

4 THE EXILE

Setebos’ jaw clenched as he recorded his findings, the four vid screens still open on his side of the room.

Arakiel and Turiel: four.

Shamsiel and Satariel: seven.

Armaros and Tamiel: six.

Ramiel and Zaqiel: nine.

He glanced over at Miranda’s side, with her four screens glowing with the aerial images of the assigned patrol areas of the other teams, and looked at the large screen, showing the running table of their calculations, as Miranda recorded her numbers.

Azazel and Sariel: ten.

Ananial and Bezaliel: three.

Chazaqiel and Ezeqeel: five.

Danel and Yomiel: eight.

Miranda swore under her breath, “Shit.”

When Setebos had returned from Baraqel and Kokabiel and relayed what had happened to that doomed team, Miranda had refused to believe what Baraqel had said, that all of the Watchers were fallen.

“I said to be careful,” Miranda had said, wary of the nephil energy still emanating from Setebos like heat from a feverish patient. “Baraqel tricked you with that false image, so how can we trust what he’s said about the other Watchers?”

Setebos had replied, “We can check out the other teams as we look for Samyaza.”

“That’ll take a while --”

“Not if we survey all of them at the same time.” Setebos, flush with energy, had plenty of power to send up and activate the eight probes and vid screens. “We can see for ourselves.”

Even being careful to keep their surveillance stealthy, Setebos and Miranda completed their survey quickly, in one productive day. Just as Baraqel predicted, the other Watcher teams had discovered the same new source of extraordinary, wondrous power. With Baraqel’s children included in the calculations – Baraqel and Kokabiel: six -- Earth had fifty-eight nephilim, fifty-eight native-born hybrid creatures, unauthorized and dangerous and fallen. In eerie mimicry, the other teams’ areas also had technological advancements well beyond the local humans’ understanding, were contained with force fields constructed of nephil energy, and – to Setebos’ dismay – the angelic components of the nephilim came from their respective Celestial Engineer fathers. In a few areas, the humans were nearly wiped out, similar to Baraqel and Kokabiel’s, when the Sentry became subordinate to the Celestial Engineer, both protecting their nephilim. In other areas, the humans fought to survive, allied with

the Sentry against the Celestial Engineer and his nephilim, locked in a futile civil war since the ultimate loser would still be the humans, as ephemeral and fragile as they would always be. The remaining were in a precarious balance, of Celestial Engineer and Sentry co-ruling lands of pampered yet enslaved humans and iron-willed nephilim overseers.

Only Miranda and Setebos’ area – nephil-free and its humans intact -- remained.

“Miranda --” Setebos began.

“Take the vids down,” she interrupted, “before they find out we’re watching.”

Setebos assented, with one small hand gesture. The last vestige of nephil energy exhausted, he felt empty, tired, and jittery.

“Since Samyaza isn’t with the other teams,” Miranda observed, “he’s either here or still in the Eden zone.” She glanced at Setebos. “Are you in any condition to travel?”

“No. And neither are you.”

“What do you mean by that --”

Setebos walked towards her, stopped, and placed his hands on her shoulders. “You’re in no condition since once you find Samyaza you’ll want to kill him.”

Miranda began to tremble in anger.

“Even though you can’t since angels – even fallen ones -- can’t die.”

She gritted her teeth. “I’d still want to fucking TRY.”

“I know.” Setebos sighed. “Me too.”

Miranda shook her head, stepped forward, and wrapped her arms around Setebos’ waist. Surprised, Setebos adjusted his arms, and both stood in an embrace, with Miranda’s chin resting on Setebos’ shoulder.

“We trusted him, Setebos,” she said. “We fell because we trusted him.”

“Yes,” he agreed, “and how fucked up is that?”

Miranda tilted her head into his shoulder and began to cry. “Shit, I hate crying,” she murmured between sobs.

“Always the soldier,” Setebos said.

She gave a short snort of laughter. After a bit, she dried her eyes on his shoulder and leaned back, violet eyes looking at gray eyes. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For not getting mad when I didn’t believe you at first and then letting me cry like a little girl.”

Setebos shrugged. “You’re still my teammate. Being fallen doesn’t change that.”

“Still, thanks.”

Setebos stepped back, patting Miranda’s arm, and walked to his side of the room. “I know you want us to set out immediately, but it’s nighttime now, and I need to recover.”

“Right. Sorry.”

Setebos waved away her apology. He stripped down, settled into his cot, and closed his eyes. He heard her strip down and lay down in her cot, as well.

After a short silence, Miranda said, “Setebos?”

“Hmmm?”

“I never told you this – but Ariel himself had requested that you be my partner when we were assigned Earthside.”

Setebos opened his eyes. “What? Why?”

“Because I had rejoiced when Lightbearer and the other traitors lost the War, like most of us who won. Truth be told, I actually relished fighting during the War – crushing my enemies, flooding the ground with their ichor.” Miranda’s eyes flashed with the memory, but then became saddened. “I’m not proud of that,” Miranda said, her voice sounding soft and bittersweet, “because both you and Ariel still felt that we lost, because we had lost our brethren. You and Ariel still grieved on their behalf.” She paused. “I didn’t understand why back then.” She paused again. “I understand now.”

“What do you understand?”

“Like what you said earlier – that being fallen doesn’t change that connection. That relationship.” She smiled at Setebos, uncertain. “That love.”

“Miranda...”

“We didn’t fall like Lightbearer and his ilk, who only felt hate. We fell because we cared too much.” She looked at the ceiling. “We still care too much. Just like the humans.”

Setebos remained silent, listening.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is that I’m not so naïve to think that we’ll definitely find a way back to Heaven. But now that I know I’m fallen... I’m glad you’re by my side.” Miranda flinched. “God, that’s so selfish.”

“Maybe,” Setebos said, “but if so, then I’m selfish, too.” He paused. “And that’s why I’ll never let what happened to the other Sentry members ever happen to you.”

“Setebos --”

“Get some rest, you old soldier,” he interrupted. He closed his eyes. “We have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow.”

“... Copy.”

#

“Found him.”

“Where?”

“Guess.”

“You don’t mean --”

“Yes.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“Sonuvabitch. Do you need backup? Things are quiet here.”

“No. I can take care of it.”

“Okay,” Miranda said, “but be careful.”

“Will do.” Setebos turned off his comm.

Samyaza --

He touched down.

-- what the hell happened to you?

With the natural amphitheater below him, Setebos saw before him a massive, spiraling structure made of rare earth metals and iron, reaching high into the sky. On the very bottom stood the angel Samyaza, although Setebos barely recognized him. Gone were the strong, imposing features of the Watchers’ commanding officer and a leader of Celestial Engineers. Now he was a gaunt, skeletal figure, his gnarled hands on the foundation of the rising tower, sweat pouring down on a face twisted in pain. Assessing both angel and tower, Setebos took a step back, as he read the massive amount of Samyaza’s energy stored in the tower, witnessing Samyaza pushing himself beyond reason, to transfer more into the structure.

Only when Setebos called out, “Samyaza!” did he break the connection, as he stumbled back, startled, and fell to the ground, exhausted.

“Go away!” Samyaza yelled, as he struggled to stand up. “I don’t need your goddamn accusations or insults!”

That old bastard, Setebos remembered Baraqel calling him. “Wait – you HEARD what we said on the comm all this time? Why the hell didn’t you answer?”

“What, to waste my time and power answering to insubordination?” Samyaza replied. He stood up, his legs wobbly and buckling underneath him. “Everyone thinks I made a mistake – I am proving I did NOT.”

“How?” Setebos stared at Samyaza and then at the structure. “With THIS?”

“I just need to break the communications blackout – to explain to Central. A transmitter powerful enough will do it. I built this – I charged this up --” He stumbled to the tower.

“What?”

“I can fix this – this misunderstanding.” He grinned manically. “This will work, I know this will work, and I can explain everything.”

“Samyaza --”

“I’m close, close to being done, I know it --” He reached out his hands towards the base of the tower again.

Setebos intervened, grabbing gaunt wrists. “Samyaza!” He shook his head. “It’s no use. Don’t you see? We’ve fallen--”

“NO!” Samyaza screeched and pushed Setebos away, still having enough strength in his withered body.

Setebos stood aside, a helpless witness to an angel gone insane. But the tower, supercharged with Samyaza’s

accumulated power, was dangerous in itself, a bomb waiting to explode, with an unknown radius of destruction. Still, even in his diminished state, Samyaza was difficult to subdue.

“Dammit, Samyaza,” Setebos murmured. He reached up from within his wing and took out Baraqel’s canister of nephil energy, which he hadn’t planned to bring but did at Miranda’s insistence.

“Take that with you,” she had said.

“Why?”

“Just in case you need a tactical advantage.”

So, Setebos thought, *here goes nothin’*. He popped open the canister, lobbed it at Samyaza, and flew backwards as fast as he could. As he expected, Samyaza’s weakened state couldn’t handle that much power all at once, and the potent nephil energy overwhelmed his faculties, rendering him unconscious. What he did not expect was the excess blow back hitting the tower and setting off its explosive force. “Argh!” he cried out, having no time at all to take cover.

Faster than the speed of light, the Archangels Uriel and Gabriel descended from their posts. Spreading their wings upward, they redirected the expanding explosive blast of Samyaza’s tower straight into the sky, which broke free from the Earth’s atmosphere and harmlessly co-mingled with the planet’s magnetic field. Setebos stared at the sheer size and power of the two archangels, for Uriel and Gabriel had adjusted their proportions enough to enter the Earth’s atmosphere safely, but still looking like giants compared to human-sized creatures like himself and Samyaza. All that remained of the tower was a deep yet surprisingly narrow blast crater, which resembled a sinkhole, with Samyaza collapsed beside it. With the danger passed, Gabriel returned to his position above the Earth, leaving Uriel, who resized so that he was more of human proportions, albeit still a figure towering over Setebos, who tried not to cower as the archangel approached him.

“Stand at attention, Setebos,” Uriel said.

Setebos flinched, long unused to the protocol of the chain of command, and then straightened up. “Sir.”

“What you did was out of line. Samyaza is still your commanding officer.”

Setebos clenched his fists but didn’t respond.

“As such, you should have trusted that I and the other Archangels, as his superior officers, would have taken care of him. Yes, we were aware of Samyaza’s mental breakdown due to his fallen state, and we had made the appropriate accommodations. Samyaza’s tower would never have been completed – we made sure of that. It would have kept him occupied, sequestered here in the Eden zone, indefinitely because of his obsession to take matters in his own hands. Therefore, your current actions were both unwanted and unnecessary.”

“Permission to ask a question, sir?”

“Permission granted.”

“What is my punishment for dereliction of duty, sir?”

Uriel gave a curt wave, as if swatting Setebos’ question like a pesky fly. “You are punished enough, being sequestered here on this planet, as are all of your fellow Watchers.”

Setebos stared, surprised.

Uriel looked at the crater and the unconscious Samyaza. “You Celestial Engineers – what is it with you lot, assuming you can ‘fix’ humanity when you weren’t even involved in humanity’s creation in the first place?”

Setebos remained silent, his eyes forward.

“However, we Archangels have noticed that you – of all of your fellow engineers -- haven’t succumbed to the same error in regards to the female humans.”

Setebos twitched. “You... were watching, sir?”

“Only recently, as an extension of investigating the effect of Samyaza’s condition. Thus the fact that you, of all of the Celestial Engineers of the Watchers, have not made that error is under consideration, as Central decides the fate of fallen Earth.”

“That fate of fallen Earth, sir?”

“Yes -- whether to activate the Reboot or not.”

“WHAT?” Setebos looked at Uriel, alarmed.

“Ah. So you are familiar with what the Reboot is.”

“Yes, sir.” Setebos tried not to let his panic show. “It means a reset to the original default programming of the Earth -- including sentient creatures. But wouldn’t that essentially wipe out any creature existing on Earth after Adam and Eve’s creation?”

“The senior members of Central are only debating its merits for now,” Uriel replied, not answering Setebos’ question. “Meanwhile, no one in Central is allowed to contact Earth -- ever. Earth is Ground Zero for fallen Creation, and Central can’t risk it spreading, especially with Heaven still recovering from the War. Do you understand me, Setebos?”

Setebos swallowed hard and nodded. “Yes, sir,” he said, even as he thought, *Oh God, does this Reboot all depend on me?*

“Samyaza will remain secured here. Now, I’ll return you to your assigned area.” Uriel made a twisting motion with his hand, opening a portal. “Do not succumb to that error, Setebos.” With a slight push of his hand, he sent the portal toward Setebos who, in barely a blink of an eye, found himself returned next to his and Miranda’s chosen roost tree.

“I’m outside,” Setebos said in his comm.

“Copy.” Miranda emerged from the roots of the tree as an ethereal shimmer and then materialized before Setebos. “Hey, you’re embodied. How did you get here so fast? And what did you do about Samyaza? Also – ARE YOU OKAY?”

Setebos sat down heavily on the ground, his hands on his head, as he tried to control his breathing. “Miranda, I can’t – words --” He looked at her. “You’re not only my teammate, but you’re my best friend in this whole damn world, right?”

“Setebos, why --”

“Because I know that sending is really invasive, especially between persons who aren’t close, but this stuff in my head – I want you to know what happened, but talking --”

Miranda placed a hand on Setebos’ shoulder. “If you want my consent, you have it. And yes, we are more than just teammates.”

“Thank you.” Then Setebos closed his eyes and sent his memory of everything that happened in the Eden zone to Miranda. When he opened his eyes, he saw Miranda seated next to him, her hand still resting on Setebos’ shoulder, but she was staring at him, stunned.

That isn’t right, she sent. She coughed and said vocally, “I mean what Uriel said, ordering you not to --” Miranda shook her head, angry. “What kind of angel does he think you are?”

Setebos looked at her sadly. “A fallen one.” He gently removed her hand from his shoulder.

“But it was all Samyaza’s fault --”

“Sure. Just like it was all Lightbearer’s fault that Eve fell. Or that it was Eve’s fault that Adam fell.” He sighed. “Free will, remember? We all could’ve said no to Samyaza. But we didn’t.” He stood up. “I didn’t.”

“Still.” Miranda stood up as well. “I think Uriel is an arrogant asshole.”

“MIRANDA --”

She yelled into the sky, “You hear me, Uriel? Yeah, YOU DO.”

Setebos stared at her. “Are you crazy?”

“No, that would be Samyaza.” She shrugged. “We’re already fallen – so what’re the Archangels going to do? Make us more fallen?”

“But --”

“The way I see it,” Miranda interrupted, “we may be fallen, but we haven’t been instantly condemned to Hell. So we’re in the same state as the humans. Maybe because we’ve been with the humans too long – maybe we’re going native. And no.” She held up her hand, stopping Setebos’ protest. “I don’t mean like Baraqel and the other Celestial Engineers. But it wouldn’t make sense that Central is still debating what to do with us, if our fallenness is absolute. So let’s assume it’s not.”

“But I’m still the wildcard, Miranda. I’m the last one who hasn’t totally lost his mind like Samyaza and the other engineers. But I’m nothing special! I could be a ticking bomb of batshit crazy, for all you know!”

“HEY.” She thumped his chest. “Can you stop sounding like a hysterical human for one minute?”

“Ow – that hurt!”

“Good.” She exhaled loudly. “Look, according to Uriel, our area is the least fallen of all the Watchers. So we just keep doing what we’ve been doing. As for what may or what may not happen in the future, there’s no point worrying about it. But if you’re still paranoid, I’ll keep an eye on you – and I’ll beat your ass back into common sense if I need to. Okay?”

Setebos sighed. “Okay.”

“Good.” She switched from material to ethereal. “It’s gotten too quiet, so I’m going on patrol.” She looked

away. “And I need the distraction -- since I’ll never see Ariel again.” She took off, flying high in the sky.

Miranda, do you want me to come along?

No. I need to be alone right now. And get out of my head, Setebos.

Setebos received her sending, including the hurt, anger, and sadness behind her unspoken words. *Understood. Sorry.* He pulled back, giving her mind privacy, and didn’t follow after her. He returned to the roost room and dropped into his cot, realizing how exhausted he was. Laying there, allowing the tree’s lifeforce slowly recharge him, Setebos listed all the times he messed up.

Agreeing with Samyaza’s expanded directive. Being too obvious with his powers with the humans. Accepting Baraqel’s contraband nephil energy battery. Using it against Samyaza. And –

“Shit,” Setebos said out loud.

Of course, that was the risk of sending – for everything in the creature’s mind and soul at that moment would have been communicated. So Miranda would know now. The obvious reason that Setebos was never tempted by any human female, ever. But then there was the secret that Miranda had kept hidden within her, that she revealed, most likely by accident, what Ariel had whispered to her in the containment room, all that time ago.

That isn’t right, she had sent before she left for patrol, which meant all sorts of things.

Setebos groaned and fought the urge to run away. “Don’t be a damn coward,” he said out loud. “Just wait and explain first. Yeah, just wait....”

Miranda didn’t return that night. Nor the next day. Nor the next. After a week, Setebos’ worry began to override his horrified embarrassment, and he decided to contact Miranda after one more night. When he awoke in the morning, he saw Miranda, sitting on the floor, next to his cot.

“Agh!”

She chuckled, but her eyes were somber. “Let’s talk topside.”

“Okay.”

Instead at the bottom of the tree, the two fallen Watchers emerged among the treetop, above the forest canopy. There, sitting side by side, they watched the sun rise. Once the sky turned from rosy dawn to the bright blue of morning, Miranda turned to Setebos. “Sorry for the radio silence.”

Setebos stared forward. “No need to apologize. You said you needed to be alone, so...” He trailed off.

“Heh. Alone. I ended up having to put down a skirmish at the northwest perimeter. Some of the more ambitious so-called ‘princes’ discovered the energy shield of Baraqel and were using it as a weapon to push their rivals against. Nasty way to dispatch your enemies.” She shook her head. “I didn’t want to deal with the GodKing nonsense, so I embodied myself as a heretofore unknown general, took over a couple of companies, and made them force the others away from the perimeter.” She paused. “Some of the humans were needlessly stubborn, so there were... collateral damage.” She shrugged.

Setebos looked at her. “Why didn’t you call in for help?”

“No need – these were just low-tech military maneuvers in a low-stakes campaign. Not really a challenge to a veteran Sentry member like me. Remember, I was an officer in the War in Heaven.” She flexed her wrists. “It was actually over in two days. The remaining days were to determine terms of surrender, and I helped install a new ruler that was amenable to those terms. Actually --” Miranda chuckled, “I suppose I’m the covert ruler, while the overt one is just a puppet. Either way, part of the terms was that the ruler would marry a daughter of the losing sovereign. Fortunately with the puppet, that wasn’t ME.”

“Clever,” Setebos replied. “But why the covert proceedings?”

“This area doesn’t have the technological advances as the others, so the only strategic defense we can do, just in case the other humans, Watchers, or nephilim overtake our boundaries, is to have a unified political and military force. And since I can’t contaminate this area’s human culture with ideas too advanced for them to understand, I have to work within the military-patriarchal system that is these humans’ traditions, by advancing as this ‘lord general’ persona.” Miranda sighed. “It’s slow going, but it should be enough to maintain this area’s integrity, at least in the eyes of the Archangels and, hopefully, Central.”

Setebos took in the information in silence. “You’ve planned everything out.”

“Yes. As I said, the skirmish itself only took two days. So the other days, in between installing the ruler and getting him married off, I had some time on my hands.” Miranda looked at Setebos. “It’s because you’re going away, aren’t you?”

“Miranda --”

“You’re right, Setebos,” she interrupted. “You are my best friend. On this entire planet, no creature is as close to me as you. But you being my lover?”

Setebos twitched at the word. “You should’ve told me about Ariel.”

“I know.” She looked up. “Typical Celestial Engineer arrogance, eh? Wanting to fix every conceivable problem. He knew that I’d be lonely, away from him, so he made sure a colleague who’s as close to him character-wise would be my partner.”

“But telling you that it would be okay if you and I were to sleep together – I mean, WHO DOES THAT?”

“One who cares deeply for his beloved and his trusted colleague. Shocking, isn’t it?” She smiled, obviously thinking of a private memory, and then started to cry. “I miss him, Setebos.”

Setebos opened his arms, and Miranda leaned in, burying her head in his chest.

She laughed through her tears, “How come anytime we hug, I’m crying?”

“I dunno – maybe that’s my special talent,” Setebos said. “I can make hardened warriors cry, just with the force of a hug.”

“Heh.” She wiped her eyes. “I’m sorry, Setebos – that I don’t feel the same that you feel for me. It’s not fair.”

He sighed. “Yeah – well. Now that’s all cleared up, I should go. You got full control of everything here, so it’s obvious you don’t need me. And between how I feel for you and that standing order by Uriel over my head,

it’s best I go as far away from humans as possible.” He started to move away.

“Wait.” She had that look that Setebos had witnessed, all that time ago in the containment room, when she was privately debating with herself before she called out to Ariel. “This will probably be the last time I will be as Miranda, as I’ll have to live in the field, embedded with the humans, as a new person. So – I want to give you something before you leave.”

“What?”

She reached up to his face, pulled it close to her, and kissed him long and deep. “Let’s go back inside.”

The next day, Setebos rose from the large mat that was in the center of the room and pulled on his gear. He turned back and kneeled down. Like Ariel before, he kissed Miranda’s forehead and her lips. “Thank you.”

Violet eyes met gray eyes for one last time. “Goodbye. And be careful.”

#

All of that was a long, long time ago.

After leaving the coastal mountain and the plain filled with people who invaded the solitude of his exile in his first (and up to that point only) home, Setebos sought for a place that ensured that no human would ever find him. Flying high, almost on the edge of space, he surveyed all of the lands of Earth and saw that the clash of wills between Watchers, humans, and nephilim had only gotten worse since his initial sojourn from his and Miranda’s area.

Not my problem, he thought, and he plunged into the sea. He swam down and far until he reached an island system with above-ground caves that could only be reached by swimming through complicated undersea passages. *There*, he thought. *No one can reach this*.

Imagine his surprise when, one day, a young woman’s body bobbed up and washed ashore into his home cave. He stared, seeing her lifeless body. He jumped, nearly scared to death (not that he could die, of course), when her body convulsed and retched ungodly amounts of sea water. She remained unconscious but was very much still alive.

He hardly wore his gear anymore. He hardly ever left his cave anymore. But he remembered everything in his past, and when he carefully approached the woman, he stopped when he saw her face.

Is – is this Cora?

She suddenly opened her eyes, grabbed Setebos’ arm, and sent —

FOUND YOU.