

1 THE CELESTIAL ENGINEER

When Setebos became conscious, on the first day of his existence, he woke to the sound of a persistent, repetitive chime, which stopped once he sat up. Looking around, he was in a tiny, private sleeping quarter, on top of a narrow bunk. He slid off and automatically searched underneath the bunk, where his gear was. Setebos didn't question how he knew where his gear was, or what “gear” even was. He just knew -- and knew exactly what to do -- as he was as fully formed as he would ever be.

Such was the way of angels.

On his first day, he pulled on his silvery-gray gear: a two-part skin suit which covered his pale nakedness and then a one-piece oversuit, which ended with material that flowed over his feet, forming sturdy boots. Only his dark-haired head remained uncovered.

Even though the room had no obvious door, he walked toward a bare wall, which divided into two vertical halves and opened up without Setebos pausing. The halves slid together shut once the wall door was behind him. Outside was a wide corridor, and he joined the others. By instinct, he knew they were Celestial Engineers, just as he was, and they walked to the briefing room. In rank and file, he stood at attention with his cohort, already aware that they were all in the lower rank of Virtues, and listened to an angel who was taller and physically more imposing than they were: Samyaza, the Celestial Engineers' commanding officer and a member of the higher ranked Dominions.

“Welcome to existence,” Samyaza declared, “and welcome to the Creation Battalion. You all know what performing your duties as Celestial Engineers entails, but our present mission will depart from the previous iteration. While the veteran Celestial Engineers constructed the expansion of Sacred Space, our new objective is to actualize Alpha Omega's composition, to create spacetime. Your stations are located within a specialized containment room on the edge of timeless space. The objective today is to initiate that construction of spacetime, and Ariel will be team leader for the initiating phase. The ultimate objective will be preparing a new embodied world for Alpha Omega's new creatures, which Alpha Omega will actualize personally.”

That last piece of information caused a surprised murmur among the Celestial Engineers, which abruptly stopped when Samyaza raised his hand.

“Dismissed.”

On that first day, Setebos arrived with his fellow Celestial Engineers to a massive, windowless, metallic room, where a wide horseshoe of transparent monitors hovered around a large, central dais. On that dais stood Ariel, a senior member of their cohort and a veteran of the prior construction of Sacred Space. As the junior Celestial Engineers settled in before their individually assigned monitors, Ariel stepped down from the dais, ran a hand through his close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair, and squared his shoulders. He raised both arms like a

conductor before an orchestra. “Let’s begin.”

Immediately, tumbling figures that were the code for the setup of spacetime appeared on each engineer’s monitor, flashing across the screen with a cacophony of bell-like ringing. With both hands touching his own screen, Setebos manipulated his part of the arcane figures, stitching them into a coherent track that became more melodious and harmonious with his fellow cohorts’ tracks the faster he worked. Ariel, as both conductor and mixer, ensured that the total piece followed the structure of Alpha Omega’s intended composition exactly. Under Ariel’s outstretched fingers performing tweaks here and there, Setebos could see in real time the overall initiation phase made actual in the center of that massive room, as matter came into being, undulating with dark radiation. Then with one concluding hand motion, Ariel gestured that all the engineers rest their hands. Finally he made a curt twisting gesture and stepped back quickly.

The dark undulating smear collapsed. Then it exploded in one blinding white-hot singularity with a split-second piercing note that quickly transformed into a low-frequency roar. Before their eyes was the newly born spacetime, burning brightly and contained in a bubble that was once a pinpoint of light but was now rapidly expanding with roiling particles.

Walking around the bubble, assessing its existence and its rate of development. Ariel nodded. “Good,” he declared.

Setebos stared at the glowing sphere, in awe. *Beautiful*, he thought.

Such was Setebos’ first day.

#

Setebos’ next few days were like the first. He would wake up, be briefed over that day’s objectives, perform his duties far past his allotted shift, and then return to his quarter to rest for the next day. It never occurred to him to do anything differently, and the simple routine gave him a sense of security that he liked.

However, time came when his role was to wait on standby, yet he still reported to the containment room, even though he was on leave. One day, he saw that Ariel was also more hands off, as spacetime developed on its own after passing through the initiation phase without any unforeseen problems. There he saw Ariel approach a member of the containment room’s Sentry, who had stood guarding the perimeter and yet was curious about what spacetime was. Not until the Sentry member spoke did Setebos realize that this angel had taken on a distinctly female gender as part of its existence, which stood out since the default was either masculine or androgynous. But what especially surprised Setebos was when Ariel offered her a guided tour of the newly created Earth, and he witnessed Ariel and the female Sentry member portal from the containment room into material spacetime.

Genuinely surprised by the break of protocol, he blurted aloud, “You can do that?”

His voice startled the engineer next to him, who declared, “That’s the first time I’ve ever heard you speak. I was beginning to wonder.”

The engineer on the other side of Setebos, whose name was Baraqel, snickered. “Be nice, Arakiel,” but he

didn't sound particularly nice himself.

“And yes,” Arakiel said, “you can do that. There's no rule saying we can't survey our work up close. You can even bring along members of other units.”

“As long as you secure clearance from the COs first, like Ariel did,” added Baraqel.

“Well, of course.” Arakiel shrugged. “Although why that Sentry guard wanted to check out the Earth is beyond me. It's just dirt, after all.”

“Indeed,” agreed Baraqel. “To think that Alpha Omega prioritized the creation of material spacetime. He didn't even do a follow-up survey of Sacred Space. And making something as fragile as the Earth. What's its purpose? Boggles one's mind, doesn't it?”

After a stunned pause Setebos was about to respond, but then the soft chime indicating a shift change sounded, and Baraqel and Arakiel rose up from their seats before Setebos could say anything else that would make the conversation feel awkward. Remaining in his seat, he watched his two peers go next door, to the beta-testing room, so he replied to no one in particular, “But it's beautiful.”

“Setebos.”

He looked up, seeing Samyaza himself standing before him. Awkwardly, he stood up and stepped back, giving his superior officer respectful personal space. “Sir!”

“You're on leave. Explore Heaven – expand your knowledge.”

“Sir. Yes, sir.” Reluctantly, he relinquished his station, walked through the various corridors of the Creation Battalion's far outpost along timeless space, and emerged outside. Knowing what his commanding officer expected from him, Setebos jumped up and then flew, his seldom-used wine-dark wings beating down in long, lazy strokes, only touching down when he was in the busy interior of Heaven.

There, on the exercise fields, he saw various members of the Sentry, doing martial drills both simple and acrobatic. Within the open porticos of the academies, he saw the Scholars do another type of martial drill, using deduction and debate. In the open-aired pavilions, the Musicians practiced their craft, their songs causing the ground around them to undulate, the air to shimmer. But since they were just practicing, the effects weren't permanent, unlike the Musicians who had worked with the previous Celestial Engineers, in crafting the raw firmament of Heaven into mountains and valleys, streams and trees, as they performed, conducted, and mixed the song of Creation composed by Central Himself.

In passing one particular pavilion, he overheard two angels, one of whom had been in an audience of the Court Chorus of the Heavenly Palace, and he slowed down and then stopped, as what they said disturbed him.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes – Lightbearer himself argued with Alpha Omega, about the new relationship between the Seraphim and Central.”

“Really? LIGHTBEARER?”

The other angel shrugged. “Well, he wasn't disrespectful. He still knew his station. But it was bizarre, seeing

him stand out from the rest, commanding attention. One would think he would keep his misgivings to himself.”

“Ah, who knows what’s in the mind of someone like Lightbearer? After all, we’re all different species from each other. Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised that we don’t have identical mindsets.”

“Still.” The other angel shook his head. “That someone as extraordinary and respected as Seraph-ranked Lightbearer would be bold enough to question Alpha Omega in front of Central Himself... I don’t know what to make of that.”

Setebos, frowning, walked away. *That’s enough expanding my knowledge for one day*, he thought, and he made his way to the Celestial Engineers’ barracks, to the safe confines of his sleeping quarter.

The next day, he returned to the containment room, even though Samyaza would likely send him away again. He noticed that Ariel and the female Sentry hadn’t returned yet from an Earth that was close to its fruition as the birthplace of humanity. At that stage, Earth was a pristine, bright marble of deep blue striated with cloud-white, under which the brown-green landmasses sat like daubs of paint on a glassy palette. Glancing down at one particular area, he spotted Ariel and the female Sentry, and he quickly looked away as they had embodied on the surface of the Earth, and his witnessing their initial nakedness felt too much like voyeurism.

Suddenly, a new sound reverberated throughout Heaven. “All personnel report back to stations. All personal report back to stations. This is a Code Crimson. I repeat – this is a Code Crimson. This is not a drill.”

It was the first and only time Setebos heard that announcement, but as soon as he heard it, he knew what it meant: a traitor was in the midst of Heaven. And considering what he had overheard the previous day as he was on walkabout, he knew who that traitor was.

The electrical shimmer of a portal appeared before the dais, and Setebos saw Ariel and the female Sentry return. They were fully clothed and back to their ethereal state as angelic hosts, although the Sentry’s hood was down, exposing her long, blue-black hair. Just before Ariel stepped away, Setebos heard her call out in a strong, warm alto, “Ariel.”

“Miranda?” Ariel said, as he turned back, looking at her.

Then, for all to see, she gave Ariel a quick kiss and rushed off, departing with the other Sentry guards, scrambling to wherever their new stations would be.

Ariel stared after her for a brief second, shook his head, and stepped away from the dais.

For there wasn’t much time for romance when one was fighting a coup d’état in Heaven.

#

Setebos hated being afraid. He hated that he knew what hate was. He hated being afraid of the creature who gave him that knowledge, the creature who showed everyone what betrayal was. As he looked across the tactic’s table to the empty spot where Ariel, who was now his superior officer, would be, Setebos hoped his face didn’t show to the others just how much he hated his job.

Of course, Lightbearer and the others who sided with him deserved punishment, and their uprising must be stamped out. But his job of assisting the senior tacticians who developed new methods of war – surrounding

and obliterating with tactical firepower, dropping payloads of explosives, dividing and conquering – all resulted in the violent hemorrhage of angelic ichor onto the firmament of Heaven. It only increased Setebos’ fear that he was just a tool of destruction and that the peace and security of Heaven would never return.

Part of his duties, sickening as it was, was also taking his prior experience of creating a beautiful world and creating its opposite, from the cancerous firmament that erupted when Lightbearer chose to overthrow Alpha Omega’s kingdom. After gathering the toxic substance before it spread, he and his teammates fabricated a dimension of darkness and pain, which Ariel and the other tacticians called Hell. It was a prison, to house the rebels at the end of the War, although Setebos couldn’t see how the War could possibly end. While smaller in number, Lightbearer and the third of the angels who sided with his ambitions were stronger than the other two-thirds of the heavenly host, for the third were like Lightbearer – powerful Seraphim, the holiest of the holy.

So how would the War end?

Lost in his thoughts, Setebos almost missed Ariel returning to their tactical tent. He heard Baraqel, whose monitor was next to his, murmur disapprovingly, “Probably looked for Miranda again. Tch.” Setebos frowned but said nothing.

Ariel resumed his position, seeing in real-time the tactics implemented in the overall strategy of winning the War. Unlike the other senior tacticians who grinned, confident in their inevitable triumph, Ariel’s dark brows knitted together as he was troubled by the destruction being played out on the tactic’s table. Then his eyes widened, and Ariel beckoned Setebos and others in the tactical tent to step outside.

In collective silence, they saw Alpha Omega’s massive flagship overhead, scraping Heaven clean with divine strafing, as it mowed down Lightbearer and the Fallen Third of Heaven. One end of Heaven opened up, like the door of a sleeping quarter, and the rebellious angels surged through in a sickening wave of flailing, screaming, broken bodies, the ground below becoming slick with ichor, the honey-colored blood of angels.

“Victory! Victory!” Setebos heard the jubilation through the comm in his ear and many of his peers in front of him. But all he could see was Ariel, dropping to his knees in front of the tent, and Setebos closed his eyes with pain.

#

Setebos hoped to remain with Ariel, to help rebuild Heaven after the War. Whole mountains were obliterated, and the areas where the rebels made camp and where they fled in their terror had to be sanctified and made clean. But most importantly, Heaven needed a full-spectrum survey and sweep, since a speck of the hellish toxic substance had breached the containment room which housed the new Earth.

While many of the recommissioned Celestial Engineers decontaminated the containment room, Alpha Omega Himself took direct control of the final phase of the mission, just as originally planned. By the end of the day, the new creatures called humans took shape and came into existence. But because of the existential threat of Lightbearer, Alpha Omega assigned select angels to serve as sentries in orbit around the Earth and assigned Raphael to teach the humans all they needed to know about who they were and what was their place

in their shining, new world.

As Raphael’s lengthy and detailed lesson to Adam, the male human, played across his view screen, Setebos wished that someone could also teach him what he needed to know about who he was -- and what was his place in a Heaven that had suffered hate and war. Ariel had returned to his position as a Celestial Engineer, but Setebos was still awaiting orders, and the waiting was driving him to distraction. Unable to concentrate, Setebos tapped off the view screen, which disappeared before him. He slid off his bunk and decided to take a walk.

Setebos walked, at first seeing no angel as they were in their quarters viewing Raphael and Adam. He walked out of his quarter, down the maze of corridors, and was about to pass the quarters of the senior Celestial Engineers when he saw ahead of him the lithe, athletic form of Miranda leaving Ariel’s quarter. Her usual pale face was flushed pink, and a stray tendril of her hair peeked out of a hastily hooded head. As the door slid closed behind her, she looked up, and Setebos stared into her violet eyes.

“Hey,” she said, with an uncertain smile.

He stared at her, speechless.

With a shrug she turned, and he saw her walk away. Unsure of what to do, he returned to his quarter and resumed watching the rest of Raphael’s instruction to Adam. But even he couldn’t sit through all of the Scholar archangel’s long-winded lecture, especially when Raphael began to summarize the War to an eagerly curious Adam. He tapped off the screen, as the last thing he needed was to be reminded of the details of the War. Hoping that enough time had passed for Miranda to return to the Sentry’s barracks, Setebos left his quarter. This time he saw no one, and he walked out of the fortified compound.

Traversing across war-churned ground, Setebos only stopped when he reached the one area untouched by the War: the verdant forest surrounding the mountain where, on top, the Heavenly Palace shone like a blinding star. Growing at the foot of that mountain were two special trees. One was massive and many-branching, with fruit of every kind imaginable. The other was its smaller partner, with fruit of the same shiny, round spheres. Both trees had served as templates for the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge in Eden, the home of the humans Adam and his wife Eve, but those material versions were only pale echoes of the real trees.

A narrow stream flowed from the top of the mountain to the foot, in a silvery waterfall that flowed between the two trees and disappeared once it flowed away from the plain. Setebos lay down underneath the Tree of Knowledge, and he looked up at the sky between its swaying branches. Because of the omnipresence of the heavenly light, the closest to nightfall Heaven had was twilight. It was twilight now. In timeless space, there were no stars, clouds, planets, and the shimmery play of galaxies across a sky the color of a darkening rainbow. That sky would be in the matter of spacetime, on a tiny, delicate planet third from its bright, yellow star. Twilight sky in Heaven was a matte, dark silver-to-gray, with the horizon ringed with a brighter silver fed by the heavenly light that was always there. Heaven’s twilight sky was the color of every angel’s skinsuit, and it was also the color of Setebos’ eyes.

Even though he knew the pat answer, Setebos still couldn’t understand it. “How could he fall?” he asked

the sky.

“Because he was free to do so.”

Setebos sat up, startled. Looking around, he saw Ariel approach him from above, and he scrambled to stand up. “Sir! I – wait, you flew?”

“Fastest way to reach you. You turned off your comm.”

“Oh!” Setebos reached behind his ear and tapped once. He heard the message, “Setebos, please report to the containment room immediately.” He frowned, confused. “Sir --”

“I’m not your superior officer anymore, Setebos. Just call me Ariel.”

“I’m sorry, s -- Ariel. I’ll go now --”

“Hold on.” Ariel looked up at the tree under which Setebos once lay underneath. “It’s funny that I found you right under the Tree of Knowledge. Prescient, actually.”

“Sorry?”

Ariel reached up and picked one of the red orbs. “How are you, Setebos? After the War, that is.”

Setebos frowned again and chose his words carefully. “I... I’m afraid, sir.” He couldn’t bring himself to call his former superior officer by his name, especially after encountering Miranda earlier that day.

“Of what?”

“Of... falling, sir.”

Ariel regarded the fruit. “Why?”

“Because Lightbearer was the best of us – the strongest and wisest of us. And if he of all the angelic host could fall, then someone as inexperienced and ordinary as me...” Setebos trailed off, unable to finish, and shrugged.

“You underestimate yourself, Setebos.” Ariel raised the fruit up, and it attached back to the branch of the tree as if it had never been touched. “Lightbearer, like all of us, is just a creature, a creature with free will. And with that free will, he had two choices. One was to remain as one of us, as an angel grateful for his existence, in service to his Creator. The other was to abandon us, as a creature jealous of divine power because he believes he has been disrespected by his Creator.”

Setebos stared at Ariel, agog. “Disrespected? How?”

“Lightbearer sees himself equal to Alpha Omega – Central’s Son. He hates that he isn’t.”

“But – that’s insane!”

“Yes.” Ariel shrugged. “Nevertheless, that’s the risk of free will. Lightbearer’s will wouldn’t be free if there was only one choice. So to prove that he truly loved his Creator, he had to choose not to hate. We all know what he chose.”

“That’s so complicated, sir.”

“Free will always complicates everything. Speaking of which,” Ariel paused and turned on his comm. He declared, “I’ve found Setebos. We’re on our way in.” He tapped his comm off. “Setebos, prepare yourself.”

“What? Why? What happened?”

Ariel shook his head. “The humans fell.” He leapt up, gaining air.

“WHAT.” Setebos followed after him. “How? WHY?”

“Lightbearer. Disguised himself as a low-rank angel and slipped past the sentries. Then he possessed a snake --”

“WHAT. He entered into a beast? LIGHTBEARER?” Even a fallen Seraph was still a Seraph, and it shocked Setebos that someone of Lightbearer’s powers would degrade himself to possess a snake.

“Clever tactic.” Ariel gritted his teeth. “Clever tactic of deception. He even disabled our surveillance capabilities, so this intel comes straight from Central. In his beastly guise, Lightbearer awed the human female. Of course, no beast can hold intelligent conversation and persuasion, so when she faced this one, she was fascinated. He led her to the Tree of Knowledge--”

“But – she knows!” Setebos interrupted. “She knows about the edict, like Adam knows.”

Ariel sighed. “As Lightbearer has shown us, just because we creatures know what good and evil is doesn’t automatically mean we will do good. We must choose to do good. But there’s risk in that too. After all, Lightbearer convinced himself that a life of service was evil and overthrowing Heaven was good – at least, to him.”

“But the woman – Eve – doesn’t have that ambition! What possible reason could she have to disobey her Creator?”

Ariel glanced at Setebos. “You’ve never engaged in an intimate companionship, have you.”

Setebos stammered, “I – sir--”

“Because I have. As you’ve likely witnessed.” Ariel smirked, seeing the junior angel’s discomfort. “Not many have, so my answer may not make sense to you. However, here it is: Eve underestimated herself as a companion to Adam. Lightbearer fed her doubt that she was wise enough, capable enough, for Adam, and that doubt drove her to see the Tree of Knowledge as her solution.”

“But – that’s so stupid.”

Ariel gave a short bark of laughter.

“I mean, she could’ve just asked Alpha Omega, even Raphael --”

“It’s love, Setebos. Eve’s love for Adam clouded her judgment, and Lightbearer took advantage of that.”

Setebos frowned. “I still don’t understand.”

Ariel shrugged.

“And Adam?”

“Same thing. He doubted himself, that he could help her in her present condition. He even convinced himself that if he remained unfallen, then he would lose Eve forever because of their existential difference. So he chose to fall with her.”

Setebos stared at Ariel. “SERIOUSLY?”

“As I said, free will always complicates everything. Especially when love is involved.” Ariel nodded to an area below them. “We’re here.”

They touched down before the Creation Battalion’s far outpost. As they walked through the various corridors and newly-placed security protocols toward the containment room, Setebos asked, “Sir, why am I to report to the containment room?”

Ariel spoke briskly, “With Lightbearer’s infiltration of the Earth, Alpha Omega created a new platoon, in a joint venture between the Celestial Engineers and the Sentry. Besides the Archangels Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, and Uriel overseeing as the sentries from above, and cherubim barring the gates of Eden, the new platoon will serve as sentinels, assigned to the Earth’s surface, watching for signs of enemy activity from Lightbearer and his fellow fallen Seraphim among the human population. You’ve been assigned to this new unit, the Watchers.”

“How many?”

“Ten pulled from the Sentry, eleven pulled from the Celestial Engineers.”

Setebos frowned. “Eleven from the Celestial Engineers? Why the odd number, sir?”

“The eleventh is your superior officer. Samyaza.”

“Samyaza? But isn’t he still the CO of the Celestial Engineers?”

“Not anymore. And his new assignment is perfect, since he has overseen the operations of the spacetime creation from this side and is the most experienced of the Celestial Engineers. The field Watchers will pass along intelligence to Samyaza, who will report to the Archangels.”

Setebos, still frowning, started to speak.

“I know,” Ariel interrupted. “We Celestial Engineers aren’t front-line. But since we know what the original operative conditions of the created Earth are, then Celestial Engineers would be able to spot Lightbearer’s anomalies better than members of the Sentry.”

“I see. And they are waiting in the containment room?” asked Setebos.

“Yes. You missed the briefing, but you got the gist from me.”

Setebos nodded. “Will you be serving Earthside, too, sir?”

“No.” Ariel’s face became oddly tense. “I’ve been field-promoted as the new CO of the Celestial Engineers.” He stepped into the containment room, with Setebos, looking stunned, following behind.

Standing in attention around the spacetime containment field were the twenty members of the newly commissioned Watcher unit. Among the chosen Celestial Engineers, Setebos noticed his former colleagues Arakiel and Baraqel. He couldn’t help but frown a little at that. The Sentry members stood out from the engineers, as they wore another layer of gear: a slightly metallic armor, which slowed and diffused blunt-force trauma and covered the head, leaving an oval opening that exposed the face. As Ariel conferred with Samyaza, Setebos saw the now-familiar form of one of the Sentry members standing apart from everyone else and understood Ariel’s tense body language.

Miranda stood at attention, her eyes looking forward and impassive. Setebos wondered what she was

thinking at that moment.

“Setebos,” Samyaza said.

At his name, Setebos snapped at attention. “Sir!”

“We’ve already divided into teams of two – you are with Miranda and will patrol here.” Samyaza pointed to an area of a continent south of the equator, on the other side of the planet from Eden. He then addressed everyone in the unit. “Okay, then. Remember -- stealth only. Do not engage the locals. Survey your area and report your observations to me every twenty exaticks. Only if Lightbearer or his members endanger the locals, then engage, but limit the sphere of combat. We’ll rendezvous in FOB Eden after one yottaCalend.”

“Yes, sir!” the Watchers responded.

“And Setebos?”

“Sir?”

Samyaza grinned, his eyes glittery. “Keep your comm on.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Watchers divided into their two-man teams, readying for quantum portal transfer into spacetime. As Setebos walked over to Miranda, he suddenly saw a change in Miranda’s violet eyes, as she looked over at Ariel. After a brief internal struggle, she pushed down the hood of her gear, revealing her long, blue-black hair.

“Ari,” she said.

Everyone in the room pretended not to watch, as Ariel joined Miranda, facing her. She leaned in close, whispering something to him, and Ariel nodded, his reply inaudible. Smoothing her hair, he kissed softly her forehead, her lips. Then he straightened up. As he stepped away from the center of the room, Miranda tucked in her hair and pulled on her hood. She looked at Setebos.

“Ready?” she asked.

Still feeling unprepared and trying not to show his embarrassment in witnessing yet another intimate display of affection between his superior officer and his now-teammate, Setebos nodded. “Ready.”