigned Aleph to the observatory, "in homage to your mother," Aleph knew the real reason: although he was the oldest, his younger siblings were more powerful than he was.

Installed in their bunkers, Aleph and his siblings had maintained large physical distances from the humans, following one of the strict rules that their father gave to them when they were old enough to leave their mountain home base and report to their assigned duty stations. They followed their father's rules without fail, for the rules were simple:

1. Never harm a human.
2. Never let a human see you.
3. Never leave your duty station.
4. Always siphon and capture your excess energy.
5. Always keep your comm open.

For four years, they had obeyed those rules while their father and uncle patrolled the region. With Isa and Dala powering him through the grid, their father could leave Kamret while still maintaining the Lethe command that had altered the Kamreti's memories all those years go. Meanwhile, the humans of Kamret and the other village-states, who spoke of the six nephilim's existence as rumored ghostly monsters, saw the GodKing and his Warrior as magical men who kept the monsters at bay and gave them miraculous gifts of machines and

other technologies, transforming their world.

Even though Lilith's children, obeying Rule 3, could not see the transformation with their physical eyes, they had inherited their mother's ability to separate their ethereal selves from their physical bodies, an ability that they had practiced when they were younger in their uncle's home base. Their physical bodies stationed in their bunkers, their ethereal selves could float invisibly and harmlessly among the humans. With quiet amusement, they witnessed the wonders that they had helped make happen. Isolated in their bunkers, they also kept in contact with each other via comms (which their father had implanted behind their right ears before they left their home) and vid screens. If they wanted to share more than material sounds and visuals, they would communicate with sending. In that way, although physically separated, Lilith's children were never really alone.

Yet Aleph continued to feel set apart from his siblings.

As his comm was filled with the amused observations of what his brothers and sisters had witnessed outside their hidden bunkers, Aleph chose to stay integrated, body and spirit, within his station. Even as he heard news of how the humans quickly adapted to the technology that they still saw as magic, Aleph didn't want to see a world in which he couldn't feel the sun on his skin, the grass under his feet, the warmth of his mother's hug.

He performed his duties and, at night, he emerged from his bunker to peek at the night sky, eating a late night snack. His siblings, having outgrown the need for external food, used the regenerative energy produced from their own bodies as self-sustaining nourishment, but Aleph used his cache of stored energy to power a food replicator. Like

a human, he preferred the act of eating. So, nibbling on an apple, he would see the cold twinkle of faraway stars, wondering if Archangels were really up there.

After a while, his siblings observed that the humans' expectations for what the GodKings could give them had become insatiable, even as their irrational fear of "ghosts" and "monsters" grew, and one day Isa declared, "These humans are still so immature."

Aleph flinched, for he still saw himself as human – at least part human. Hearing a familiar arrogance in his sister's voice, he turned down his comm's volume until the back-and-forth, self-satisfied commentary became a soft hiss that he hardly noticed. He never turned up the volume – and not once did he ever send to his siblings, lest he reveal his troubling alienation to them.

Thus Aleph was taken aback when he heard a man's piercing scream shatter through his comm's hiss and his sister's wordless sending of raw terror.

Tallo!

Too far for Aleph to travel physically without a large time delay, his ethereal self flew towards Tallo's bunker – or what used to be Tallo's bunker. Before he even saw the crater, Aleph saw the white-hot glow of a massive wave of radiation that could kill any mortal creature at ground zero. At the epicenter of the blast was Tallo – normally calm, aloof Tallo – weeping uncontrollably, as the rest of her siblings' ethereal selves arrived. Then their father and Kokabiel, still ethereal from their respective patrols, arrived. Touching down before Tallo, their father materialized. Incoherent, Tallo could only send a torrent of thoughts.

THE LAST BEATRICE

She had just returned from her ethereal walk when she stood up in her bunker and saw the wide, rapacious eyes of a strange man before her. In an instant, she saw everything that was in the man's mind.

He desired to know the magical source of the miraculous machines that could transport people without touching the ground. He traced the source to an unremarkable stand of boulders on the far reaches of his land. He passed through the illusion of boulders and stumbled into a secret place, not knowing that it had been designed to keep a nephil bodily inside but not once designed to withstand a human being from the outside – for the idea that a mere human would be dangerous to a nephil seemed unfathomable to its designer. The man saw the cache of captured excess energy, glittering blue and gold in the dark, and grabbed at it, believing to have discovered magical treasure.

But then he started, frightened by the glowing ghost child's sudden appearance. With a cry, he dropped the cache and, as the cache detonated, his scream was cut short – while Tallo's voiceless scream passed into sending as the forever unknown man, and everything around her, vaporized in the thermonuclear explosion.

As Aleph and his other siblings stared, shocked in receiving her thoughts instantly in their mind, Tallo cried, over and over, "I killed him! I killed him! I killed him!"

Angered by his helplessness, Baraqel tightly held his daughter as she sobbed, her hysteria making her voice grow higher and more ragged. Meanwhile, Kokabiel flew above the bubble of radiation to set down a containment field, but tendrils of radiation burst out. *SHIT!* he sent, alarmed.

As if broken from a spell, Aleph shook himself from his daze. "We

need to help him!” he called out to his other siblings. Isa, Dala, Dalet, and Limeh joined Aleph in hauling back the tendrils and sealing the cracks that threatened to shatter the containment field. Then they pushed the encased radiation down, deep into the Earth, letting rock several miles below the surface capture it, away from surface-dwelling mortal creatures. Afterwards, they were exhausted shimmers but were reluctant to return to their bodies while Tallo was still distraught.

Suddenly, Kokabiel looked away. “Baraqel,” he said.

Their father, still calming down Tallo, at first didn’t hear.

“BARAQEL,” he said, louder.

“WHAT,” their father responded, angry.

“The Lethe command.”

Their father froze. He closed his eyes for a second and then opened it. He was about to say something when his eyes widened.

Kokabiel met his stunned stare and then took off without a further word, his ethereal ashen-gray wings beating hard and fast.

Their father began to follow.

Confused, Aleph asked, “Father —”

“STAY HERE!” their father barked, and he shot up, his golden wings shining in the darkening sky, then becoming ethereal.

Aleph stared at the soon empty sky, but then he turned back to his sister Tallo, still frightened and bewildered by her new, raw emotions, her small body exposed in the open. At once he realized that he and the rest of Tallo’s siblings were as substantial as light and air, when Tallo needed a warm embrace and a safe place to recover. “Tallo,” Aleph asked, “can you travel?”

“Y-yes,” she replied, shivering even though the evening air was

warm.

“Good. Isa’s bunker is closest, so we’ll go along with you until you get there.”

“But Father –” Dalet and Limah both began, their voices sounding not like powerful nephilim but frightened little boys, unused to emotions overwhelming them.

“I know what Father said!” Aleph interrupted. “But it’s not safe for Tallo to be out like this. What if another human sees her?”

At that thought, Tallo whimpered, and the twins – wide-eyed with fear – nodded in silent assent, as did Isa and Dala.

Broken, Aleph thought, as he regarded his younger siblings. *They’re broken now – like me.* “Okay then,” he said aloud. “Let’s go.”

With Tallo bodily integrated, they couldn’t move as fast as if they were all ethereal. But being nephil, Tallo was faster than any human. Comforted by the presence of her siblings, Tallo crossed vast distances until she arrived at a familiar-looking outcropping of boulders. Tallo pressed through the barrier illusion. The sensation felt like suffocating gel, through which she crossed into the interior of the bunker. As ethereal spirits, the others easily phased through the barrier. Isa quickly integrated with her unconscious, supine body, sprang up, and – without hesitation – embraced her sister.

Aleph looked on and felt a guilt-addled twinge of envy. He exhaled deeply. “I’ll inform Father where Tallo is,” he said to Dala and the twins. “Meanwhile, return to your bunkers. We all need time to recover after all this.”

“Aleph?” Tallo asked.

He met her frightened gaze, her green eyes blood-shot with crying.

“Yes?”

“Am I a bad person?”

He stared at her, then shook his head. “No, Tallo. That man’s greed violated your space. If we’re looking for a bad person, it would be that man.”

“But he died,” Tallo said, her voice wavering.

Isa held her tightly. “No, no,” she said, her voice sounding as if she was about to cry as well, “it was an accident.”

Leaving Tallo in Isa’s care, Aleph and the rest of his siblings phased outside of Isa’s bunker. Aleph waited, watching the twins and then Dala leave, before he took off. Returning to his bunker underneath his father’s observatory, he was tempted to make a hard left.

To where his father and Kokabiel had flown.

To Kamret.

But the effort to contain and sequester the explosion’s radiation exhausted Aleph, who – unused to the separation of ethereal self from his body – felt the taut strain of the connection to his physical body, worn thin. Also, he knew that disobeying his father’s command to stay at his and his siblings’ positions, in order to lead Tallo to a safe haven, was one thing; interfering in the urgent actions of his father and Kokabiel was another level of insubordination. Reluctantly, he stayed on course. Returning to his bunker, he integrated, gasping for air as if he had held his breath for several hours. Feeling the exhaustion settle into his bones, he turned over in his bed. Trusting that, whatever had happened in Kamret, his uncle and father would take care of it and they would inform him and his siblings soon enough, Aleph tried to get to sleep.

But just like that night when he eavesdropped on the conversation between his mother and Kokabiel, Aleph woke up after a fitful few hours, staring into a darkness faintly illuminated with his glowing energy.

The Lethe command, he thought, remembering Kokabiel's words and the abrupt departure of both Kokabiel and his father. He recalled the shock and alarm in his father's face before he left, and Aleph sat up as he realized what his father's reaction meant: something went wrong with the Lethe command. The Lethe command that had rewritten all of Kamret's memories, when Kokabiel and Baraqel first arrived at Kamret. That had changed how the people of Kamret saw the two angels and the headman's family.

That had kept his mother safe.

Ma! Aleph sent, his sending a cry of fear, but his sending encountered an ominous silence, rebounding against a psychic block as if he had run against a solid rock wall. Panicking, he tried sending to his father and uncle but encountered the same silence, the same block. Without thinking, his ethereal self flew out from the bunker and shot through the pre-dawn sky, fear driving him to Kamret.

When Aleph arrived at the outskirts of Kamret, where the arboreal home base of his infancy was located, he could feel the invisible wall. At first, nothing appeared amiss as he peered through it. But as he carefully negotiated a way through the wall, using the same energy that his father bequeathed him that also constructed the wall, he saw the image of a sleepy Kamret at dawn totally transform.

On the other side, fields and structures were ablaze. Violence had erupted, with fellow Kamreti turning on each other. The ground had

grown slick with blood and slain bodies. And high above them all, Aleph saw his father and uncle.

To human eyes, they would have looked like two blinding figures of light – one silver, the other gold – darting around, crashing, and then tearing away at each other like living fireworks. But to Aleph’s nephil eyes, he only saw his father and uncle, their wings outstretched, aflame with their respective energy. Kokabiel propelled blasts long range, which his father deftly deflected, aiming the redirected energy to the sky, away from the humans below. His father closed the distance, grappling Kokabiel, but Kokabiel broke free, reared back to gain distance again, and then propelled shards of energy, trying to shoot his father out of the sky.

At first, Aleph stared, his mouth agape, confused. But then he realized what he was seeing for the very first time in his short life: his father and uncle were fighting each other. “NO!” Aleph screamed, his voice still sounding so young, and his scream carried into sending to both, to the imperfect fallen angels whom he saw as fathers – the one who sired and commanded him, the other who raised and understood him.

Kokabiel reacted first, turning his wild, wide amber eyes to Aleph. Before his father could act, Aleph received a sending so raw that he thought his brain would explode –

The shock of Tallo’s explosion.

Isa and Dala’s broken power connection to Baraqel.

The Lethe command over Kamret, weakened and then gone.

Hatred and hostility restored among the Kamreti.

Kamret’s destruction.

THE LAST BEATRICE

Lord Arim finding a sleeping scapegoat.

Lilith awakened by Lord Arim plunging the knife into her heart.

NO!

Lilith's cry hits both Baraqel and Kokabiel, so far away with her children.

They fly to her side.

Kokabiel kills the assassin, wreaks vengeance on those who hold the same murderous intent.

Baraqel saves Lilith's life, but the assault so traumatizes her that he despairs that her Beatrice spirit is lost. He gives her Lethe sleep so strong that she falls into the same coma that befell her parents.

Kokabiel returns, sees the betrayal of everything Lilith stood for – of fighting for her parents' return, of accepting her mortality, of holding onto hope – and only sees an enemy.

A rival.

A monster to destroy.

But then he hears the monster's son, sees Lilith's eyes look at him in horror.

I'm sorry, my boy.

Kokabiel's rarely used Lethe sleep hit Aleph.

As he collapsed, Aleph saw his father, shocked and then enraged. His father fired off his own blast. But Kokabiel did not move: a hovering target in the sun-rise sky, ichor dripping from his wounds. The blast hit him full force. Aleph wanted to cry out but was slipping away, and as darkness fell into his eyes, his last memory was Kokabiel on fire.

Falling back to Earth.

When Aleph awoke, he had returned to his body, but everything else in his world had changed.

Kamret had fallen and – as if the hatred and hostility were an uncontrollable disease – all of the humans in his father’s domain had killed each other. His mother lay comatose in her father’s house, and Kokabiel had met a similar fate: his father stripped Kokabiel of consciousness, imprisoning him into the very tree where Kokabiel had slept that night after he realized that he and Baraqel were fallen. In time, Kokabiel would be part of the tree, his sentence lost, as close to death as an immortal being could be.

His father, in grief and despair at the loss of Lilith and Kokabiel, had at first retreated to the old home base, having abandoned the humans to their self-destruction. Aleph’s siblings, who had never recovered from that night of the explosion, stayed in their bunkers as obedient bystanders. Only after Aleph awoke – several years later to his surprise – did his father choose to live in the observatory, to see the stars and wallow in his guilt and shame. Aleph, first-born of his father’s children, was allowed to leave his bunker and join his father above ground.

In time, Aleph stayed above full time, suspended in a glass case hovering a meter above the ground. There, Aleph could power the observatory within the border of wakefulness and sleep, could ignore the despair that flowed off his father like indigo ink and blood. Aleph had lost track how long he was in that state when he felt an electric shock, a signal that something had crossed through the barrier that had

kept his father's domain quarantined from the rest of the world.

“Setebos,” his father said.

From deep in the memories that he had inherited from his father's life as a Watcher and before, Aleph recognized that name. The Watcher who had saved a little girl from her despair. The Celestial Engineer who had wept at the end of the War in Heaven. The angel whom his father once disregarded but from whom he had learned how to be humble when no one else could – not even Kokabiel.

When Setebos arrived, seeking answers about the state of the Watchers, Baraqel chose Aleph to speak for him, so it was a weak nephil boy who sent the history of Kamret and its fall. The knowledge drove Setebos to weeping, yet it also drove him towards action. When Setebos asked his father to join him, to confront Samyaza, their long-absent commanding officer, about their fallen state, his father declined. “I've done enough harm as it is.” But even as he did so, he gifted his old colleague a canister of Aleph's nephil energy, to power Setebos and his partner Miranda.

Once Setebos left, Aleph had hoped that the unexpected visit would change his father somehow – to spur him out of the meaningless stasis that was his father's existence. But his father only shook his head, murmuring, “I don't know anymore.”

And, for the first time, Aleph despaired that he was ever born. He winced. *No*, he thought, *no, I can't think like that*. He ranged through his memories – past the recent ones, the inherited ones, the sad ones – and recalled the earliest of his own personal memories. His mother was holding him in one arm, standing on the top-most deck of the home base made from a tree. It was a bright, spring day, and she was

pointing at a hawk in the sky.

“Don’t cry, my sweet boy, that you can’t fly. You see that bird over there?”

“Yesh,” little Aleph replied, his voice with a young toddler’s lisp.

“Even though it’s high above, do you know where it’s always looking, where its home will always be?”

“No.”

“Here.” She stamped one foot on the solid deck floor. “On the ground. On the Earth. No matter where it flies off to, it always returns home. So the ground must be pretty important, eh? Pretty special.” She hugged him. “Just like you. You don’t need wings to be special, sweet one. Do you believe your mama?”

He hugged her tightly, smelling her sweet, earthy scent.

She kissed his soft, baby cheeks. “Angel, nephil, human – it doesn’t matter. Always remember this: your mama loves you. Forever and ever and ever. You promise you’ll remember?”

“Yesh, Mama,” little Aleph replied. “I’ll remember.”

I remember, Aleph thought. He looked through his enclosed case and saw his father, sitting down as if exhausted even though, what with nephil energy saturating everything, he knew his father would never be underpowered. *Why can’t you?*

Many years passed again. Aleph remained at age sixteen, and he knew that his sisters were still ten years old and his brothers remained four-year olds, as if the fall of Kamret had forever arrested their aging. Then one full moon night, his father tore away from the telescope, looking aghast. He rushed out and, for the first time in ages, took flight.

What is it? By that time, Aleph had returned to staying in his bunker

during the day, so he was above ground when he witnessed his father flying high in the sky, his flight path making wide arcs in the sky, following the curvature of the barrier shield that had existed ever since Dalet and Limeh were installed in their station all those years ago. Aleph shifted his focus from his father to the shield, which at first appeared as clear and unmoving as crystal – but then he noticed the slight shimmering and subtle wave motion on its surface. Looking through the shield, he could see what was causing the unusual movement: it was raining.

Aleph frowned. *Rain shouldn't be able to do that. Unless –*

Just like recognizing Setebos as if he had always known him, Aleph was born with the Celestial Engineers' knowledge of the Earth's initial set-up and execution. That included what happened if the Earth became so riddled with faults that its initial execution became terminally degraded. The Earth would undergo a wipe and update, what the Watchers called "Reboot," and the method of it was a flooding rain that originated not from Earth – not even the material universe. It would come from the Purgatorial Sea of Sacred Space itself.

Aleph witnessed in stunned wonder. It was strange, knowing this fact to be true even though he never learned it, never experienced it. The knowledge of the Reboot was as real as the bones in his body and the blood in his veins. It served a purpose, and the purpose was for the good of Earth and Earth's creatures. But he never knew how terrified his father would be, upon witnessing the Reboot happen, for his father – as were all the other Watchers who were Celestial Engineers – truly believed they would never have to experience it.

In contrast to his father, Aleph was not afraid of it. *Why?*, he thought. Immortal that he was, he knew that the Reboot could destroy him, but he wasn't suicidal. He didn't want to die. Yet he knew his life wasn't happy. It wasn't what his mother, father, or uncle had wanted for him – nor for his brothers and sisters – and another day of this current deadened existence made him struggle with his immortality. While his father questioned what was right or wrong, Aleph felt that whatever “right” was, his current existence wasn't it. If being washed away in the Reboot gave him the clarity of what “right” was, then he – he –

He looked back at his father, whose flight path became more erratic, more frantic, pulling the ambient nephil energy to shore up the unstable shield, so single-minded in his task that he didn't think to ask Aleph or his siblings for help.

If being washed away gave him peace – then Aleph welcomed it.

The shield wouldn't hold. The shield would inevitably fail, and the waters would come for them. It was futile to fight against it. But Aleph knew that his father wouldn't listen to him, as he still saw his children as obedient subordinates, even though his father did love them, in his own aloof fashion.

Aleph wasn't afraid for himself but for his father, his siblings, his mother, and uncle. What would happen to them in the Reboot? What would happen to them, unprepared as they were at the end of the world? At that thought, he began to tremble: the Reboot itself didn't frighten him, but being all alone did.

Another moment of clarity. *Is this how the end of the world works? Making you admit harsh truths about yourself?* As Aleph witnessed his

father, he realized that he needed an adult's steady guidance, but not when the only adult before him was regressing into mindless panic. Aleph would have to wake up his mother and release his uncle from imprisonment.

Could he do it?

He remembered the only time he had felt like a leader, when he commanded his siblings to help Kokabiel after Tallo's bunker exploded and then directed his siblings to their bunkers, with Isa sharing hers with Tallo. *Isa and Tallo are still like that*, Aleph realized, which meant that his father had agreed with Aleph's decision. He looked at his arms, blue and gold energy signatures intertwining, but the blue from his human mother was and had always been stronger than the gold from his angel father. Yet his mother wasn't an ordinary human – how could he forget that? A Beatrice, beloved by two angels: he was her first-born child. Didn't that amount to something?

Aleph glanced up. His father still wasn't paying attention to him. The purgatorial rain on the other side of the shield increased its intensity and further drove his father to frenzied obsession. He took off running.

Faster, he thought. *I need to go faster!*

Suddenly, Aleph felt his body change, becoming lighter and smaller. In a flash of indigo light, he took flight, becoming a brown, blue-eyed sparrowhawk. *How?*, he began to ask, disoriented by his high vantage point, his unfamiliar form. But he had no time to wonder how he had changed his body, an ability that neither he nor anyone else knew he had. The stark, dead land below him was a blur, as his hawk's body sped with a nephil's power. Soon, he arrived at the window of

his mother's bedroom. As Aleph transformed back to his true form, human hands reached out to open the window, and he clambered inside. He ran and then paused before his mother's bedside.

She lay coldly still, her body enveloped in the golden glow of his father's energy signature that sealed her in Lethe sleep. Channeling the same energy signature that flowed in him, Aleph placed his hands above her head and felt resistance from the seal. But then the dual golden energy signatures melded together, and slowly – agonizingly slowly – he parted the seal, exposing his mother's face. He cupped his hands around her face, and the dark indigo blue inherited from his mother flooded his hands, supplanting his father's. Leaning forward, her past words echoed in his mind:

“Angel, nephil, human – it doesn't matter. Always remember this: your mama loves you. Forever and ever and ever. You promise you'll remember?”

With eyes closed, he touched his forehead against his mother's and sent: *I remember, Ma. Do you remember me?*

She didn't move.

Ab, he thought. *Ab, I'm too late* – but then he felt his mother's small hands cover his hands and heard a voice he hadn't heard in several years.

“Aleph?”

Ma! The seal fell away, and he collapsed beside her then, hugging her tightly. He sent everything that had happened, from the night of Tallo's explosion to the rain of the world's end. He felt her tremble, and Aleph pulled back, to see his mother weeping. “Ma—” he began, frightened.

THE LAST BEATRICE

She sat up and quickly wiped away the tears with the palms of her hands. “It’s all so sad, my boy,” she said. She glanced down, at where the assassin’s knife had been, but there wasn’t even a scar. “They’re all dead, and the only humans remaining in Kamret are your grandparents and me.” She shook her head. “Enough regrets.” She looked at her son. “Is it really the end of the world?”

“Yes.”

She exhaled sharply. “To Kokabiel, then.”

“I – I don’t know how to get him out, Ma,” Aleph admitted.

“That’s all right,” she said. She swung herself over to the side of the bed and stood up on wobbly legs. “I do.”

At the foothills of a mountain nearby Kamret stood a tree that had existed since the beginning of the world. Once, it had been the largest tree in a dense forest, with a wide trunk, gnarled roots, and a broad canopy. In the end times, however, it was a dried husk of what it had been. Yet, woven in the tree’s matter, lay the barest existence of the fallen angel Kokabiel. Stripped of what he once had been, he may as well be the half-dead tree, annihilated into silence and stillness.

It had taken some time for Lilith to find the tree, as the landscape had drastically changed during her long slumber. The image of that tree in Lilith’s memory stood in stark contrast to the ruin that they had found, after seeking Kokabiel’s silvery energy signature that lay, on a quantum level, entangled within both of them. They had traveled far, with Aleph transporting her as a massive, gray wolf for her to ride. “I still don’t even know how I can do this, Ma,” he had said, as he bound across the land with great speed.

“Sometimes the ability arises when you most need it,” she had replied, remembering when her ability to send awoke when she screamed on a lonely hill by the sea, the day before Kokabiel arrived on that violent night in Kamret.

Now before the tree, Aleph placed an assessing hand on the trunk. “There’s hardly enough of him left,” he said, worried.

Lilith placed her own hand. “There’s enough,” she said. She leaned in.

“What are you going to do to get Uncle out?”

She rested her head against the rough, sun-bleached trunk. “I’m going to sing.”

Aleph blinked. “What?”

Lilith gave a small smile. Then she sang.

The lullaby she sang to all of her children when they were babies. The lullaby her father sang to her when she was a child. The song his mother taught him, all the way back to their earliest ancestors, when there were no words but the joyful harmony of being together, of being alive. Lilith’s voice rang out across the blighted, dead foothills, and through her sending the music resonated through the tree. For it was the music that had called Kokabiel from far away, all those years ago, to Kamret. To Lilith. To himself.

Thank you, Lilith.

Aleph stared as the ruined tree trembled and then shuddered. Suddenly, it exploded in a great cloud of splinters and dust. “Ma!” he cried out, shielding himself with his arms.

But when the cloud settled, what remained was Kokabiel, shining in silver, holding Lilith, unhurt, in his arms. *I saw him stab you*, he sent,

his emotions raw, the memory of Lilith's assassination still in his mind.

Hush, Kokabiel, Lilith sent, and then she sent her son's memories, from that time to the present.

Kokabiel looked up then and saw Aleph. "My boy," he said, his voice raspy, unused to speaking. He stretched out an arm.

"Uncle," Aleph said, and he joined Kokabiel and Lilith in a family embrace.

All too soon, the bittersweet reunion ended, and they stepped back from each other. Kokabiel looked up, peering through the barrier shield above them, assessing the situation.

"Is it –" Lilith began, but stopped when she saw Kokabiel's grim expression.

"Yes, it's failing," Kokabiel confirmed. "And the waters will rush in. SHIT. No wonder Baraqel is terrified."

"Uncle?"

"Aleph, you already know. The Reboot means that the Watchers have failed. Not just me and your father, but all of us Watchers – planet-wide. We already knew the Reboot was a 'worst case' option before we came here. It's the only countermeasure against humanity's total catastrophic failure, and once the Reboot's begun, there's no stopping it. But not once did we think that WE would be the cause of the Reboot." He shook his head, incredulous. "We've fallen so long ago and fucked it all up – what happened here likely happened with the other Watcher regions." He paused, thinking. "But the Archangels left us alone, even while operating in our fallen state, and I have no clue why. So there's no predicting what will happen to Baraqel and me. And as for you and your brothers and sisters – who knows what the

Reboot will do to you?”

“But... why aren’t you terrified, too, Uncle?”

Kokabiel stared and then burst out laughing. “Aleph, I am frightened out of my mind!”

“Uncle!”

“Look – I’m frightened, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to put up a useless fight against the Reboot. I share your mindset, Aleph. The Reboot isn’t a tool of malice. It’s to clear away the mess we’ve made, force us to account our actions, and rehabilitate and restore Earth’s status. It’s not knowing where we fit in all of that which frightens me – likely why your father is terrified – but fighting against it? No.” He shook his head, taking in the dead land around them. “We can’t keep on existing like this.”

“Then what should we do?”

Lilith, who stood silent, listening to Kokabiel and Aleph, declared, “We need to make Baraqel understand. Then we need to be together when the end comes.” Her eyes blazed, taking on the role of the last leader of Kamret. “Aleph, get your brothers and sisters. Show them how to transform – if you can do it, then they can as well. Then all of you go to Kamret, get your grandparents, and bring them to the upper deck of the home base outside of Kamret. Kokabiel, your father, and I will meet you there.”

“Ma –” Aleph began.

“Go,” she interrupted. “There’s no time.”

Aleph hesitated, reluctant to leave his mother again, but then he nodded and transformed into his sparrowhawk form. Quickly he gained air and took off.

Once Aleph was far enough away, Lilith exhaled deeply, and Kokabiel grabbed her before she collapsed on the ground. He asked, “Why are you hiding this from Aleph? That the ambient nephil energy is still harming you? He knows this already.”

“Because,” she said, “he’s still a child, and he needs his mother to be strong, especially at the end of the world. Even if it’s only for appearance’s sake.”

“Lilith.” But he stopped himself.

“Take me home,” she said, closing her eyes. “I’ll wait for you and Baraqel once you get that infuriating angel of ours to face reality.”

“All right.” He held Lilith tightly to himself as his ash-gray wings materialized. Without another word, he leapt up.

Lilith let out a small sound of surprise, and her hands clutched Kokabiel tighter.

He glanced down. “That’s right – you’ve never flown with me,” he replied. He paused. “So much time lost.”

Kokabiel didn’t need to send for Lilith to feel his sadness. “So much time lost,” she echoed.

As they flew, neither spoke nor sent. Kokabiel stripped enough excess nephil energy from Lilith so that, when they arrived at the home base’s upper deck, she could steady herself on her own two feet upon touching down. For a brief moment, both felt a keen ache of *déjà vu*, of the night when Kokabiel returned from his first sojourn away, when Lilith was pregnant with Aleph. Kokabiel turned, about to leave for Baraqel, when Lilith called out, “It isn’t fair that we couldn’t do what we wanted to do.”

Hearing the pain in her voice, Kokabiel paused. “This isn’t the time

to say that.”

“The hell it is. It’s the end of the world. It’s the perfect time to say it,” Lilith retorted. “I wanted more time to be a mother, more time to get my parents back, more time to be with Baraqel – more time with YOU.”

“Lilith –” he said.

“Instead it was separation and isolation and public duties to people who didn’t give a damn about me. And you – YOU – everything you’ve done, every choice you’ve made, have been for the sake of Kamret, the family, the MISSION. But what about you?”

He was silent.

“What did you ever want, Kokabiel?”

He turned to her then. He crossed the short space separating him from Lilith, dropped to his knees, and wrapped his long arms around her small, soft waist. “What I wanted,” he said, his voice ragged, as if a deep secret was being torn from him, “was music,” he looked up at her, “and you.”

At that, Lilith bowed down, and they kissed – a soft, gentle kiss.

“You are my best friend,” she said.

“Ah,” he sighed.

“And I will love you forever and ever.”

Kokabiel gave a short bark of laughter. “Even after the end of the word?”

“Even after.”

They held each other in silence for a few seconds more and then, reluctantly, released each other’s embrace. For the second time, Lilith saw Kokabiel turn away, but this time she let him go.

Oh my God, Baraqel, Kokabiel thought. His partner, frantically shoring up the failing barrier shield, looked like a disoriented moth, flying blindly about an open flame. He didn't even notice Kokabiel's presence until Kokabiel flew in front of him, grabbing Baraqel's arms. "What are you trying to do, Baraqel?" Kokabiel barked in his face.

Baraqel blinked, as if woken from a trance. Then he recognized the being in front of him. "How are you here?" he cried out.

"Lilith broke me out," Kokabiel replied, "after Aleph woke Lilith."

"ALEPH?" Baraqel looked down, finally noticing that his son wasn't there. "Why would he disobey me?"

That angered Kokabiel. "Because he feared for his father, who is acting like a MADMAN." His hands tightened around his partner's arms. "I ask you again: what are you trying to do?"

Baraqel, weakened by his non-stop exertions, struggled to break free. "I've no time for this, Kokabiel! I need to reinforce the shield, so we can wait out the waters –"

"Wait out the waters? Of the REBOOT? Dammit, Baraqel, I'm no Celestial Engineer, and even I know that as long as there's one anomaly outside tolerance, the Reboot will keep running until everything's complied with the original parameters. And this," Kokabiel gestured sharply at the shield, crackling with the collective nephil energy of Baraqel's children, "is one hell of an anomaly!"

"But I can't – I can't just let them –" Baraqel stammered. His green eyes, wide with fear, stared into Kokabiel's amber eyes, beseeching for an answer, and he sent what was in his mind.

The dark, oozing, toxic substance from the enemy during the War

in Heaven, molded and spread out as far as the eye could see. The inflamed, sick color of the hard, bare plains, stone mountains, and desert valleys. A red sky thick with sulfurous clouds crackling with electricity. The substance's exothermic reactions created a stifling, stinking heat. The enemy's unceasing screams of fear, hate, and despair, echoing across that immortally-damned land. And the guilt, as sharp and keen as a stab wound, that he had caused his partner and his entire family to be condemned to the place that would forever haunt his existence.

Baraqel broke down then. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" he cried out.

Kokabiel held his partner and gently took him back down to the ground. Sitting together, they remembered the horror of Hell being formed all around them, and Kokabiel let Baraqel sob on his shoulder, his arms around him as if he were a father and Baraqel his son.

As he waited for the storm of weeping to pass, Kokabiel thought, *How long have you kept this fear inside you, Baraqel? How long have we deluded ourselves that we actually knew what was best?* Kokabiel gave a soft, sigh. *God, we're fools – we're all fools.* Once he heard the weeping ease a bit, Kokabiel said, gently, "Hell is the place for those who defy Central's directives, even when given the opportunity to repent that defiance. It's also a place where hope is absent, crowded out by hate and despair. So, don't you see, Baraqel – in denying the Reboot because of your despair, you were priming yourself for Hell by creating an internal one of your own?"

Baraqel groaned, dropping his face into his hands. His face still covered, he asked, "How are you able to have hope, Kokabiel? We don't know anything – ANYTHING – about will happen when the

Reboot hits us.”

“You’re right – we don’t know anything about what’ll happen to us. And I won’t deny it. I’m as scared as you are. But what I have more than fear is hope – because Lilith has hope that there’ll be something good, even after all this.” Kokabiel paused, recalling Lilith’s embrace, her soft kiss. “Remember, it was you who told me that she loves us, both of us. And it’s true. She loves us, and she loves her family. Do you really believe that’ll mean nothing, when we face the Reboot?”

Baraqel rubbed his face, drying his eyes. He exhaled deeply. “Our Beatrice,” he said.

“Our Beatrice,” Kokabiel affirmed. He stood up and extended a hand to his partner. Hand clasped, he pulled Baraqel to his feet. “She’s waiting for us, at our home base. Your children and Lilith’s parents, too, at this point.”

Still holding his hand, Baraqel said, “You know, you’re more than a partner or fellow Watcher to me. You’re my brother.”

Kokabiel shook his head again, smiling. “Idiot. I knew that already. You think I’d put up with your bullshit all of this time if I didn’t love you like family?” He pulled Baraqel in for an all-too brief, meaningful hug and then released his hand. “Ready?”

“Not really.”

“Yeah, me too,” Kokabiel admitted. Then he added, grinning, “But we shouldn’t keep Lilith waiting, or she’ll be pissed.”

“Hah.” Baraqel gave a shaky smile. “She’s scarier than the Reboot.”

“No lie.”

Lilith saw her children arrive first, flocked together to form the

shape of a massive eagle, bearing Zaia and Rifan on their backs. The eagle shape slowly separated, gently setting down Zaia and Rifan, still locked in sleep, on the wooden surface of the upper deck. Then, one by one, her children returned to their original forms, embracing their mother with bittersweet tears. When Baraqel and Kokabiel finally arrived, they saw the sleepers' heads resting on Dalet and Limeh's sitting laps. Huddled on one side of their grandparents were the triplets Isa, Dala, and Tallo, who held each other. Aleph sat on the other side.

Sitting at the foot of her parents, keeping a watchful eye, was Lilith. Seeing her foolish angels, she stretched out her arms, and both Baraqel and Kokabiel came to her, without a word. Then both Watchers extended their respective golden and ash-gray wings, enveloping the last family of Kamret in a celestial embrace.

They were all together, when the world ended.

The waters outside had risen so high that it was over the top of the shield. When it finally failed, it winked out in an instant, and the deluge crashed down upon them, before anyone could cry out.

With Lilith's head bowed, her tears drowned into the waters of the Reboot, her last thought was, *Oh my loves, be happy – be free.*

Even as the deafening cataclysm fell upon them, they all heard an unexpected answer, from within the Reboot itself:

GRANTED.

10 BREAKING THROUGH

I remember – when I was LILITH.

From within the island’s belajoun tree, Janey’s maternal grandparents, Setebos and Cora, materialized. Simultaneously, a shimmery portal appeared closer to where she stood, winking away as her maternal grandparents – Ariel and Zoey – stepped through, onto the field of snowy flowers nodding in the twilight breeze. The former Celestial Engineers and the eternal Beatrices walked towards her, four members of Janey Babson’s miraculous family.

Ariel regarded his granddaughter. “You remember,” he simply stated.

“Yes, I remember,” Janey declared. “When I had children. When....” She paused, trying not to cry. “When I died – and left my family to suffer without me.” She felt her face contort. “And you knew! You knew and kept it secret the whole time, you KNEW. And YOU –” her eyes flashed with rage towards Setebos – “YOU made me forget

–” She stopped, breaking down with angry tears.

Ariel spoke calmly, “You have every right to be angry. But if you truly remember everything, then you know why we had to keep this knowledge hidden from you.”

Janey stood, not answering at first. But then she suddenly exclaimed, “ARRRGH!” She wiped her eyes with the palms of her hands. “YES. I know why, and I know it was the right thing to do. But twenty-three years! Twenty-three fucking years not knowing, wondering what the hell was wrong with me! Do you know how that feels?”

Her grandparents responded with silence.

Janey stared at them and then realized that she knew their stories – their pain and their triumph – to become the persons standing before her. Her grandmothers, who surmounted violence from the hands of others; her grandfathers, who fought through their own self-inflicted trauma. “Hah. Of course you do. How could I forget?” Janey shook her head and suddenly burst into laughter. But then the laughter became hysterical, and when they became gulping sobs, both Cora and Zoey came to her. They held Janey as she bowed her head into their caring arms, her body shaking.

“It’s okay, sweetie, it’s okay,” Zoey whispered, stroking her granddaughter’s hair.

Cora, appearing not much older than Janey, looked towards Setebos. “Tea,” she said.

The wine-dark winged angel nodded. With a twist of a hand, a blanket appeared underneath Cora, Zoey, and Janey. A small wooden tray and a mug filled with hazel herb tea appeared at one corner of the

blanket. He saw Zoey gently set Janey down on the blanket, speaking to her in soothing murmurs as they sat, and Cora reached over and handed the mug to Janey.

“Setebos.”

He turned to Ariel, whose snow-white wings glowed in the twilight.

“Janey’ll be all right. But we need to put up the shield now that she’s here.”

Setebos nodded. “Right.”

With strong wingbeats, both angels took to air, flew straight up, and then separated to opposite ends of the island.

Drinking her tea, Janey felt the mild soporific take effect as the jarring return of her previous life’s memories finally began to integrate with the memories of her current self. She looked up, seeing her angel grandfathers. She remembered clearly Setebos’ intervention seven years ago, when Aleph accidentally summoned her. But now she also remembered vividly the first time she saw Ariel – before he was even her grandfather.

On the day Lilith died.

#

GRANTED.

At the sound of the voice in the Reboot, everything around them changed.

A dizzying stream of cold stars flew past, and the last family of Kamret found themselves in darkness dimly illuminated with innumerable glowing pinpoints of soft blue. In the change, they had separated and were frightened when neither angel nor nephil could produce a light using their energy signature. Shaken, they called out to

each other in hollow echoes as their eyes adjusted to the sudden change of light, and they reunited in the center of a vast cave, the ceiling high above them.

“Wait,” Lilith cried out, her voice echoing against the unseen cave walls. “Where are my mother and father?”

A strangely familiar voice answered from the darkness: “Here.”

All turned to a slight shimmer, from which an angel with glowing white wings and short-cropped graying hair stepped through, holding a glowing, red sphere.

“Ariel!” both Baraqel and Kokabiel exclaimed, relief and fear comingling in their voices.

Lilith started. She recognized that name – the commanding officer of the Celestial Engineers, in the containment room before the Watchers came to Earth. Her children, sensing the alarm in Kokabiel and their parents, drew closer to each other and closer to Lilith. *I must be brave*, she thought. “Where are we?” she asked. “And how are my parents here?”

But Baraqel, who had been peering at the cave walls and then at Ariel, suddenly asked, “WHEN are we, Ariel?”

Lilith turned to Baraqel. “What?”

Ariel nodded. “What Baraqel is seeing is a shift in the time signature of my energy, Lilith. Angels are celestial creatures who can travel not only through space but also time; the Reboot imparts that ability as well. You’ve arrived at a time very far after the Reboot, and the space is on the other side of the planet from where Kamret used to be.”

“We are still on Earth,” Kokabiel said.

“Yes,” Ariel replied.

Realization hit Kokabiel. “So – we passed the Reboot.”

Baraqel stared at Ariel. “That means – that means...” He hesitated, as if not wanting to jeopardize the hope blooming within him.

Ariel smiled. “Yes. Thanks to the intercession of Lilith, your Beatrice, your status and Kokabiel’s status have been restored. And even your nephil children have been granted a place in the post-Reboot universe, although they cannot remain on Earth.”

“Why?” Lilith demanded, as she felt her children cling even closer to her.

“Being the progeny of angel and Beatrice, they are too powerful to exist with humans. The only reason you are able to be here unharmed, Lilith, is because this cave is in a pocket dimension with energy dampeners in place, even though it’s nestled within an island on post-Reboot Earth. But once they leave the pocket dimension, they must leave Earth.”

“Ma –” Aleph began to protest.

Lilith placed a silencing hand on his arm. She turned back to Ariel. “Then where would they go?”

“They are free to travel anywhere beyond Earth, since they are children of this universe. Just like Baraqel and Kokabiel, who are celestial creatures, are free to return to Heaven.”

“But I’m human – would I be able to be with my children?” she asked. “And my parents – they are human, too – wait,” she interrupted herself. “You said they are here, but how are they here?”

“Ah,” Ariel said. “First, I must share something about myself that not even Baraqel and Kokabiel know.” With a soft sigh, he sent to all of them in that cave an extraordinary account: of his time as a fallen

angel; his restoration through his Beatrice, several millennia later; and the redemption of his beloved Miranda, in the scouring waters of the Purgatorial Sea.

Baraqel stared agog at his former commanding officer, exclaiming, “You FELL? YOU? And Miranda – became HUMAN?”

Kokabiel frowned, as if troubled, but his only comment was “Charon duty – that’s your post-Reboot role.”

“Yes,” Ariel said. “I shepherd dying humans’ transition to Sacred Space, safeguarding their souls from the clutches of Hell.”

“That’s why you’re here then,” Kokabiel said. “Because we were with humans at the Reboot.”

“Correct,” Ariel replied. “Even though you, Baraqel, and the nephil children are immortal, you were together with mortals, and Lilith, Rifan and Zaia are in my purview. Lilith, as a Beatrice, is a simple transition, but Rifan and Zaia are another matter.” He paused. “That’s why there are in here.” He held up the glowing red sphere.

“HOW?” Lilith pulled away from her children, to peer closer, but Ariel drew back. “What’s going on?”

Baraqel asked, “Ariel, may I?” He held out his hand, and once the sphere touched his palm, he winced. “Oh my God.”

“WHAT?” Lilith asked, her patience wearing thin. “Tell me!”

“Lilith,” Baraqel said, his voice shaky, “your mother had been living in her own personal Hell for decades when the Reboot came. Even though we tried to break through to her before, her will was too strong – is still too strong – in her belief that leaving you was the right choice, even now....” He shook his head.

“What are you saying?” Lilith asked, but she knew. “Don’t tell me

my mother is in Hell!”

“Lilith –”

“No... NO!” she interrupted.

“LILITH,” Baraqel continued, “she’s not alone. Your father stayed with her – and a Heaven-bound soul can’t stay in Hell. It’s incompatible.”

She stared at him, bewildered. “What does that even mean?”

Ariel replied, “It means that your parents are locked together in an existential Limbo, caught in the part of Hell that is on the liminal border of Sacred Space. Your father is shielding your mother from Hell’s denizens trying to get to her, trying to consume her – but he is also fighting against his own Heaven-bound soul, trying to pull him away from Hell, leaving your mother behind. In order to stabilize your father’s condition, Central created a pocket dimension within Hell.” Ariel held out his palm, and Baraqel gingerly handed the sphere over. “But this stasis field won’t stop your father’s torture, and it won’t save your mother either, even though his love for your mother is as strong as her self-damning despair. They are at an impasse.”

Lilith shook her head, listening to the explanation of two former Celestial Engineers, and cried out in frustration, “Is there NOTHING we can do?”

Kokabiel, who had been listening to both angels, said, “You’re giving us a choice, aren’t you Ariel.”

“Explain,” Lilith demanded, her temper barely in check.

“Lilith,” Kokabiel said, “you sent ‘Be happy – be free,’ at the Reboot; thanks to you, we are. You, Baraqel, the children, and I are free to leave – right now – to have our ‘happily ever after.’ But that

means leaving Rifan and Zaia frozen in Limbo. So the question is, can we truly be happy in our freedom, knowing we've left two of our own behind?"

"You're telling me that any one of us can choose to stay, to help them?" Lilith turned to Ariel. "Is that the choice we can make?"

"Yes," Ariel said. "But it's not any one of you. In order for both Rifan and Zaia to have a chance to escape Hell, all of you must choose to stay."

"All or nothing?" she asked.

"Yes. But it will be painful, for all of you. It will not be easy, nor swift. So be certain that you're willing to sacrifice your personal freedom for this."

"Ma," Aleph suddenly said, "I want to help."

As if released from their own stasis, the rest of Lilith's children agreed, "Me, too, Ma," even the youngest ones, little Dalet and Limeh— "We want to help, too, Mama."

"Oh my loves," she said, trying not to cry as her six children converged and hugged her as one group. She looked at Kokabiel, who gave a silent nod, and then Baraqel.

"Do you even need to wonder, Lilith?" Baraqel asked. He reached for her hand and kissed it.

Kokabiel regarded Ariel again. "Obviously we've all chosen to stay – and you already have a plan in place for that, don't you?"

"Yes."

Kokabiel asked, "What is it?"

Ariel nodded at the sphere. "First is ensuring Rifan and Zaia's safety. I'll remove the energy dampeners so that you, Baraqel, and the

children will have full access to your powers. Then Baraqel and I can join their pocket dimension with your own. We'll open a keyhole portal to the other dimension, wherein you can slip through. As Sentry, you are best suited to serve as a shield for Rifan and Zaia."

Lilith said, "Oh God, Kokabiel, I didn't know —"

"I did," Kokabiel said. "It makes sense."

"But —"

"As Ariel said, I'm Sentry, Lilith," Kokabiel replied. "I've been wounded by Lucifer's army before. It didn't destroy me then. It won't destroy me now."

She shook her head. "Stubborn as always," she said, bittersweet. "What will Baraqel and the children do?" she asked.

Ariel replied, "Baraqel will remain on the other side of the boundary. He'll keep Hell from creeping into your pocket dimension and will regenerate Kokabiel as your parents' shield. Kokabiel and Baraqel will be like two sides of a lock."

Baraqel nodded in assent.

"The children," Ariel continued, "will stay with Baraqel. They will provide power as Baraqel serves as the barrier against Hell and regenerator of Kokabiel as your parents' shield. They MUST maintain constant connection with Baraqel, or else Kokabiel will be recalled back here, exposing Rifan and Zaia to the denizens of Hell."

The children, overwhelmed, could only stare.

"What will I do?" Lilith asked.

"Ah," Ariel said, and whenever he said that, Lilith had already learned that he was about to say something unusual. "The second part — preparing the 'key' to release your parents from their pocket

dimension in Hell.” He paused. “Once the energy dampeners are removed, Lilith, you’ll die.”

Baraqel and Kokabiel kept silent, waiting for clarification, but the children gave sharp outcries of alarm. Lilith hushed them, trying to keep calm herself. Then she asked, “How is that part of the plan?”

“Lilith, you are a Beatrice, but your energy signature as Lilith isn’t enough. You already know that you can’t withstand nephil energy, and you weren’t able to break through to both your father and mother during your time before the Reboot. As for your ability to cross over into Hell Actual, even with the Heaven-bound soul of a Beatrice, you don’t have that strength. So you’ll need to boost that signal strength. Having another scionic incarnation cycle, entangled with a more rigorous ancestral strain, will give you that boost.”

Lilith stared blankly at Ariel. “Can you please explain that NOT like a Celestial Engineer?”

Baraqel, breaking his silence, answered, “He means you’ll be reborn into a more powerful family, Lilith.”

“What?” She face grew incredulous. “I’ll be a baby and then grew up – as someone else’s child? But won’t I forget who I am – was –” She shook her head. “Please explain.”

Ariel replied, “True, your memories as Lilith will undergo Lethe sleep, but they will be intact, albeit dormant. When your second self is mature enough to have both memories integrated into one, you will remember, for it will indicate that your Lilith energy signature and your second self’s energy signature have also merged into a stronger signal strength, to break through the Lethe sleep. Your energy signal will be a hybrid of the two, and when that happens, then you’ll be able to

return here, without harm to yourself. Then you'll complete the third part of the plan, which is crossing into Hell and freeing your mother and your father."

Lilith frowned. "But what if – what if I don't remember? What if my memories don't come back?"

Ariel replied, "There is that risk. But the family you will be born into has counteracted Lethe sleep before, becoming stronger as a result. Memories – and the knowledge and power that come with those memories – have returned. I'm certain in my belief that your memories as Lilith will return."

"But – how can you be so certain?"

He looked at her, as if considering his options. "You'll forget this anyways until you remember." He paused. "Lilith, I'm certain in my belief because that family is MY human family – my Beatrice's family. You will be my daughter AJ's child."

"Ariel..." Lilith stared at him, and her astonishment was mirrored by Kokabiel, Baraqel, and her children.

"It is the surest way to increase the odds for success," Ariel said, "because not only will your mother be the child of a Beatrice, but your father, too."

"You," she realized, "will be my grandfather."

"I suppose I will be." Ariel paused. "Which means, to use AJ's words, seeing you die will really really SUCK."

Lilith blinked, feeling her heart beat hard. "Will it hurt?"

"No," Ariel said. "You'll be in Lethe sleep first."

"Hah. Well, that part I'm familiar with," she said. She gave a small smile to Baraqel, who stared at her.

“Make your goodbyes, Lilith,” Ariel said. He then walked away from them, stopping at the centermost area of the cave, and set down the red sphere. Then with his fingertips, he began to mark out on the ground a wide energy circle around it, the circle glowing white in the blue-tinged darkness.

“Lilith,” Baraqel said. His voice was so forlorn that Lilith pulled him towards her for a tight embrace. “I’m sorry for –”

“Idiot,” she interrupted. “I forgave you before the Reboot. Don’t make me knock some sense in you.”

“I’ll miss you, Lilith,” he murmured.

“I know.” She gave him a soft kiss, touched his face, and broke away, turning to her children.

“Ma,” each of her children said, and she gathered them up, embracing all of them, with the last one being Aleph, who was taller than she was. “I’ll be back – you’ll see,” she said, peering into the blue eyes of her oldest son.

“I know, Ma,” he said, softly. Then he turned away before she could see him cry.

She finally turned to Kokabiel. “My dear,” she said to him.

Unused to displaying his affection for her before the others, Kokabiel said, “I hope you remember us.”

She reached for him then, hugging him as tightly as she did with Baraqel. “How could I forget you?” she replied. “You’re my best friend.”

“Lilith,” he pulled back a bit so she could see his face and his somber amber eyes. “If you don’t remember me –”

“What are you saying –”

THE LAST BEATRICE

He continued, “then it’s okay. I don’t regret doing this – shielding your parents. It’ll be like shielding you.”

“Kokabiel –”

“It’s okay if you forget me because I’ll never forget you.” Then he kissed her forehead and let her go.

In the end, it was Ariel who was with her as she lay down on the cool, dark ground. As he placed a gentle hand over her forehead, the Lethe sleep beginning to lull her into unconsciousness, she saw her wondrous children spread out along the glowing circle. In the center, facing each other, sat her two foolish angels, the red sphere which held her parents between them. As they waited for the energy dampeners to drop away, they dared not look at Lilith, lest they were tempted to change their minds.

Even as the Lethe sleep finally took hold, she still heard Kokabiel’s final sending when she was still Lilith.

Farewell.

#

Sipping her tea, Janey saw Ariel above her, and she shook her head in disbelief, that this angel whom she had known since she was a newborn in diapers was also the same one who had first seen her as a married mother of six children. Then her eyes drew to Setebos, and she thought of what Cora had told her as she drank her tea. “It’s incredible, Ina, that until I went missing seven years ago, you, Ino, my mom, and my dad didn’t even know of the existence of the pocket dimension – and the fact that I was another person in a previous life! I mean, weren’t you pissed off when you found out?”

Cora gave a snort of laughter. “Of course, Janey! But that’s Need

to Know for you. The less people who knew otherwise, the better.”

“But wasn’t that a huge risk, Ina? What if I had never remembered?”

Cora shook her head. “Even though Lethe sleep repressed all memories of Lilith in order for you to grow up as Janey, we all believed that, in time, those memories would come back. The effects of Lethe sleep don’t last in our family.”

“Like you,” Janey commented.

“Yes. And like me, you had to recover those memories on your own.” She looked up, seeing Ariel. “With his Charon duty, Ariel knew of your previous life. Of course, once Zoey became his partner in that duty, he told her. But they’re not a continuous part of your upbringing, so there was no risk in her knowing.”

“Sorry for keeping this secret, my dear,” Zoey said, but Janey gave a soft smile that said, *It’s okay*.

“However,” Cora continued, “David and AJ, as your parents, are an intricate part of your life; them knowing might have influenced how they raised you, so they never knew until Ariel had to reveal it to them, seven years ago.”

“That’s why my dad got so mad!” Janey realized.

“Yes,” Cora said. “In fact, your dad was so angry that he refused to set foot on this island until you were allowed to come back, and I don’t blame him.” She shook her head, remembering how enraged her son had been. “But, angry as he was, even he understood that you needed to grow up as your own person, as Janey Babson. The same went for Setebos and me: our duty is overseeing Earth’s unfettered nephilim, so we also had no Need to Know about the matters of this special

arrangement – until we needed to know as well.”

“When Ino had to find me,” Janey realized. “But why didn’t Lolo go instead?”

Cora gave another bark of laughter. “Because once Setebos and I were briefed, then it became part of OUR purview; Setebos immediately sent his acknowledgement to Aleph. And if he was going to have a pocket dimension with a precarious gateway to Hell under himself and me, then he was definitely going to make his presence known to the gatekeepers.”

Zoey peered at Janey. “Are you okay, dear?”

Her head swimming with several lifetimes’ worth of memories, Janey replied, “Not really, Lola. But that doesn’t matter.” She lifted up her mug, drained the remaining cold dregs of her hazel herb tea, and set it down with a resounding *thok* into the tray. “My memories are back, my children are bleeding themselves as fuel cells, Baraqel is locked in agony, my first parents are stuck in Hell, and Kokabiel is being tortured by demons on their behalf. And I’m supposed to cross into Hell and save my mother?” Janey’s tone of voice grew higher at the end, sounding agitated and mildly hysterical. “I don’t know who I am anymore – am I Janey? Or am I Lilith?”

Cora and Zoey glanced at each other and then shifted on the blanket so that Cora sat on Janey’s left, Zoey on the right. With their arms wrapped around Janey’s waist and shoulders, they regarded the young woman who strongly resembled Zoey herself and yet, through the quirk of genetics, was also the 21st century doppelganger of pre-Reboot Lilith.

Cora said, “Yes, you were once Lilith, and a part of you will always

be Lilith. And Lilith is scared and angry that she had to bear this burden alone, to be the strong one. Zoey and I know how that feels like, my sweet girl. My God, we know.” Cora paused. “But you are Janey Babson, too. And even though Janey Babson is also scared and angry, she is also the scion of angels and Beatrices who will always be with you.”

Janey stared up into the sky, seeing Ariel and Setebos finish installing the double-barrier, in preparation for her return to the pocket dimension. “What if I fail my family?” she asked. “What if I fail all of you?”

“So you fail,” Zoey replied bluntly. “So what?”

Janey started and turned to Zoey, seeing cobalt blue eyes that matched her own. “Lola?”

“Janey,” she explained, “in spite of everything, you’re still human, and failing when doing hard things is human. So if you fail, no one will find fault in that. Not me, not the rest of us, not anyone. In the end, it will be Zaia’s choice.”

“But whatever the outcome, Janey,” Cora added, “you are our beloved granddaughter.”

“Yes,” Zoey agreed, giving Janey a soft squeeze of her shoulders. “No matter what happens, you are forever our family, my dearest girl.”

“Ah,” Janey said. She turned her eyes again to the sky. “Ina, Lola - - you’re gonna make me cry again.”

“That’s fine,” Cora said, smiling. “We have plenty of shoulders to cry on.”

Janey shook her head, smiling. “I’m okay now.”

With her dual memories integrated into one, Janey easily saw Ariel

and Setebos channeling their energy – one shining alabaster-white, the other silver-gray – to form a double-walled energy barrier that effectively sequestered the island from the rest of the Earth. No one had to tell her why they needed to install such a rigorous shield since she would be entering a pocket dimension that contained her powerful nephil children and then another pocket dimension that nested in Hell itself. If anything, she hoped that her grandfathers' shield was strong enough to contain the explosion of energy if the plan went catastrophically wrong. Once installed, she saw them descend from the sky. She and her grandmothers rose up to meet them as they touched down in front of the blanket, with the silence and precision of owls.

“How’re you feeling, Janey?” Setebos asked, holding out his hands.

She grasped them, and in the darkening twilight she could see not only his silvery-gray energy signature but her own in her arms and hands: twining strands of Setebos and Cora’s matching silver-gray, Ariel’s white, Zoey’s blue, and Lilith’s fluorescent indigo. “Better now, Ino. I’m sorry for yelling at you earlier.”

He shook his head and gave Janey’s hands a reassuring squeeze. “Like Ariel said, you had every right to be angry.”

“Still.” She looked towards Ariel standing behind Setebos. “You, too, Lolo. I’m sorry.” She saw him open his arms, and she moved forward for his hug. In his warm embrace, Janey felt her grandfather tremble. She pulled back a little to see his face and care-worn blue eyes. “Lolo,” she said, surprised, “are you afraid?”

“Of course,” Ariel responded. “You’re my granddaughter, and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Can’t be helped, Lolo,” she said. She paused. “Free will always

complicates everything —” she began.

“—especially when love is involved,” he finished. He kissed the top of her head, as if she was still a little girl, and sent what needed to be done.

Janey stepped away then, her four grandparents behind her, as she regarded the quiet field, the silhouette of the belajoun tree, and the darkening sky. She inhaled, taking in the sweet scent of hazel herb, and exhaled hard. Through the shimmer of the shield, she could see the stars appear in the coming night. She turned around to them. “I’m ready,” she said.

Setebos nodded. Before he took flight again, he kissed Cora and then leapt up, gaining height before stretching out his wings. He flew until he crossed through the island barrier and stopped just on the other side, hovering over them. Janey knew that he was monitoring the integrity of the double-walled shield from the outside. Meanwhile Ariel stayed on the ground, to monitor the shield from the inside, as well as survey the integrity of the pocket dimension from the outside. With a small series of twisting motions with Cora’s left hand, the air next to them began to shimmer and then a glowing portal appeared. Cora stepped through first.

Zoey was about to follow, but she paused. She turned to Ariel and kissed him softly. “I always do, Ed,” she said, using her private nickname for Ariel, and she stepped into the portal.

“I told her to be careful,” Ariel said before Janey could ask. “As should you.”

She regarded Ariel, a former superior officer of the Celestial Engineers and the patriarch of her miraculous family of angels,

humans, and those in-between. “You really are just a Mama Bear inside, aren’t you,” she said.

He smiled at that. “Now you know my secret.” He stepped aside.

As she entered the portal, Janey recalled what Ariel had said as part of his sending -- *Once you cross into the pocket dimension this time, Janey, you can't cross again. Your arrival provides the final part of the pocket dimension's stability; once you leave again, it will collapse.* With a sharp breath, she emerged from the portal, on the other side, and she felt the portal immediately wink out behind her.

Janey stood for a beat in the cool silence of the cave, darkly illuminated by innumerable blue glowworms from above. As Janey, she knew that the dimension lay in the centermost cavern within the island, which had been Cora and Setebos’ pre-Reboot home, before Janey’s father was born. As Lilith, she knew that the dimension was the post-Reboot connection that the last family of Kamret had to Earth. Both memories hit her with a keen double-stab of déjà vu.

But then the moment passed, and she approached the glowing circle. Waiting for her, Cora stood just outside of the circle’s perimeter, and Zoey stood nearest to the circle’s central focal point.

Like the incident seven years ago, Janey saw six kneeling figures, separated equidistant from each other along the circle, with heads bowed low towards the center. But now she recognized them – her six children when she was Lilith. She recognized the fluorescing indigo of Lilith’s energy signature within them but also Baraqel’s golden energy entwined with the indigo. The dual energy emanated from their bodies, forming thin tributaries that flowed towards the center, where Baraqel lay. Unconscious, his wings wrapped tightly around him, Baraqel lay

curled into a fetal position. The children's energy flowed into him – just enough to sustain him. Then it flowed underneath him, through the paper-thin barrier separating Earth and Hell, towards a place like submerged smoky glass – where Kokabiel lay, whose position mirrored his partner on the other side.

Cora stood six feet behind Aleph, indicating where Janey was to stand within the circle. Janey took a deep breath, thinking, *I can do this*. She crossed the glowing border of the circle, kneeled before Aleph's bowed form, and placed her hands on his cowed head.

Immediately, a thick ribbon of Janey's hybrid energy flowed from her hands to Aleph, who began to glow with Janey's energy signature. Like liquid light, the energy split on either side of Aleph, following the circle's outline, and flowed from one nephil child to the next in two strands – Dalet and Limeh, Isa and Dala – until they rejoined as one with Tallo. With Janey's infusion, their strained yet unconscious forms relaxed.

Monitoring the children's progress, Cora declared, "They've recovered."

Janey nodded. Even though she was reluctant to remove her hands from her son's head, she did so. In doing so, the circle contracted, pulling away from the still-unconscious children, and arrived underneath where she stood. They exhaled, as if they had been holding their breaths, and settled down onto where they were, in a deep, restful sleep.

The six tributaries from the circle continued to flow towards Baraqel, but now Janey was the source. As she stepped closer to Baraqel, the circle narrowed until it circumscribed Janey and Baraqel,

with Zoey just outside the circle. Kneeling next to Baraqel's frozen form, Janey sent the full force of her energy, looking like a massive glowing ribbon. Still, Baraqel lay trapped in pain, as his connection to Kokabiel's agony remained unchanged. Janey frowned, feeling her energy flow meeting resistance as it tried to cross the dimensional boundary. With a deep breath, she pushed through, the remaining speck of the circle contracting and dissolving underneath her, and Janey felt her energy cross through to the other side. It rushed, unabated, towards Kokabiel in the pocket dimension nestled in Hell.

Janey gasped once it reached Kokabiel, feeling through her energy the other angel's dire condition.

Baraqel's eyes flew open as he felt the unexpected change in his connection to Kokabiel. "NO!" he cried out.

Zoey quickly crouched down, next to Baraqel, who reared back, staring at her in bewilderment. She placed her hand directly into Janey's energy ribbon, as a blinding light emerged around Zoey. In a flash it dissipated, and Zoey gone.

In her stead, just an arm's length away, lay a barely conscious Kokabiel, twitching and hemorrhaging ichor through his flayed wings. Baraqel began to leap towards Kokabiel, frightened and confused, but an unfamiliar woman rushed past him to Kokabiel's side while another woman grabbed his arms, holding him back.

"Baraqel!"

He stared at the other woman then – shining with the blinding light of a Beatrice, unfamiliar yet strangely familiar. His green eyes blinking like a newborn, he stared into cobalt blue eyes. "LILITH?" he asked, bewildered.

“YES,” Janey confirmed. She touched his face like she had done all that time ago. “It’s me.”

At that, he flung his gaunt arms around her and sobbed, releasing the pain he had borne in silence. Through her energy, he received her sending of everything that had happened from the last time he saw her to what was happening now – a torrent of memories and emotions and knowledge. In the end, he pulled back and said, “Your name is Janey.” He said the name as if trying out a strange, difficult word.

“Yes.”

“And your grandmothers,” he said, “are the Beatrices of Ariel and Setebos.”

“Yes,” Janey replied. “Zoey and Cora.”

Baraqel looked to his other side then, seeing Cora tend to Kokabiel’s wounds.

Janey’s energy still flowed from himself to Kokabiel, but not towards Hell Actual once Zoey swapped herself with Kokabiel. In conjunction with her own energy, Cora coaxed Janey’s energy to heal the other angel, tending to injuries that Baraqel hadn’t seen since the War in Heaven. Because he was still connected to Kokabiel, he could feel Cora’s healing methods, reminiscent of both Miranda, her first teacher, and Setebos. Baraqel saw deep gashes that exposed bone and sinew sealed up, leaving angry, dark lines. Then the lines became lighter, leaving faint, silvery scars. Kokabiel’s shredded wings, sticky with ichor, became clean and intact with restored, smoky-ash flight feathers that lay neatly against his back. Kokabiel’s labored breathing became slow and even, and his twitching ceased as he relaxed into a peaceful slumber, similar to Baraqel’s six children.

Cora sighed and stood up from her kneel, stretching her shoulders and back, also reminiscent of Miranda.

Baraqel marveled at what he had seen and what he had felt. “Thank you,” he said, amazed.

Cora smiled. “You’re welcome.” She held out an assessing hand, palm out, to both him and then to Kokabiel. She looked at Janey. “You can draw down, my dear.”

Janey nodded in confirmation, and the energy ribbon that she was sharing with Kokabiel and Baraqel retreated back within herself. Kokabiel remained in his peaceful rest, and Baraqel felt fully recovered.

He saw Cora walk towards his children, still lying unconscious all around him and Janey. “Are the children –” began.

“They’re fine,” Janey said. “Like Kokabiel. Like you.”

He frowned, knowing what she had yet to do. “I wish I could do more.”

Janey reached up and touched his face once more. “You’ve done plenty.” Then she pulled his face closer and kissed him.

Baraqel was startled at first, for while Janey looked identical to Lilith, in his head she was an entirely new person – someone whom he didn’t know as intimately as his wife. Yet, at her familiar touch, he responded in kind. Afterwards he said, “I missed you.”

“I know.” She smiled a little. “You weren’t meant to wake up yet. Just like Kokabiel and the children, you need to rest after that extended contact with Hell Actual.”

He shook his head. “You should’ve known that wouldn’t happen. I’m the linchpin; once I felt the balance change, of course I’d wake up.”

“Granted. But now you’ll be here, being worried about me.”

“Lil – I mean, Janey,” he corrected himself, frowning.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’m Lilith, too.”

He shook his head again. “I’ll always worry about you.”

Instead of answering, she gave another small smile and touched his face again. Then she moved a little, closer to Kokabiel, and lightly swept the other angel’s hair from his closed eyes. Janey leaned down, softly kissed Kokabiel’s forehead, and sat up again with a determination that mirrored her grandmothers.

Baraqel looked at her. “You need to go.”

“Yes.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Keep watch with my Ina Cora.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

She touched his arm, then stood up and walked a few paces away.

Baraqel saw Cora, with practiced efficiency, open a portal from the Earthside pocket dimension to its counterpart in Hell Actual. He saw Janey steel herself before she entered, not looking back, and could feel her strength. Without a doubt, Baraqel knew she could save her mother. *Our Beatrice*, he thought. As the portal closed, he wondered what future lay for him and his partner, who had been restored to unfallenness; the nephil children, who neither belonged in Heaven nor Hell; and the living woman named Janey, of whom only a part was the woman who was once his wife in a world long gone.

Through the memories of Kokabiel, Janey knew what Hell Actual looked like.

THE LAST BEATRICE

It bore bare plains, stone mountains, and desert valleys under a red sky thick with sulfurous clouds crackling with electricity. High-pitched whining from intermingled, constant wails of despair was as palpable as wind. It was a sick, inflamed land, infused with a stifling, stinking heat, all created from a substance produced from the original fallen angels of old.

Through the memories of Malech – when he was the angel Miranda, Ariel’s beloved before Zoey – Janey knew where in Hell Actual the pocket dimension was: a lava river with fiery banks pockmarked with toxic pools as slick as mercury, two leagues away from the center of Hell Actual.

Yet, although far from the vast prison fortress of Pandemonium, which its deluded leader called his palace, the scent of Rifan’s and Zaia’s untouched souls drew Hell’s lackeys like flies to raw meat. The demarcation of a celestial pocket dimension stopped many, but those that could cross over were often the stronger ones. Thus the presence of an unfallen angelic protector – and a Sentry at that – spurred their ravenous frustration into enraged hate, and they poured their hate into the Sentry, ripping away his celestial flesh without rest, the Sentry’s ichor pouring into the infernal land, appearing red like human blood under the red, boiling sky.

When the Sentry suddenly disappeared, at first they believed they had vanquished their enemy as they saw the two human souls exposed. But then a creature appeared whose blinding light burned them with such agony that they screamed, as they suffered wounds like those inflicted on them during the War in Heaven. The hated light filled the entire pocket dimension, and they fled, not daring to come closer, yet

raving at the abhorrence of its existence in their realm.

With this knowledge, Janey knew she was safe from Hell Actual when she arrived into the pocket dimension. From her standpoint, she saw Zoey stand as sentry, the Light of Heaven that always lay within her shining forth like it would do during her Charon duty with Ariel. Looking behind Zoey, Janey saw an all-too-familiar icy wall, as high and wide as far as she could see, and in spite of herself, she began to feel afraid.

“Janey?” Zoey asked, sensing her fear.

“It’s okay, Lola,” she said, staring at the wall before her. “It’s just bringing back bad memories, that’s all.”

“Ah, sweetie,” Zoey said. “I wish I could help you.”

Janey smiled at that, for it was almost exactly like what Baraqel had said. “It’s okay, Lola. I know it has to be me.” It was still strange to Janey, that Zoey could keep back the demons from Hell because in Hell all personhood was stripped away so her energy could affect Hell’s lackeys, yet she was unable to engage either Rifan or Zaia because her personal energy wasn’t entangled with theirs. But Janey’s was. And thus she knew what to do.

Janey squared her shoulders and strode towards the wall. Before it, she placed her hands on the surface. When she was Lilith, she fought with it, trying to burn it away. But now she knew it was a manifestation of Rifan’s protective barrier – to keep Zaia from slipping further away from him. Feeling for Rifan’s energy nestled within Lilith’s, Janey realized that Rifan never meant to shut Lilith out. He was just trying to protect young Lilith in the only way he knew how, just like he had asked Baraqel to be her husband.

THE LAST BEATRICE

Janey reached out, imagining herself as an extension of Rifan, and the hard ice underneath her palms suddenly felt soft and pliable, as if a portion of the wall had turned to a gel. Then it thinned out, into a plasma, allowing Janey to pass through with little resistance. Once she crossed through, the area of the wall where she had entered solidified again. On the other side was a dark space that was much smaller on the inside than it was on the outside. There was just enough space for the familiar tableau: Zaia, incased in dark ice and curled on the ground, unmoving; indigo-fluorescing Rifan pounding at the ice, with no effect, and yet he would not stop. Neither of them noticed the presence of another soul with them.

Witnessing Rifan raise his arms to pound the ice again, she stepped towards him. “Father,” she said. With both hands, she caught his closed fists in mid-strike. “This is not the way.”

Rifan looked frightened at first, wondering why his arms weren’t moving. But then Janey came into focus, and even with the years separating them and unfamiliar clothes, he recognized her. “My child,” he cried out, “how did you come here?”

“I did what you did,” she replied. “I wanted to reach Mother.”

Rifan’s dark eyes roved over Janey’s face, glowing with a multitude of energy signatures. “You’re different,” he said, confused.

“I’m stronger,” she said. “And I’ve learned this isn’t the way to reach Mother.”

“How then?” he asked, his voice reedy with exhaustion.

“Make her remember,” Janey said. “what she is to us.”

“HOW?”

Janey placed Rifan’s hands over Zaia’s ice-encased head, and her

hands remained covering his. “We share our stories.”

Rifan sent.

His hate and anger against Tiros, but then seeing Zaia,

Zaia, smiling,

Zaia, laughing,

Zaia, shining like the sun.

Not caring if he lived or died, when he cared for her in her sickness,

Not caring if he lived or died, when he stood upon his execution

block,

As long as Zaia lived.

She championed his innocence – the only one.

Even afraid, she gave herself to him.

Even afraid, she gave a beautiful child to him.

Not caring if he lived or died, when he cared for her in her sickness,

As long as his beloved was there,

As long as Zaia was Zaia,

She made him the happiest man in the world.

You still do, Rifan sent. *Zaia, you still do.*

Janey sent.

Her wonder that her blue eyes matched Zaia’s eyes.

Zaia’s open arms,

Zaia’s soft kisses,

Zaia’s warm tears in a smiling face.

Not caring if Tiros’ people approved of her,

Not caring if Kamret’s people approved of her,

THE LAST BEATRICE

She kicked her doubt the same way Zaia kicked the Tyrant Tiros' face.

Zaia's anger,
Zaia's stubbornness,
Zaia's ferocity,
In the face of killers,
In the face of angels.
Zaia's blood flowed in her blood,
Flowed in her nephil children's blood.
And when being Lilith was not enough,
She died and lived another life,
Became Janey,
So that she could come back to Zaia,
Her mother.

You asked me to forgive you, Janey sent. And I do, Mama. I do.

Under the ice, eyelids fluttered.
Under the ice, tears formed.
Then,
and then,
faint and far away,
an echo of an echo,
a small voice replied,
Thank you.

“ZAIA –” Rifan began, feeling the ice sublimate underneath his hands.

RUFEL F. RAMOS

And then the darkness exploded into light.

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. “Baraqell!”

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.

#

An, 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

THE LAST BEATRICE

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.”

THE LAST BEATRICE

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.

12 HOME

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 Kokabiell’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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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