

2 THE RELUCTANT WATCHERS

From above, Earth still looked beautiful. The crystal blue planet with cloud marbling and tan-green landmasses dotting its serene surface – it was as Miranda remembered as she descended from the sky. In contrast, Setebos winced a little, as he perceived that the environment felt wrong, felt *off*. It wasn't enough to appear different, but it was wrong enough, like a piece of fruit that still looked delicious on the outside but on the inside it had already started to rot. You could only notice the rot if you knew how to look, and Setebos knew how to look.

What remaining awkwardness Setebos felt around Miranda had burned away as he started to feel angry, surprising himself. Unfallen Earth was an intricate, interconnected system that was satisfying to behold, and he couldn't help but feel pride that he had been a part of that creation. But now it was all ruined. Miranda couldn't see that. She looked across the vast field of vision, taking in a sunny sky that caused the snow to sparkle and glitter and surveying the dark green plain below that was crisscrossed with rivers and streams joining an azure sea along a distant coastline. As they landed on a rocky outcrop on a high, snowy mountain range, she transferred from ethereal energy to matter, including her gear, and her embodied form sunk a little in the snow. She reached down and tasted a bit of snow, savoring its cool sweetness.

“Has the Earth itself really fallen?” she asked. “The humans I understand – they're intelligent creatures. But an actual planet?”

Setebos replied, grim, “Yes.”

“How?”

“The Earth, the humans – they're all part of the same system. When one part gets corrupted, it all gets corrupted.” Setebos saw Miranda frowning, puzzled. “Look – you're embodied. What do you feel, standing here?”

“Cold.”

“And?”

“Thin air.”

“Would you be comfortable here?” Setebos asked. “That is, if we were to bivouac here right now.”

“Sure.”

“Well, that's because we're angels. But no human would be... now. But back then, they would have been.” Setebos pointed all around him. “Paradise Earth was the perfect place for humanity, as it would accommodate itself to humanity's needs. Eden was just the humans' connector between Earth and Heaven – the terminus point. ‘Be fruitful and multiply’ guaranteed that humanity would outgrow Eden, but they would still be stewards of an Earth that was easy to take care of because it would take care of its stewards. A mutual, symbiotic system. But not anymore.” He shook his head. “Now, humanity is destined to die, and Earth is apathetic to whether

humans live long or die soon. They'll have to work, and work hard, to live on this planet. If they drop their vigilance, if they take anything for granted, this fallen Earth will be their violent death.”

Miranda could still taste the sweet coolness of the snow. After a pause, she asked, “Setebos, do you even WANT to be here?”

“I did,” Setebos said, “before the humans made it fall.” He shrugged, surveyed the area around their location, and focused on one spot. “There. We'll need to go where the humans are.” He looked at Miranda. “Do you intend to stay embodied? Samyaza said that we needed to stay in stealth.”

“I'll switch back to ethereal just before we reach the humans.”

“Why be embodied at all?”

Miranda looked away before answering. “It reminds me of the first time I came to Earth.”

Setebos suddenly remembered that Miranda was Ariel's beloved. “Oh.”

They took off from their perch, Miranda following Setebos' lead. In that part of the world, where the human population was sparse, it took focused concentration for Setebos to follow the trail of human migration. With his discerning eyes, he estimated the group they were tracking to be small, perhaps about one-hundred members. Eventually, the trail ended in a little valley where the weather was warmer, with plenty of vegetation, natural shelters, and a coastline promising of good fishing. It was also there that Setebos and Miranda stopped short, as Miranda, with her own soldier's eyes, exclaimed, “Oh God.”

They alighted before the humans, not bothering to conceal themselves, as all the humans in that group were dead.

Setebos had been right – they had been a band of about one-hundred. Picking their way through the makeshift camp, including inspecting tents thrown about, they saw slaughtered bodies, the spear and blade wounds already grown dark and sticky with time. Miranda, overwhelmed by the stench of human blood, urine, and feces spilled from soon-to-be rotting bodies, felt her body convulse with dry heaves. Setebos glanced at her.

“Switch to ethereal, Miranda.”

She nodded, and her gross matter flashed away. “Should we call this in?”

“No.” Setebos assessed the pattern of the massacre. “This is just fallen human on human activity – nothing originating from Lightbearer's army.”

“How can you tell?”

Setebos pointed down. “The soil is churned up with the imprints of struggling bodies. And there and there and there – footprints of animals and a smaller group of humans leaving. Also, did you notice what humans are not here?”

“What do you mean?”

“The dead here are men, old women, and children,” Setebos said. “But where are the young women?”

Miranda's face twisted.

“Exactly.”

“A raiding party, then.”

“Could be. Either that, or they were members or guests of this band.”

“That – that would be terrible.”

Setebos shrugged. “Either way, they attacked this camp while everyone was still asleep, overwhelming any man who was still awake as night watch, and made off with the animals and the fertile women.”

Miranda looked around. “What do we do now? Follow the murderers? Try to save the kidnapped women?”

Setebos shook his head. “That’s not our directive. This didn’t come from Lightbearer.”

“So we do NOTHING?”

“We’re Watchers, Miranda. We can track these other humans down, but unless Lightbearer or members of his army are working directly through them, then all we can do is --”

“Watch,” Miranda interrupted. She threw up her hands in frustration.

“Now you know how I feel.” Setebos started to turn away.

“Wait. We can’t just let them be like this.”

“What?”

“Exposed like this. They were intelligent creatures, just like us. It’s -- unseemly.”

Setebos shrugged. “Without their souls, they’re just corpses, pieces of meat. Let the scavengers have them.”

Miranda stared. “When did you become so cynical, Setebos?”

Setebos flinched. “Okay. FINE.”

Even though they were angels, it still took some time to bury all of the bodies.

#

It had been two yottaCalends since they first arrived on Earth, seven hundred years since Miranda and Setebos buried those long ago bodies. While humans became more organized in their settlements and gained some progress in their ability to feed and shelter themselves, still nothing substantive had changed. The Archangels patrolling above Earth were doing their jobs so well, keeping Lightbearer and his ilk out, that any evil deeds done on Earth sprung entirely from the minds of Earth’s human inhabitants.

It was starting to get tedious.

The palpable panic of this specific village drew Setebos and Miranda’s attention. But all it took was Setebos to observe the villagers’ behavior for a few minutes. “They poisoned themselves by eating diseased crops.”

“And THAT?” Miranda pointed at the mob surrounding a small hut. Two men invaded the dwelling and dragged out an old woman, with her children and grandchildren screaming after her.

“The villagers blame her for it because she’s the only one who didn’t get sick.”

“Are you sure,” she asked “that this isn’t Hell’s doing?”

Setebos stifled a sigh. “Yes. My assessment is unchanged.” He shrugged and made a disinterested note of yet another episode of fallen humans behaving badly against each other.

“ARGH!” Miranda threw up her hands. “I can’t stand this!” She took off.

After Setebos took account of the villager’s specific problem and behavior, as part of their report to Samyaza at a later date, he left as well. He didn’t need to see what would happen to the old woman; both he and Miranda had already seen what a witch burning looked like. Flying to a nearby mountain range, Setebos saw Miranda, fully embodied, grabbing loose boulders and hurling them at sheer sides of cliffs.

“Miranda.”

“ARGH!” Miranda exclaimed, as she hurled boulder after boulder, one hand per boulder.

“Stop beating up the mountain.”

After a time, Miranda finished battering the cliffs out of frustration and settled down, landing next to Setebos. She was sweaty and grubby and still angry. “Why are we still here, Setebos? What’s the point? We’re supposed to protect these humans from Lightbearer, but who’s going to protect humans from themselves? At this rate, there won’t be any humans to protect because they’ll all be extinct due to killing each other or dying for stupid reasons, like that damn village back there.”

Setebos remained silent.

“Well?”

“What do you want me to say? That I agree with you? That’s not helpful.” Setebos shrugged. “You know we all think that way. Even Samyaza. Nevertheless, remember the last meeting in Eden before we rotated patrols? Samyaza confirmed with Central that Eden is a permanent base, so our assignment is part of the new protocol now. He even asked about cycling in new sentry and engineers, but they’re all locked in their assignments, especially developing procedures for transitioning human souls – now that Heaven has to deal with them.”

“Hmph. Heaven’s pretty busy these days.” She bit her lip, frowning.

“Missing Ariel?”

She grimaced. “Am I that predictable?” She looked up, at a clear blue sky. “I know that our comm is only for mission-related tasks, but I wish there was a protocol for private messaging. Routing personal communication through Samyaza is – awkward.”

“Is Ariel still overseeing the containment room?”

Miranda shook her head. “He’s delegated that to his XO. Alpha Omega has him supervising the construction of a human soul processing compound, what with human souls crossing en masse into Sacred Space these days.” She pulled down her hood, allowing her long blue-black hair to fall freely to her waist. “Did you know that I was field-promoted as an officer during the War?”

“Huh? No.” Setebos wondered where Miranda was going with that statement.

“It was one of the last things Michael did, before the *Chariot* arrived. So I wasn’t an officer for very long, but it was a great honor.” She shrugged. “So, I’m trying not to envy Ariel -- his work in Heaven. He’s doing so much good.” She sighed. “I wish I were with him. Yet here I am,” she gestured toward the battered cliffs, “beating up mountains.”

“And following orders,” Setebos reminded her.

“And following orders,” Miranda echoed. She exhaled loudly, as if she had been holding her breath for a long, long time. “Where to, now?”

Setebos looked around. “Someplace without mountains.”

#

It was a dark and stormy night, and the rain was making Setebos’ wings wet.

“You always stay ethereal,” Miranda had said earlier that day, before they separated on their respective patrols over a vast grassland that transitioned to desert. “That’s funny, considering that the Celestial Engineers taught the Sentry how to transfer from ethereal to matter in the first place. Why don’t you?”

“I don’t have to,” Setebos had replied.

“Yes, but you don’t have to stay ethereal, either. Are you afraid that if you do, you won’t be able to change back?” She smirked.

It was the smirk that did it. “FINE.”

But now – several hours later -- it was raining hard, the lightning briefly illuminating the sky in jagged shards of light. Setebos’ very solid body was drenched, and he thought, *I don’t see the appeal at all*. He at first took satisfaction that Miranda was somewhere as soaked as he but then realized that she was probably enjoying the sensation of flying in a rainstorm.

With it being night and the weather awful, any sensible human would be ensconced somewhere indoors, so Setebos began to make his way back to his and Miranda’s temporary camp. As he flew over a torrential desert river, he glanced down and saw something tiny slip off a barely-there rope bridge and fall into the river below.

Ah!

Maybe because he was tired, or maybe because he was embodied, Setebos didn’t think if what he did next was right or according to orders. He didn’t think at all, as he dove down into the swollen, raging waters and scooped up the creature before it tumbled further down the dark river. Only when the heavy, limp body was in his arms did Setebos realize what he had done. “Miranda!” he yelled in his comm. “Where are you?”

“Just heading back to camp, Setebos. What’s up?”

“I’m bringing a creature – a human. Female, I think.”

“WHAT?”

“Half-drowned in a river --”

“YOU actually rescued a LOCAL?”

“I know, I know!” Setebos tried to shake the rain from his eyes, but it was pointless. “Just prep for medical and recovery for the embodied, okay?”

“... Copy.”

Soon enough, Setebos touched down before a patch of short, scrubby trees. Pitched in the middle was a small tent, which did not exist beforehand. Entering the tent, Setebos carried the human into the interior as it

expanded, and as soon as they crossed the threshold, both angel and human became dry. Belying its appearance from the outside, the inside took upon the facilities of a field hospital tent, and Setebos gently set the human onto a waiting treatment bed.

Miranda declared, “It’s a girl.” She looked between six and eight years old, with long dark brown hair and skin a few shades lighter than her hair. The girl was only wearing a thin shift of a dress: no outerwear or shoes to speak of.

“I saw her fall into a river.” Setebos’ palms hovered two inches over the girl’s chest, assessing her vital signs. She still had excess water in her lungs, so he shunted energy to dry that out, in addition to optimize her oxygen levels to ease her breathing. “Heart and blood circulation look good,” Setebos said. He moved his palms towards her head as he shunted additional oxygen to her brain but then stopped, startled.

Miranda noticed. “What is it?”

“She has cancer.”

“Where?”

“Brain. Glioblastoma – advanced. It’s a miracle that she was able to walk at all.” Setebos stared at the girl’s face. “What was she doing on that bridge?”

Miranda shook her head. “Well, Setebos, it’s your call. We’re already past our directive here.”

Setebos paused. The girl’s cancer was biologically-based, so her death was natural. They had seen plenty of humans, young and old, die countless times before. They had even witnessed much younger children face far more horrific deaths. And yet, he needed to know the answer: *what was she doing on that bridge?* He shifted his shoulders. “Well, I’ve already saved her. So I might as well do this right.” He looked at Miranda. “I’ll need your help.”

“How?”

“Place your thumbs and middle fingers here on her skull. Energy type ethereal transfer to matter, but dial down by 78%. Focus the beams to pinpoint two inches below the scalp. That should shrink the tumors.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll destroy the blood vessels that feed the tumors. That should destroy any remaining tumors and prevent new vessels from growing back.”

“Whew. Lots of moving around the skull for you.”

“Yes.” Setebos looked down and tried not to feel nervous. “Lights.”

The lights of the tent changed from room lighting to the focused lights of an operating table. For several silent minutes, both angels concentrated on their tasks, and various areas around the girl’s skull glowed and hummed. Afterwards, Setebos nodded at Miranda, and they moved their hands away from the girl’s head as Setebos called out, “Lights,” which returned the room back to its previous setting.

Setebos spread wide his arms, one palm down at the girl’s feet, the other at her head, and slowly brought both palms together at her waist, as a final check. “She should be clean,” he said and stepped back as Miranda

brought out a heavy blanket from under the bed and placed it on the girl, up to her neck.

Both angels sat heavily on chairs that materialized under them.

“Should?” Miranda asked.

“Well, this is the first time I’ve done this.”

“Wait – what? I thought all Celestial Engineers got medi-training, especially since you were in the Creation Battalion.”

“We do. But I didn’t perform medical care in the War, and Alpha Omega took full control of the humans’ creation, even though we engineers did get the specs.”

“Hmmm.” Miranda looked at their sleeping patient. “I’ve never done anything like that before, either. Being Sentry, I’m more suited to breaking things than fixing things, you know?” She smiled. “Feels good to do something substantive for a change, eh?”

“Yeah.” Setebos frowned. “But it was beyond our directive, as you said. ‘Don’t engage the locals unless to intervene when Lightbearer attacks,’ remember?”

Miranda waved the thought away. “We did good, Setebos. Don’t ruin the moment. And I’m sure Samyaza will understand. It’s only one human, after all.”

“Maybe.” Setebos yawned. “Need to recharge after all that.”

Miranda yawned, too. “Same here.”

Both angels closed their eyes, and after a while they shimmered away to ethereal, flowed up and away from the tent, and coalesced around one of the shrubby trees as their resting roost.

By morning, the violent storm had become a memory, and the sky shone bright and clear. Fully revived, the angels checked on their patient.

“Still sleeping,” Setebos commented.

“I got her energy signature,” Miranda said. “So I’ll see if I can find her people.” She turned to leave the tent. Setebos called after her, “Stay ethereal this time. No point scaring the locals.”

“Hah.” She took off.

Setebos turned to the sleeping girl. For her sake, he had become embodied. He was about to check her vitals again when he saw her open her eyes, look right at him, and ask in a soft, calm voice, “Am I dead?”

He stared at the girl. Her eyes were the same color as her hair – a dark mahogany. “No.”

His answer seemed to agitate her. Still staring at his gray eyes, she shook under the heavy blanket. “Who are you? Where am I?”

“I’m --” Setebos struggled for the right word. “I’m just a traveler. But I saw you fall into a river during the storm last night, and I rescued you. You’re safe in my tent.”

“What... what did you do?”

Setebos frowned. “Sorry?”

“I’m not in pain.” She made a small hand gesture to her head. “I’m always in pain.”

“Ah, that.” Setebos was at a loss for words again. “My... fellow traveler and I fixed that.”

“... I don’t understand.”

Setebos pulled up the chair closer to the bed and sat down. “Why don’t you just tell me why you were on that bridge.”

She stared above her.

He waited.

After a long silence, she spoke. “Because our enemies were coming,” she said. “Our father said that the world has become so evil, so corrupt, that if we live long enough even the innocent ones will do bad things. That there’s no hope anymore.”

Setebos stared at her, speechless.

“Our father made us leave -- my brother and me.” The girl bit her lip, her face twisted as she stopped a sob. “He said it was too late for him, but that our grandmother might be alive, out there. We were on the bridge together. But my brother fell and drowned.” The girl looked at Setebos. “So I wanted to die. I wanted to fall and drown. So – so I did.” She turned her face away as she started to cry in sharp, staccato sobs.

“Oh,” Setebos said. He looked at the tortured profile of the girl, seeing this little human being as a fellow creature for the very first time. It stunned him that he hadn’t seen it until now. Then Setebos did something he had never done before in his entire existence, but he knew what to do.

Such was the way with angels.

Setebos said softly, “I’m sorry.” He reached out one hand and, tentative at first, placed his fingertips on her forehead. “I will gift you with the truth.” He paused, then continued, “My name is Setebos, and I’m called an angel – a servant of God. When I saw you fall into the water, I saved you from drowning. And when I realized how sick you truly were, I had to save you from that, too. Because I had to know why were all alone.” He paused again. “My partner Miranda and I took away your sickness that caused your pain. You’re cured, little one. And your father was wrong.” Setebos’ face suddenly looked astonished as he said out loud his rediscovered belief, “As long as there are enough people like you in the world, this world can never, ever truly be evil.”

Her ragged sobs eased, as Setebos intended. Calming energy flowed like a warm breeze from his fingertips to her forehead.

“I’m sorry that I couldn’t save your brother in time, but take heart. We will find your grandmother and bring you to her, little one. Have hope. Live long. Be well. That’s my blessing for you.”

The girl’s breathing became slow and even. Before she dropped back to sleep, she said her name. “Thank you. I’m... Cora.”

Setebos sat back and watched over her for what felt like a long time. By day’s end, Miranda returned.

“I found a woman – about sixty years old -- that matches the girl’s signature. She lives alone in a small compound, about two hundred miles from here.”

Setebos nodded to the still sleeping girl. “Time to bring Cora to her grandmother.”

Miranda regarded this piece of information. “She woke up, then.”

“Yes.”

“You and she explained everything?”

Setebos nodded. “Yes.”

“Then you put her into Lethe sleep?”

“Just enough so that she’ll remember our exchange more like a barely-recalled dream.”

Miranda nodded to that. “Good call. I’ll do the same to the grandmother once we bring the girl to her.”

Setebos sighed, relieved. “Stealth mode, after the fact.”

Miranda smiled. “At least we can still follow THAT order.”

Setebos chuckled at that. He stood up.

“Need help?”

“No, I’m good,” Setebos said. He carefully lifted up the sleeping girl, blanket and all, and cradled her in his arms. She felt small and warm and fragile. “Lead the way.”