

10 ECCE PARENTES

Walking on water was an angel. He was Uriel, the Archangel of Wisdom, one of Earth’s overseers and a liaison between Heaven and Earth. He was tall, imposing, and two ranks above Setebos in the Watcher chain of command.

Thanks to having been Miranda’s protégé once upon a time, Cora knew who Uriel was, and none of those things she gave a damn. From the shoreline of the inner cave, she stood her ground. “Did you come here,” she said, “just to say that?”

“Cora --” Setebos began, anxiously.

“No,” Uriel said, “although I was surprised by your – er – present condition, young woman. Perhaps I spoke out of turn.”

“PERHAPS?”

“Cora, please --”

“Setebos,” Uriel said.

“Sir?”

The archangel shook his head. “I think we’re beyond formalities now, Setebos. I came here to bring a message to you, a fallen Watcher who cared enough about good and evil to put yourself in solitary. However, I see that you still have that Celestial Engineer temptation to ‘fix’ humans and thus create unnecessary complications for yourself --” Uriel nodded towards Cora, “-- and others.”

Cora clenched her jaw but remained silent.

“I failed,” Setebos said. “That’s why you’re here, right? Despite my precautions, I meddled with the affairs of humans again...” He trailed off. “You came to tell me that the Reboot will happen.”

“Yes,” Uriel confirmed. “However, the Reboot isn’t because of you. As this young woman can attest, Earth has become too corrupted to remain as is. It needs a clean slate to restart anew.”

“But what about her and --”

“I need to walk,” Cora announced, angry that they were talking about her in the third person, as if she weren’t there. She turned and began stalking away, her still-wet dress and footsteps leaving a damp trail behind her.

“Cora, wait --” Setebos started after her.

Uriel, having reached the shoreline, placed a restraining hand on Setebos’ shoulder. He observed the hunched form of a resolute, angry Cora retreating further into the caverns. “Leave her be, Setebos,” he said. “You’ve done enough.”

“Yes, sir.” Setebos’ shoulders dropped. “Sorry, sir.”

Uriel crossed his arms, seeing how diminished this former Watcher had become.

“I hadn’t meant to induce parthenogenesis, sir.”

“Of course you hadn’t,” Uriel said, “yet you did. You even masculinized the embryo so that it’s male, not female, but at least you didn’t artificially produce a nephil. For your sake, it’s fortunate that he’s human. That may mitigate your fate post-Reboot because of that.”

“But -- what about Cora, sir? And the child? What will happen to them in the Reboot?”

“You were once a Celestial Engineer, Setebos. You know the answer to that.”

Setebos swallowed hard, trying not to panic, but was silent.

“Does the woman --”

“Her name is Cora. Sir.”

Uriel gave Setebos an assessing look. “Our records say Sycorax.”

“She prefers Cora.”

Uriel stifled an impatient sigh. “Cora knows what the Reboot is, yes?”

“Yes,” Setebos admitted. “Miranda would have told her.”

“Yet she wanted you to remove your energy signature that effectively gave her immortality – a boon that many humans would give and do anything to have?”

“Yes.”

“Hmmm.” The archangel considered the information and made a decision. “Brave woman.”

“Yes, she is, sir.”

“Well, Setebos, I have given the message, that Central has decided to execute the Reboot. Not immediately, as Central is still conducting some human assessments.”

“To see who is worthy,” Setebos said, remembering a containment room debriefing many lifetimes ago.

“As you say. Considering the circumstances, Setebos, your self-exile can come to an end since the destiny of this planet is settled.”

“But... where would I go, sir?”

“You remember this world from afar – when it came to fruition in the containment room.”

“Yes, sir.” Setebos smiled sadly. “It was beautiful.”

“It still is – in a way. Even now, from space, Earth has a melancholy beauty.” He surveyed the limited confines of the cave. “As your superior officer, I grant you the liberty to see Earth in that way again.”

“What are you saying, sir?”

“You’re not a cave animal, Setebos,” Uriel said. “Go outside Earth’s atmosphere, but not beyond the confines of Earth’s moon. One last time before the Reboot, when Central decides what the fate of you and the other fallen Watchers will be. See it as visiting an old friend.”

Setebos frowned again. “I don’t mean to be ungrateful, sir, but...”

“Yes?”

“I can’t just leave Cora alone, sir.”

“Ah. Simple solution – bring her with you.”

“WHAT?” Setebos stared at the archangel. “But she’s human and – and pregnant!”

“She has your energy signature within her, Setebos. As long as she’s with you, then you can expand an energy shield around her with ease. Also, I grant you and Cora access to the lunar field base, which can accommodate the embodied limitations of a human.”

Setebos still stared, stunned. “Sir,” he began, “I appreciate all of this, but --”

“Why am I being so nice?”

“Sir?”

Uriel shrugged. “Sometimes we creatures need a reminder of who we were before fallenness divided us. Besides,” he continued, “Cora has only seen Earth as a conflicted, fallen work. Considering what she has been through, perhaps she needs that reminder as well.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Uriel gave an acknowledging nod. “As I’ve said, we’re beyond formalities now. But I must go.” A portal opened behind him. “However, before I leave --” he made a small hand gesture and said, “Goodbye, Setebos.”

Setebos, his clothes and body now completely dry, watched the archangel turn around and step through. “Goodbye... Uriel.”

He glanced at his hands. They radiated with the soft, golden glow of Uriel’s energy signature. But unlike the slamming of energy felt from nephil sources, or from Cora when she sent uncontrollably, Uriel’s felt like an old tree or the sun: unnoticeable at first but then increasing with measured intensity until fully powered. Setebos didn’t even know Uriel had recharged him until he saw his hands.

“We’re beyond formalities now,” Uriel had said.

Setebos realized, that meant that they were friends.

He rubbed the tears that suddenly sprang from his eyes. *No*, he thought. *I don’t have time for that*. He looked towards the inner caverns, seeing the still damp trail of Cora’s dress and footsteps. *Cora?*, he sent, following her trail.

Silence.

Cora?

She still didn’t reply.

Are you okay?

As if straining through a barrier, Setebos heard her sending – *Nooo...*

Oh God, Setebos replied, feeling Cora’s sickening wave of nausea crashing over her. He jumped, taking flight, and found her just short of the center cavern, hunched over against a tunnel wall, retching with dry heaves. Because pregnancy wasn’t an illness, Cora’s healing factor did nothing to ease her morning sickness. Crouching next to her, he placed his left hand on her back, the right on her lower abdomen. Between adjusting Cora’s

hormone levels and providing specific nutrients, Setebos could feel Cora’s body relax as she collapsed against him. Since she was still damp from the water’s shoreline, he gave a small push with his left hand, and she became dry.

Cora stared at him and then closed her eyes, exhausted.

With his right hand, he assessed the condition of Cora and the developing embryo, finding a high concentration of the original energy ball engulfing Cora’s womb and accelerating the gestation. Even now, Cora’s hours’ old pregnancy was equivalent to being eight weeks’ pregnant. If nothing was done, the child would come to term in only twenty hours. *Too fast!*, Setebos thought, alarmed. Taking care not to touch the embryo, he stripped layers of the energy ball from Cora’s womb, distributing the energy particles throughout her body’s cells, although he couldn’t remove them from her body. Monitoring Cora’s progress, Setebos managed to slow the gestation enough so that the child would be ready for birth in two months.

Cora was asleep.

Gently, Setebos lifted her up from the ground and carried her to the center cavern, to her little cot. He set her down, adjusted her pillow and blanket, and sat down on the ground, next to her. Cora’s face was flushed, her hair a disheveled mess. He stared at her, a woman he had never wanted into his life, a woman he had wanted for her to leave so that he could have his peace again.

He rested his forehead on the edge of Cora’s cot and closed his eyes. *Five more minutes*, he thought.

Hours later, when Setebos awoke, the cot was empty. He stood up, alarmed. *Cora?*, he sent.

Outside, she replied.

In the darkening twilight, Setebos found Cora standing on the edge of a promontory, facing the direction of a faraway continent. Even far away, both Setebos and Cora could see a strange brightening of the horizon from that continent’s direction, a sign of terrible human activity that grew with every passing day.

Without turning around, Cora said, “I’m a hundred and fifty years old. Everyone who knew me as a little girl, as a young woman, are dead. Everyone who could tell me about my family before I was born are dead. I’m not suicidal, Setebos – but I came here because I was tired of living.”

Setebos joined her at the promontory. He stood next to her but remained silent.

“The last human being I saw before I came here was a little boy, when he walked down a street to blow himself up.”

Setebos inhaled sharply but stayed silent, listening.

“How irresponsible, how WRONG would it be, to bring a new life into a world where little boys blow themselves up? Into a world that was dying anyway?” She paused. “This world will die by everyone killing each other or by decree from a cold, higher power, so what is the point in me wanting to live?” She looked down, at a belly that was already starting to soften. “And yet I want to be alive to see this boy grow up. I want this boy to be happy.” She turned to Setebos, angry. “I hate you for making me want to hope. I HATE YOU.”

“I’m sorry, Cora.”

“SHIT.” She started to cry.

“Please believe me – I didn’t expect this to happen. It’s all just --” Setebos threw his hands up in frustration.
“I don’t know what to say, Cora.”

Cora shook her head and angrily wiped away her tears with the palms of her hands. She grudgingly asked,
“Well, what did that angel have to say?”

He looked at her. “This.” Then he sent everything he and Uriel said.

Cora stared at him. Then her shoulders began to tremble. But instead of crying, she burst out laughing.

“That was not the response I was expecting,” he said, bemused.

“Uriel surprised me.” She shook her head. “Many years ago, while explaining your people to me, your former partner once called Uriel an ‘arrogant asshole.’”

“Ah, that.” Setebos had to smile too. “Yeah, that’s Miranda for you.”

“You and Miranda, both.” She looked at her belly again and frowned. “I have a question.”

“Yes?”

“Back then – when I was a child – why did you cure me? I was going to die anyway, so maybe it was my time to go. So why?”

Setebos gave a long exhale. “Because it seemed wrong, for a child that young to die that way. To die that way with despair in her heart — I just... couldn’t.”

“You still can’t.”

“You’re right. I still can’t.” He sighed. “But since I can’t extend the length of your life, as I’m certain the Reboot will finally make you mortal, I’d like to make what life you have remaining be – be --”

“Magical?” She smirked. “Like when Ariel showed Miranda Earth when it was new?”

“Miranda told you that – of course she did.” Setebos answered his own question.

Cora hugged herself. She looked at the darkening sky above her head and the cold field of stars emerging from the dusky gloom. “It’s hard to imagine, seeing Earth from out there.” She turned to Setebos. “Let’s go.”

Taken aback, Setebos asked, “What? When?”

“Now.”

“But don’t you need to eat or sleep for the night --”

“Setebos.”

Dark eyes met gray eyes.

“Okay. Well, since we’re flying a long distance, I’ll have to hold you here and you’ll have to hold on to me here --”

“I’ve flown with Miranda before. I know.”

“Of course.”

“So why are you stalling?”

He looked down. “I don’t want to hurt you, Cora.”

Cora moved close to Setebos so that, even looking down, Setebos’ eyes met hers. “You won’t.” She wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Yes, ma’am.” Setebos scooped her up, adjusting his arms for a secure hold. His wine-dark wings materialized, unfolded, and reached high in the sky. With a sharp intake of breath, he jumped up.

“Ah!” Cora gasped as they at first dropped down from the cliff and then, with strong, long wing beats, Setebos gained altitude.

You okay?, Setebos asked.

Yeab, but I will NEVER get used to that.

Heh.

Shut up.

They flew in a wide spiral, each arc of the spiral climbing higher into the atmosphere. Even though the wind was cold and deafening, Cora kept her eyes wide open, taking everything in. For the first time in her life, she saw the surface of the Earth from horizon to horizon, the dark ocean as far as she could see, with smudges of golden light on the right-side horizon. With each spiraling arc, she saw the curve of the Earth. As soon as her breathing started to become labored due to the thin atmosphere, she felt a soft warmth from Setebos’ chest expand and then envelope both of them in an invisible, life-supporting capsule.

“Here we go,” Setebos said.

They increased speed and flew straight up, the field of stars becoming larger in Cora’s field of vision. Achieving orbital velocity, they broke free of Earth’s atmosphere, and Setebos slowed, allowing Earth’s gravity to tug on them. Since they were on the night side of the planet, Setebos flew towards the night/day divide, and they broke through on the other side of the planet, over a surface of mottled green-brown-red landmasses, the deepest of blue seas, and white clouds dotting the clear sky that shone bright in the sun. Cora looked down, the planet moving underneath them as they made their orbit. They were so far up that she saw no city, no state, no obvious sign of human habitation. Then she peered above the curve of the Earth, seeing the still, inky darkness of outer space and just how much larger this dark space was in contrast to the planet spinning below them, oblivious to its fragile existence.

“It’s beautiful, Setebos,” she said, her eyes wide.

“Yes,” he agreed, “it still is.” He noticed Cora leaning outward as much as possible, trying to have a clearer line of sight. “While we’re in orbit, you can let go of me and get a better view.”

“What?”

“With the energy shield around us, we’re essentially in a small spaceship. Go ahead. You can touch the wall of the shield if you reach out.”

Cora unhooked one of her hands, stretched out her arm before her, and felt a soft yet solid barrier, even though all she saw all around her was the darkness of space and the Earth below, as if she were encased in glass. “Huh.” She unhooked her other hand and, with Setebos loosening his grip on her legs and back, she found

herself floating. “Whoa!”

“Welcome to outer space,” Setebos said, flexing his wrists. Letting momentum do its work, with minor adjustment of trajectory with his wings, he relaxed as well, becoming a passive passenger as they orbited around the Earth.

Cora floated, going up, over, and around Setebos left wing. When she emerged in front again, she turned to Setebos, her face full of joy. “This is amazing!”

“Ah,” he said, a little stunned by Cora’s exuberance, wondering if perhaps her pregnancy was enhancing her mood. He saw her settle into an invisible curve of the shield, lying on her side, her knees drawn close to her body, and her head cradled in one arm as she watched the Earth below them. Her hair was a wild halo of dark brown tendrils as they floated outward from her head. She looked young and small and fragile, and he felt that deep ache in his heart that he had only felt for one other person in his entire life. As they orbited, Setebos found himself watching Cora see the Earth more than he himself watching the Earth, even when they passed by the light spectacle of the aurora borealis. After a few hours in low Earth orbit, he saw her stifle a yawn.

“Sleepy?” he asked.

“A little.”

“Do you want to go back? Stay here a little more? Or go to the Moon?”

“How long to the Moon?”

“Longer than going from Earth’s surface to here. You could nap on the way, if you like.”

“Like this?”

“Uh, no. We’ll be going pretty fast, so the shield will distort, to be more streamlined.”

“Oh. Okay.” Cora sat up, stretching her arms, legs, and back. Then she pushed off and floated back to Setebos, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Moon, then.”

Setebos nodded, securing his hold on Cora, and achieved escape velocity, adjusting their trajectory for trans-lunar. Even with Setebos’ enhanced power, staying embodied lengthened an otherwise speedy journey, so Cora had time enough to nap. Soon into the trip, Cora’s arms dropped away from Setebos’ neck, and he adjusted them so that they were secured on her lap. In her sleep, she curled so close to his chest that he could lower his chin and softly kiss the top of Cora’s head.

But he didn’t.

With a few hours of flight ahead of him, Setebos had time to think.

The Reboot was going to happen. There was nothing that he nor the other fallen Watchers could do to stop it. There was nothing that Cora nor the other fallen humans could do to stop it. But Uriel said that he, as the only Watcher to forsake the temptation of becoming a GodKing or siring nephil children, might have the chance to escape the worst of the Reboot, which was the first time he had ever heard was a possibility. Was this liberty away from Earth a test? He trusted Uriel, that the archangel was a friend, but he was still also his superior officer -- right?

As for Cora, yes she was born post-Eden, but her entire life was one of hardship, of being more the victim and horrified witness of fallen humanity than the perpetrator. It was true that she was now carrying a child that was the result his action, but that was his error, not hers, no intercourse happened, and the child was human, not nephil. If Central was conducting pre-Reboot assessments of human worthiness, then surely Cora would pass those assessments – right?

Setebos felt the burden of his present and future actions weigh on him. *I need to be careful*, he thought. *I need to think everything through --*

In her sleep, Cora rested one of her hands against his chest, where his heart was.

He felt his heart beating hard and fast.

In Setebos’ arms, Cora awoke. She looked out, seeing the luminescent gray of the Moon, looming larger in her line of sight as they approached. She leaned forward, silent, as they did one lunar orbit. She saw the cratered far side of the Moon, and when they returned to the Earth-facing side, she saw dark, smooth plains, surrounded by white-gray craters. As they descended on the edge of one of the smooth plains, Cora stared, silenced by the powdery gray solitude of the lunar landscape, which edged the ever-present cold darkness of space.

Then Cora looked up and back to where they came. Out of the inky blackness of space, over the stark gray line of the Moon, rose the crescent outline of Earth. She could see, in that curved bow, the ocean, the land, and wisps of clouds that marbled the surface of the Earth. Her entire world and existence were contained in something so tiny. *Home*, she thought.

Setebos touched down, feet first, before the entrance of a structure built into the lunar bedrock with mounded, packed regolith as its walls and roof. Without pause he walked in, the entry door sliding open and then sliding shut behind them once he brought Cora across the threshold. Once inside a corridor of uniformly smooth walls, he set Cora down gently, and the energy shield that was their little life-support bubble all the way from Earth collapsed back into Setebos.

Suddenly lightheaded, Cora staggered a bit, and she steadied herself against the wall, feeling the pull of artificial Earth gravity.

“Cora --” Setebos began, reaching for her.

She held up a hand. “I’m fine. Just hungry.” She shook her head and straightened up. “So where are those ‘accommodations to human limitations’ that Uriel mentioned?”

With some exploration, they found that the base was small – an outpost more than anything else. One story high with a basement level, the main floor was a public space, with a workspace, a galley, bathroom, and a communal seating area on a half-mezzanine level with three solar tubes as sky lights. The basement level was a private space, with sleeping quarters.

Back on the main level, as Cora sat down before a counter in the galley area, Setebos said, “This whole base

is an accommodation to human limitations.” Using the food replicator for ingredients, he produced a simple meal of beans and rice and set the bowl and spoon before Cora. “After all, you’ve seen how I live – do I need most of these things?”

“So this base – on the MOON – is meant for humans?”

“Not necessarily. This whole thing is basically ethereal, which means it can be embodied to fit whatever is needed. Since you were coming with me, then the base would fit human needs. If it were just me, it would be just one room with a workspace and sleeping quarters. Speaking of ethereal --” Setebos switched over from embodied to ethereal. “I need to conserve that energy boost from Uriel, especially for the return trip to Earth.”

“Hmmm...” Cora put a spoonful of beans and rice in her mouth and chewed, watching Setebos’ silvery, glowing form. “Do your people eat food?” she asked.

“What?”

“I just realized that I never saw Miranda eat, and I never see you eat. You all look like human beings, but the way you refuel yourselves reminds me of plants and mushrooms.”

“Well – we can. But it’s more efficient to tap into direct energy sources instead of converting physical food calories into usable power. Actually, when I wasn’t fallen, the food conversion would be effortless, but in my compromised state, just converting matter into energy uses a little bit of energy on my part. I prefer not to waste energy resources like that, so --”

“—so no eating,” Cora finished.

“Not usually.”

“Shame,” she said. “This meal you made me is tasty, but it’s a huge portion. I would’ve shared it with you.”

“Thanks. But you’ll need that huge portion.”

“Why?” Cora raised another spoonful to her mouth.

“Because your pregnancy is advancing extremely fast. You’ll be eating and sleeping a lot.”

“How fast?”

“Two months.”

She set the spoon down. “Seriously?”

“Yes.” And then Setebos sent, as the answer to what Cora was about to ask.

She regarded the information in silence and then declared, “I guess two months is better than giving birth tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry.”

She shook her head and then resumed eating. Afterwards, true to Setebos’ prediction, Cora was sleepy again. “I’ll be downstairs – napping,” she said, standing up from her seat.

“Do you need my help?” Setebos asked.

She gave an irritated grunt. “I’m pregnant, Setebos – not disabled.” She paused. “How long will we stay here?”

“I was thinking a day or two.”

Cora thought of the delicate crescent of Earth rising above the surface of the Moon. “Good,” she said and made her way to the basement level quarters without a further word.

Setebos sighed and then headed toward the main entrance. Although ethereal, he couldn’t phase through the base’s wall and outer shell, since the material was unfallen and celestial, effectively blocking Setebos’ fallen nature. Outside, he jumped up, soft-landed on the domed roof of the base, and sat down. From his perch, he had clear line of sight, seeing the Moon’s spare beauty. He remembered the Moon as seen in the containment room -- a tiny, pale dot orbiting a slightly bigger blue marble. Now he saw the Earth as a waning crescent, most of the planet in the Moon’s shadow. Setebos suddenly realized that the only time he was off-planet was in that containment room, preparing to leave as a new member of the Watcher corps, his new partner Miranda by his side.

He shook his head, remembering when he last saw Miranda, and pondered over the cosmic absurdity of technically fathering a child – while celibate -- with a woman who saw Miranda as a friend and mentor. Time and distance had cooled his passion for Miranda, but Cora was another matter. “Free will always complicates everything. Especially when love is involved.” Back then, Setebos didn’t understand what Ariel meant when he had said those words to him.

He did now, here at the end of the world.

What Setebos missed about his prior life before his fall was feeling connected, at that deep, existential root, with everyone else. Even with personality clashes and quirks with others in the angelic host, even with his own concerns and anxieties as a new Celestial Engineer, he always knew that he belonged, that he had support. He always knew what to do. Fallen, he was cut off, isolated and ignorant in his own person, and while humans fell so early in their existence that they adapted to take that alienation as natural and normal, angels such as he did not have that luxury. Even Lightbearer, the first of his people to fall of his own volition, felt the keen pain of being cut off – and Lightbearer had been one of the highest of the heavenly host.

Setebos frowned, disturbed by the direction his thoughts were going. *I am not Lightbearer!* He shook his head again, like a dog trying to shake away pesky insects, to break free from his dark thoughts. He looked down, admiring the elegant design that went into this little bit of Celestial Engineering on the Moon, and wondered who oversaw its creation and what its true purpose was since it could accommodate human inhabitants with ease.

Of course, unless the information was revealed to him, just like a damn human, he would never know, which brought him right back to his dark thoughts.

ARGH. He stood up and jumped down. *Need to walk this off,* he thought.

He had been on the far side of the Moon for several hours when he heard the cry of pain.

What? For a moment he was confused, surveying the cratered gray moonscape. Then he realized the cry was in his head, and it was Cora’s voice. Flying fast to the near side, he arrived at the base, to see Cora standing

outside of the entrance, staring up.

Coral, he sent, at first alarmed that she was in the open, exposed, but then saw that the base, in sensing her human vulnerability, had created and extended its energy shield, extending a life-supporting bubble from the interior outward, keeping Cora safe. He landed before her, but she seemed not to see him, as she stood frozen, staring up. He turned to see what she was looking at and felt as if someone punched him in the gut.

The crescent Earth, marbled just a few hours ago, was a solid, opaque blue.

Oh God, he thought. Turning back to Cora, he switched from ethereal to material, placed his hands on her shoulders, and gently turned her back towards the entry way. She didn't protest as he led her towards the mezzanine level and set her down in the soft couches of the communal seating area. Then he went to the galley, made a cup of tea, and brought it to her. Her face stoic and still, Cora accepted the cup in silence and robotically took a sip.

“Oh,” she whispered. She looked at the warm, amber liquid in the cup, and its surface was disturbed as her tears started splashing into it. “It's hazel herb tea.” She looked up, seeing Setebos sitting cross-legged before her. “How...?”

“How did I know?” he replied. “Your home was in a region assigned to Miranda and me by our commanding officer before he went insane. Without further orders, we made it our permanent duty station hundreds of years ago, responsible for our region's security. So hazel herb flowers and belajoun trees, the plants unique to your home – I know them, Cora... because your home was my home, too.”

“Home,” she echoed. She closed her eyes and took a long, memory-filled draught. After she emptied the cup, she opened her eyes. “I thought we'd have more time. Which I know sounds ridiculous because the Reboot was imminent, yet Uriel let us leave, so I thought...” She paused but then forced herself to continue, gripping her cup in both hands. “I was hoping I'd be there when it happened so that... that the pregnancy could end early... so that the baby wouldn't have to suffer too much --” She suddenly stopped, choking on her words. “Oh Gods, I sound like a monster.”

“No.” Setebos took her empty cup and set it down. “You sound like a human.”

Empty-handed, Cora's hands curled into tight fists. “Why did Uriel let us leave? I don't understand.”

“Me neither,” Setebos said. “It's almost as if Uriel is sparing us from the Reboot. But he would never disobey orders of that magnitude. And you and I both know that this base, as good as its amenities are, can't house us permanently. Something is going on. But I don't know what it is, and I can't even begin to speculate what's underlying all of this.”

“So what do we do?” She sounded small and young and fragile.

Setebos reached out, uncurled her fists, and held her small hands in his. “We wait.”

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One day turned to one week. One week turned to one month. One month turned to two. Every day, for those two months, Cora and Setebos expected someone from the angelic host to appear, to correct the error

of two fallen creatures escaping the Reboot. Yet another day arrived, as Cora and Setebos negotiated the twin problems of the boredom of being stuck in a small space and the panic of dealing with an accelerated, complicated pregnancy. Then Cora’s due date arrived, and Setebos found himself participating in the birth of a child unique in all of humanity.

“Setebos!” Cora cried out as crashing waves of contractions woke her and her water broke. She stared, wide-eyed, as Setebos’ ethereal form phased by her bedside and then quickly became embodied as he placed one hand under her head and another on her lower belly, on the pubic area. “Wha --” she panted as she felt her undergarment dissolve away.

“Increasing your brain’s endorphins for pain and your perineum’s pliability for delivery,” Setebos crisply replied. “This baby’s birth will be fast, but I’ll make damn sure it won’t harm you. Move to the foot of the bed.”

With Setebos’ assistance, Cora scooted forward. Grabbing pillows and placing them behind Cora, Setebos positioned Cora in a semi-upright position and then raised and splayed her bent legs on either side of her. With a twitch of fingers, warm towels appeared on a nearby table. He grabbed one and reached underneath Cora, already seeing the baby’s dark head crowning.

Even with increased endorphins coursing through her, Cora cried out in pain.

“Breathe-breathe-PUSH!” Setebos called out. “Breathe-breathe-PUSH! Breathe-breathe-PUUUSH!”

“Aaaahhhh!” Cora screamed at the third strong push.

Setebos caught the child, wrapping the newly-born and crying boy in the towel. With the expertise of a former Celestial Engineer trained in healing, he assessed the child as perfectly healthy and normal, with none of the massive energy contamination of his mother, who had leaned back against the mountain of pillows. He placed the child on Cora’s chest, wondering what part of this boy was him, when the child opened his eyes – and they were silvery gray, just like his.

Oh God, Setebos thought. He again felt like someone had punched him, but this time it was in his heart. He quickly cleaned off the child and then replaced and rewrapped the baby with a new, clean towel.

Cora, who had lain back, exhausted, brought the baby to her breast.

He shook his head. *Finish up*. As Cora nursed the baby, Setebos completed the remaining post-birth tasks of cutting the cord, delivering and disposing the placenta, cleaning Cora, switching out the blood-soiled towels and sheets with fresh ones, and cleaning himself. Afterwards, he pulled up a chair next to Cora’s bedside. He stared as the boy suckled – a creature so tiny and helpless and yet so powerful in bringing Setebos to his knees.

She looked up at Setebos, her face glorious even though she was a mess, post-birth. “His name is Caliban,” she said softly. “He was the first Lord of Ilaeon – the father of my people.” She started to cry. “Is that good?”

“That’s good.” Cora didn’t need to send, as Setebos felt her emotions, the grief over the loss of her home and people, the joy that she held the next generation. He himself felt a combination of hysterical giddiness and absolute fear, as he finally understood his fellow Watchers who had sired children, in their obsession to remake the world so that their children could thrive. “Cora,” he began, but he saw Cora’s eyes close, even as she softly

smoothed the tiny wisps of Caliban’s newborn hair.

Exhausted, she was going to sleep.

Setebos let her be. He closed his own eyes, as he let realization wash over him. For he loved this child -- this strange, squirmy primate creature with the eyes of an angel, born on the Moon. And, as he saw Cora cradle little Caliban in her sleep, he loved this child’s mother, as well. There was nothing he could do with that knowledge, and he felt worn. *Five minutes*, he thought, and he drifted off.

After a few hours, Cora woke up first. She glanced down, seeing the baby sleeping, and glanced to the side, seeing Setebos dozing where he sat. In that peaceful moment, she felt happy. She savored it, knowing it wouldn’t last.

Careful not to disturb the baby, she did a quick check of herself, not surprised that she had mostly recovered from the violent bodily exertions of childbirth. Carrying the baby, she slid off the bed, grabbing the smallest of the clean sheets, and made her way to the galley kitchen. There, with its deep sink, she gave the baby a warm bath, dried him, and swaddled him in the sheet. Returned to the sleeping quarters, she set the still-sleeping baby in a cushioned box that she placed in the middle of her bed. Gathering a change of clothes, she returned to the main floor and took a long shower with water so hot that it stung.

She tried hard not to think of the future.

Clean, dried off, and clothed, Cora went to the galley again, this time to make herself another cup of weak hazel herb tea. She stopped short, as if hitting a wall.

“Hello, Cora,” Uriel said, standing in the middle of the galley and offering her a cup of tea. “I believe you’ll need this.”

Steeling herself, Cora nodded and accepted the offered cup. “Thank you.” Keeping her hands from shaking, she took a sip and then asked, “Was it a mistake, Uriel? Letting us leave Earth when the Reboot would happen so soon?”

“No.”

Cora let that answer sink in. “Setebos said you would never disobey orders. So our leaving Earth was allowed?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Central needed more data about who Setebos had become and who you are. The timing of the Reboot had already been determined before I arrived at Setebos’ location, but once I relayed that you were with child, then I received orders to extend your human assessment study, in relation to Setebos and your pregnancy.”

Cora stared at him, taken aback by Uriel’s matter-of-fact clinical explanation. “So these past two months were an EXPERIMENT?”

“No. An evaluation.”

“Same difference!”

Uriel stood, his face placid and unflappable.

Cora sighed. “I’m sorry. It’s been... it’s been a long two months.” She took another sip of her tea out of nervousness. “I assume the study’s done since you’re here. What happens to us now?”

“You have been exemplary, in spite of your traumatic circumstances. Central accepts you to cross over, but it must correct Setebos’ error first, when he intervened when you were a child.”

“You mean – I was supposed to die back then. So I’ll die now.”

“Yes.”

Cora’s heart beat fast and hard. “And my child? Caliban?”

Uriel turned his head slightly, as if listening to something. “We’ve determined that you need to know this.” He looked a little surprised. “Cora, the Reboot resets the Earth by returning it to as close to its original creation state as possible, by using the particular properties of a substance not found in your material dimension called the Purgatorial Sea. It’s used to prepare a Heaven-bound soul, to cleanse it from any remaining error that would otherwise prevent it from crossing over to Sacred Space. You’re familiar with Lethe sleep, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Are you familiar with portals – the method I use to travel between your material dimension and the transcendent one, where creatures such as I reside?”

Cora shook her head. “No.”

“Well, now you know. Both properties – Lethe sleep and portal teleportation – are properties within the Purgatorial Sea. The Reboot is a diverted fraction of the Purgatorial Sea, appearing from ethereal to material. From the vantage point of anyone on Earth, it would look like rain coming out of the clear blue sky. We of the angelic host will personally address the nephilim and the fallen Watchers. Meanwhile, humans who are dying or were meant to die but prevented by supernatural means will face death in the Reboot, their souls teleported to the transcendent dimension. Humans who are alive and have many years ahead of them will have their memories of their life prior to the Reboot altered and then teleported further down humanity’s timeline. The humans left, smaller in number, will be from a culture closer to the simple, agri-nomadic culture of Earth’s early days, because they were relatively untouched by the corruption of the nephilim and the so-called ‘GodKings’. Humanity can progress organically from that smaller cohort.”

Her tea untouched and grown cold, Cora stared at Uriel, overwhelmed by this information. Sorting through ideas new and alarming, she focused on one thought. “So I will face death in the Reboot. I expected that. But what about my son? What about Setebos?”

“Ah, then. Your son will be given to a family, much farther in humanity’s timeline. Since he is a baby, he won’t remember that he was born before the Reboot. Since he is also human, he will have a normal, human life.”

“Will he be happy?” Cora paused, her face twisting in pain, and continued, “Will his father and mother love

him as much as I do?”

“We will place him in a loving family, Cora.”

She breathed slowly, in and out. In and out. “All right. I accept that. And Setebos?”

“His fate is rather unusual.” Uriel shook his head, in awe. “Your presence in his life, albeit complicating, gave Setebos opportunities to prove his virtues. He truly is a creature trying to live out a life of contrition and penance, as flawed as he is. Central has granted him to return to his original status, as an unfallen member of the angelic host.”

Cora trembled so much that she had to set down her cup on the counter lest she drop it. “That’s miraculous,” she said.

“Yes. But there’s a cost, Cora – to both you and Setebos.”

“What do you mean?”

“A transgression has happened, Cora. Setebos fell, and he had drawn you into his fallen state, albeit without malicious intent. In order for your soul to cross into Sacred Space, you must forget your time with Setebos past your childhood. The Reboot will scrub all memories of your child and your time with Setebos at his island and here at this lunar base. That way, you can unconditionally let Setebos return to his role in Heaven and let your child be raised by his new parents. Conversely, in order for Setebos to return to his unfallen state, he must also forget about his time with you past your childhood. We will also scrub his memories of this child and his time with you.”

Cora suddenly felt lightheaded, and she held onto the edge of the counter. “Will it hurt – this forgetting?”

“No,” Uriel said. “It will be like Lethe sleep, but much more thorough and permanent.”

“And my son will grow up and be happy? And Setebos restored to Heaven?”

“Yes.”

She felt her blood roar in her ears, her heart feeling as if it were about to explode. She again forced herself to breathe deep and slow. “All right,” she said, in confirmation. “I accept.”

“I DO NOT.”

Both archangel and woman turned to the entry way of the galley, seeing Setebos standing, cradling little Caliban, who was awake and fussing.

“Setebos --” she started.

“How can I forget you, Cora? How can I forget Caliban?” Setebos glared at Uriel. “I can accept Cora forgetting me -- that her soul will never recognize me -- because she will be safe. I can accept never being in her or Caliban’s life ever again. But losing my memories of her and this child?” He shook his head. “We are creatures of thought, Uriel. Sentient intelligence. Who I am now – a creature whom Central feels is worth saving – is only that because of what Cora has brought to me, in my life. To take away my memories of her would take away the best part of me.”

Cora walked towards Setebos, joining him at the threshold. She stared at him, speechless. Without breaking

eye contact with Uriel, Setebos gently transferred Caliban to Cora. But then he stepped towards Uriel until he was eye to eye with his former superior officer.

“It is cruel,” Setebos said, his voice barely restrained from his rage. “This is not redemption. It's punishment. Pure and simple. I do not accept this. I REFUSE.”

Uriel, calm as ever, regarded these inflammatory words. He was about to speak when he noticed that Cora had also stepped forward, one arm cradling the child, the other reaching out towards Setebos.

“Setebos,” she said.

Setebos turned, looking at her. Gray eyes met dark eyes. “Cora?”

“I'm sorry.” She touched his bare arm and gave him the strongest Lethe sleep she could give.

Setebos' eyes became unfocused, and he fell forward.

A little startled, Uriel caught him. He said, “This won't be permanent.”

“I know,” Cora said, trying not to cry. “I assume your people will make sure that it will be.”

“But why did you do this?”

“Isn't it obvious?” She then reached out, smoothing Setebos' dark hair. “Because I love him.”

Uriel's eyes widened. Then on the other side of the galley counter, in the space leading towards the workspace, the air started to shimmer and a portal appeared. Out stepped a person that Cora had never met but had seen, in the sent memories of both her friend Miranda and her beloved Setebos.

Across the counter, Ariel looked at her. He looked older than both Miranda and Setebos, an angel whose seniority was shown in his imposing figure and salt-and-pepper hair. “Uriel, look after Setebos.” Then he said to Cora, “My lady, you and I need to talk.”

“WHAT--” Cora suddenly felt a rush of cold air and blinding light streaming past her, making her wince. When she opened her eyes a split-second later, she found herself at the shore of an unfamiliar beach, under an unearthly blue sky. Clutching the baby close to her chest, she stared up at the angel standing right in front of her.

“As I said,” Ariel repeated, smiling, “we need to talk.”