

8 THE SEEKER

The voices of her past swirled in her mind, from people who had died a long time ago.

“The world has gotten dangerous, with strange forces overpowering lesser villages...”

“If we all live long enough, will even the innocent ones do evil?”

“Cowardly, vicious men are all the same, Cora.”

And yet --

“As long as there are enough people like you in the world, this world can never, ever truly be evil.”

Cora stared out the window of her hotel room, trying to believe Setebos’ words. She was high enough that she could see beyond the fortified walls of the city, to the shantytown just northwest on the other side of the wall. Little cardboard and plastic shanties filled the plain, improvised housing made from trash, clustered together with little metal trash bins outside, aflame with burning trash that served as sources of heat during the hard winter. She knew -- having explored in disguised, clandestine dress -- that gathered around each fire were people wearing layers of tattered clothes, who would stare dully into the fire, for there was nothing they could do. The people were of every age – young and old – but what pierced Cora’s heart had been the smallest of the children, who cried and couldn’t even begin to understand why their life was like this.

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When Cora was training with Malech, he once told her that humans were not meant to die but were meant to live forever.

“WHY?” she asked, horrified.

Malech chuckled. “Because humans were originally meant to remain innocent, so living forever would be a blessing, to do good things in this world without the intervention of Heaven.”

“Well,” she replied, “THAT couldn’t have lasted long.”

He guffawed at that. “Considering that it was my people who fell first, I guess it’s asking too much for your own species to do any better.” He shrugged. “What do you want to learn next?”

In the beginning, Cora’s intention was to learn how to harness the angelic energy, which had lain dormant in her body, to track Setebos and then leave to begin her search. But as she traveled with Malech’s army, she had to disguise herself as a young man so that she could prevent unwanted attention. In doing so, she learned knowledge and skills needed to survive in a world growing treacherous every day. Assigned as Lord General Malech’s personal assistant, she was able to keep hidden her true identity, as she conditioned her body to become stronger and martially adept in keeping with her role as a fellow soldier. Even after sustaining a nasty concussion after her first hand-to-hand exercise, she shook off all offers of help, and in the privacy of her tent, she collapsed, succumbing to nausea and retching as she waited for her healing factor to restore her.

However, Malech’s tent was next to hers, and he could hear through the thin canvas walls. He entered her tent, seeing Cora on the bare ground, and made a “tch” sound. He declared, “Just because you can recover on your own doesn’t mean you have to be alone.”

Cora felt too ill to protest, but she glared at him through tear-filled eyes as she felt her privacy invaded.

Malech shook his head. “So stubborn.” He squatted down and, remembering the training Setebos taught him when he was Miranda, placed an assessing hand on her head. “Ah,” he said and then accelerated the angelic energy in Cora to target the bruised area of her brain. After a second, he moved his hand away as Cora, fully recovered, sat up.

“Why did you do that?” she said, still glaring at him.

“Because,” he said, “thinking that you alone must be strong -- because no one else can -- is the loneliest feeling in the world.”

Cora’s face twisted, and she looked away.

“Look,” he said, “you were right – you have learned quickly how to track Setebos. You’re surprisingly adept. However, if you’re going to find my old partner out there in this mad world, you’ll need to know more than that. If you’re willing, I can teach you.”

“Teach me what?”

“Well... this.” And for the first time, Malech demonstrated the telepathic method of communication called “send,” as he sent the words, sounds, images, and emotions that were currently in his mind and spirit.

“Aaaahhh!” Cora clutched her head in both arms, as if keeping her skull from exploding apart. She feared that she would have a seizure, as what Malech sent her was overwhelming.

He abruptly stopped. “Are you okay?” he asked vocally, alarmed.

Cora forced herself to breathe slow and steady as she unfurled her arms. “Y-yeah – yeah.” She exhaled sharply. “What was that? That – that putting everything in my mind?”

“It’s called ‘sending.’”

“And what you... sent was --”

“The lore native to celestial creatures.” He shrugged. “A preview, that is.”

She shook her head, amazed. “You’ll teach me all that?”

“Only what you’re capable of doing. You’re still a human being, after all.”

She stared at him, her dark eyes unblinking as she peered into his violet eyes. “How do I send to you?” she asked.

“Maybe you should recover a bit --”

“I’m fine.” She shook her head to clear it and looked at Malech, waiting.

“God, you’re stubborn.” He smiled. “Okay, then.”

One month turned to two. Two months turned to one year. One year turned to three years. After four years, Cora could harness that angelic energy to control her healing factor, send, touch-transmit Lethe sleep, pass

through nephil-created energy walls (such as the one that bound the Kaldachi region), and – as she originally intended -- track Setebos. One early morning, she entered Malech’s tent unannounced. Malech looked at her and said, “It’s time, isn’t it.”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “Meet me at the pass between the two boulders, then.”

They met far enough away from camp for Malech to give Cora a farewell gift. Before Cora’s eyes, he changed to ethereal and, for the first time since she was a little girl, Cora saw the creature who, along with Setebos, had saved her from death. She saw a beautiful androgynous body clothed in shimmering white-silver skin-tight garb, the fallen angel’s dark hair billowing like the revealed corona of the eclipsed Sun, matching the blue-black of massive wings.

Miranda, Cora sent in awe.

Miranda switched to material and made a long, cat-like stretch. “Well, Cora,” she said, her voice not the usual baritone of Malech but a rich, female alto, “where do you want me to bring you to start your search?”

Cora closed her eyes, concentrating. She opened them and pointed northwest. “Fifty miles that way.”

With strong, muscular arms, Miranda scooped up Cora and took flight.

“Ah!” Cora exclaimed.

Miranda chuckled but said nothing as they flew. Soon, they touched down before a small town, and she gently set down Cora on her feet. “This is where we part, my favorite student.”

“Hah. I’m your ONLY student.”

“True. But you’re my favorite as well.” She pulled in Cora for one last hug and kissed her forehead, as a blessing. “I hope you can find my old friend and partner. Don’t be surprised if it’ll take a while, though.”

“I know,” Cora said. “He’s actively hiding from humans.”

Miranda nodded. “I know you’ll find him. But be careful, my dear.” She leapt into the air and hovered, giving one last salute. “Goodbye, Cora.”

Cora saluted back. “Goodbye, Lord General Malech – my guardian angel Miranda.” Cora saw her friend turn her body away from her and beat her wings in long, strong strokes. Soon, she couldn’t see her in the pre-dawn sky. As she turned towards the road to her first destination, she realized the irony of her situation: she was using the inadvertent gift of Setebos’ energy in order to find him – and to ask him to take that gift back. For, even four years later, Cora hadn’t changed her mind: she, just like all humans, shouldn’t live forever.

Tracking Setebos’ movements, from one increasingly corrupted human population to the next, one nephil-embattled location to the next, Cora would travel the world, at first by foot, then horse, then by autonomous vehicle. She lost count of the years, as she saw the rapid rise of technology and scientific advances far beyond the understanding of any human alive, who would view these wonders as magic and miracles -- until they used these wonders against each other. And just like her grandmother Ina before her, she learned new knowledge

and skills from every person and place she encountered in her travels, in order to stay safe while get where she needed to go.

To avoid needless attention, she gave a modified Lethe sleep to the guards at the main entrance gate, which faced east, so that they thought she was a local resident as opposed to a travelling foreigner. Taking an autonomous car to a hotel farthest from the main gate, she observed streets empty of everybody except for explicit displays of force: armed patrols swathed in red and black, their faces obscured by black helmets. Once she arrived, she easily secured a room, what with years of accrued credit attached to multiple, revolving untraceable accounts. But what she saw on the other side of the northwest wall, from her westward hotel window, was a sliver of the majority of the world’s people: those who fled the atrocities of war or human depravity but found no safe haven anywhere, for they had no power, connections, nor money to offer the rulers as payment, other than their own bodies.

She saw enough dead-eyed child soldiers and prostitutes in her travels to give her nightmares for years to come.

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Cora sighed and gave a sharp wave towards the west window, which went opaque. She then walked and sat down before another window that was also nearly floor-to-ceiling. Except this window faced the south, and from that vantage point, she could see the ocean.

She wrapped her arms around herself, to stop herself from shaking.

It was ridiculous. Cora knew that she couldn’t die, so she could never die from drowning. Yet, ever since she nearly drowned in that desert river when she was eight years old, she had a deathly fear of water. The panic was so bad that she never learned how to swim properly, in spite of Ina’s and then Malech’s patient instruction. Ironically, Malech even taught her how to pilot a boat. She had been fortunate, that Setebos had remained overland for the years of her search. But this location, several feet straight down from her hotel room, was the last place Setebos was on dry land -- perhaps many decades ago, before even the city was built. Now, her internal compass was having Cora head southwest, to the ocean and beyond.

Dammit, Setebos, she thought.

She knew she wouldn’t be able to buy or hire a ship or boat to get out there. While the city was historically a port, years of unrest and the threat of impending invaders had locked down travel for the residents, as well as keeping out any would-be refugee. That much was clear, when she persuaded the guards with the story that she was a city resident who had left the city walls to go to the shantytown, to see if she could secure a child servant but had returned empty-handed. Even that plausible explanation made them nervous, even as the Lethe sleep influenced them to be friendly to her.

As she sat, figuring out what to do next, she saw something out of place. Moving closer to the window but looking at the street just within the southern portion of the wall, she spotted a person, not dressed in the armor of the red and black patrol. Scrutinizing the person, she realized that he or she was very small, perhaps even a

child. The child was wearing a brown bulky coat and did not look lost as he or she walked calmly but resolutely towards a small team of red-and-blacks nearest to the hotel.

SHIT.

Cora grabbed her travel bag, threw on her cloak, and rushed out the door.

Where is it?, she thought, recalling the schematic of the hotel and lesser-known labyrinth of tunnels underneath the hotel, which she had discovered in her research before she came to the city. Making sure that no one saw her, she located the nearest staff elevator. With the aid of angelic energy persuasion, overriding the security feature of the staff access elevator was easy, and she zoomed down, pushing the safety limits of the carriage. From the basement level, she listened for anyone – there was none – and found an access door to a lesser known safe zone level. From there, she found the long-abandoned escape tunnels of a decades-ago-demolished manor house of a long-dead family that used to rule this place when it was a village-state. Nobody else was there because, as Cora witnessed in her long travels, no one knew their local history anymore.

From there, she felt the rumble and heard the muffled reverberation of the suicide bomber completing his or her mission.

Oh Gods, she prayed, child, child, may your spirit finally be at peace.

There would be chaos. Cora waited, and in the dark earth she could hear the muffled scrambling, screaming, and firepower of either a bloody civil war beginning or an insurrection being violently stamped out. Either way, there would be chaos. She waited for the cadence of war to shift away from her location. When it did, she struck open a little lightstick and followed one of the tunnels that, based on the bird’s eye view internalized in her mind, lead to a small pier of boats outside of the security wall. She knew the authorities would be busy with what was happening within the walls, but just in case they were watching outside, she surreptitiously unmoored all five of the boats docked there, climbed into one of them, and hid underneath the ropes and tackle.

Hidden, she let the surf and swell of the ocean do what it willed. She could feel the boat being led further away from the coast. There, waiting for the boat to be far enough away to be safe, Cora let herself succumb to the shakes, as the dread fear of being in open water took hold of her. She started laughing hysterically, only stopping once she became exhausted. Afterwards, she raised her head just enough to see the horizon line of the coast look like a blueish-gray against the overall blue-green of the ocean water.

“Okay, Cora,” she said, “let’s hope this thing is autonomous.” She searched the interior of the center area of the boat, slid open an access panel, and sighed in relief. Again going by her internal compass, she punched in the latitude and longitude, the speed, and engaged the autopilot. With a reassuring hum, whirr, then roar, the little boat came alive and followed its programming. Speeding along on a plane, Cora took the liberty to lie down, covering herself with her cloak, as she had a long trip ahead of her. Between her own energy resources and the boat’s solar panels, she refueled the boat twice in three days and ate her travel provisions twice per day, while filtering sea water for fresh water as needed, using the onboard amenities. On the third day, she arrived at the designated point in the ocean.

A small chain of low, uncharted islands rose before her, but one particular island stood out among the rest. It looked like a tall hill, covered in low vegetation, jutting out of the ocean. She circled the island twice, but she saw no beachhead, port, or anything to easily let the boat get close enough to the island without crashing into it. After the second time around, Cora dropped anchor as close as she could get. Gingerly, she stood up and saw no obvious cave, hillock, or habitation. Then she realized that Setebos was not on the surface. Instead, she sensed that Setebos was inside that island, on sea level. She stared and only one solution made sense. The cave was in the center of the island, but the only way to get to it was from below, to dive down and then swim up, to a hidden, internal lagoon and cavern.

Unfortunately, her boat had no diving equipment.

Cora knew that Setebos would be hiding from humans, but “SHIT,” she said out loud. “I’m going to end up drowning and then bobbing up in there – DAMMIT, SETEBOS!”

There was no way to mentally prepare for what she had to do. She stripped down as much as possible, took a series of three deep breaths, and dove off the boat.

It was awful.

She did as close to swimming as she could, letting her internal compass guide her as she swam with her eyes closed the whole way, not wanting to see how deep the water went underneath her. At one point, she knew that she couldn’t hold her breath any longer, even though she wasn’t quite there yet. Trying not to panic, but failing miserably, she allowed herself to take on water while still swimming as much as she could. Then, Cora remembered nothing, as she started drowning.

But at that point, she was close to where she needed to be. Her drowned body bobbed up into the hidden lagoon and washed ashore onto the internal cave’s slip of a beach. Once her body was above water, Cora’s healing factor activated, and she convulsed and retched ungodly amounts of sea water. She remained unconscious until she felt the sending, *Is – is this Cora?*

At that, she opened her eyes, grabbed Setebos’ arm, and sent her exhausted but jubilant response –
FOUND YOU.