

11 THE CELESTIAL GUARDIAN

“WHERE ARE WE?” Cora cried out, alarmed. “WHERE’S SETEBOS? WHERE --”

Caliban starting crying.

Ariel placed one reassuring hand on Cora’s shoulder, another on the baby’s head. He said, “Please, calm down.”

“Are you SERIOUSLY trying to Lethe sleep me --”

“No. Just the baby.” He moved both hands back to his sides. “You woke him up, and babies need their sleep.”

Cora stopped, and she looked down as Caliban was soothed back to sleep. “Oh Gods,” she said, shaking head as she felt her eyes prickle with shamed tears.

“It’s okay,” Ariel said. “I should’ve warned you beforehand. I’m sorry.”

She inhaled and then exhaled, stopping the tears from falling. “So where are we, then? And why did you bring me and Caliban here?”

“One: we’re on the shores of the Purgatorial Sea, in Sacred Space. Behind you,” he pointed to a craggy, narrow mountain, its peak obscured by clouds, “is Mount Purgatory, the top of which connects with the foothills of a mountain in Heaven. Usually, humans who are still alive aren’t able to come here, but – with you and your son touched by Setebos’ energy – you both can. Second: why I brought you and your son here, well.” He began walking on the rocky beach, following the shoreline. “Follow me.”

Cora stepped quickly until she was walking by Ariel’s side. She had so many questions in her but kept silent, quelled by the strangeness of the sea, mountain, and angel beside her. She glanced up at him.

As if taking her glance as a cue, Ariel began speaking. “You likely have some knowledge of who I am, but I have to say that that information is old.” He smirked. “Very very old.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Ariel said, “an earlier version of me was on Earth, at the time of the Reboot. A fallen version.”

Cora stopped walking. “WHAT.”

He paused as well, sighing. Then he replied, “I wanted to save Miranda from the Reboot, so I left Heaven... without securing permission.”

“Without securing – WHY DID YOU DO THAT?”

Ariel shook his head at his prior foolishness. “Because I knew that the answer would be no. However, because I was not cleared to know what was happening on Earth, I didn’t know that Miranda had – well – moved on, living as a general and nobleman for years --”

“Lord General Malech,” Cora interrupted.

“Yes. Lord General Malech.” He started walking again, walking slower so that Cora could remain by his side. He continued, “But by the time of the Reboot, he was also a GodKing, who had married the only surviving offspring of a dead king, a young woman named Mara. They had a son.”

Cora gasped, remembering that Setebos had dreaded a similar fate for himself. “But why would Malech do that? He knew the ills the nephilim have done!”

“He hadn’t fallen in love with a human woman before... until he met Mara.”

“But --”

“Cora, you yourself met Malech when he conquered Kaldach. You know what kind of ruler he was. Even though Malech had conquered Mara’s people, he didn’t want to rule them as a tyrant, especially since they were suffering from an epidemic at the time. By curing them, he endeared himself to them. However, they would only accept him as their ruler if he had married Mara.”

Cora frowned, remembering how powerless she had felt when she was a pawn between the Lords of Ilaeon and Kaldach, when she was the last Lady of Ilaeon. “And what did Mara think of all of this?” she asked.

“She accepted it as her duty. But,” Ariel added quickly, seeing Cora’s eyes flash with anger, “Malech made certain that anything he did, Mara would accept as well. In the end, when the Reboot happened, he revealed himself as Miranda. He tried to save Mara and their son Halim from death but failed.”

“Because Mara and Halim were dying anyway?” Cora asked, remembering Uriel’s explanation.

“Yes. And as a result, Miranda went insane with grief.” He shook his head. “On the waters of the flooded Earth that is in your recent memory, there was a gigantic ship: an ark that looked deceptively smaller than it actually is. Within that ship was a safe haven of animals and humans that were saved from the Reboot, and around that ship was a protective shield powered from the light of Heaven itself – that no angel, fallen or unfallen, can ever penetrate. Miranda tried to break through that shield, but in failing that, she swore revenge. She would find anyone on that ship, or any descendent of anyone on that ship, and bring that person’s soul to ruin, as payback for losing Mara and Halim.”

“Oh Gods, Miranda,” Cora whispered, looking down.

Ariel looked up, at the bright blue sky of Sacred Space. He continued, “The fallen army of Lightbearer wouldn’t allow the fallen Watchers to leave Hell, out of a sick sense of twisted arrogance and spite. So Miranda, locked in time’s arrow, couldn’t slip away from Hell until many millennia on Earth had passed. By that time, only one family remained that carried that particular light of Heaven from that ark, and of that family, only three members remained. They were an old man, Zack Fitzpatrick, and his two grown children, Jamie... and Zoey.”

Cora glanced up, noticing Ariel’s change of tone when he said the woman’s name.

“I mentioned that an earlier version of me, a fallen version, existed on Earth before the Reboot. The angel you see walking beside you had spent many millennia on post-Reboot Earth, as a miserable fallen ethereal creature, until a certain brave woman gave me the chance to redeem myself.”

“And that woman was --”

“Zoey Fitzpatrick.”

Cora noticed Ariel’s tone of voice again. “You love her,” she observed bluntly.

“Ah.”

She was surprised to see him blush. *That’s a first*, she thought. She said aloud, “How did she help you redeem yourself?”

“Miranda believed Jamie to be the weakest, as he had become a homeless man, living with what the humans deemed untreated psychosis. However, when Miranda tried to take Jamie, she was entrapped in Jamie’s interior psyche --”

“WHAT--”

“And when I was looking for a harmless human with psychosis to just lie low and subsist on that person’s life energy until his or her death --”

“WHAT--”

“I got entrapped as well, although I didn’t know it at the time.”

“WHAT.” She reached out and stopped Ariel’s walking. “Explain.”

“Sorry,” he apologized. “As I said, the Fitzpatricks are special, but Jamie even more so. His soul recognized Miranda as a malevolent force and locked her away in a form of solitary confinement. However, to keep her there, his conscience had to be there as well, as a spiritual lock and key. That left his living body an open shell. Meanwhile, I was in need of another human host. As I said, I had been a miserable, fallen creature, scraping by in my existence on post-Reboot Earth. To cause the least harm, I would dwell within a human incapacitated with psychotic hallucinations, making certain that I was the least intrusive of presences in that human’s shattered mind. For millennia I would disappear within a human and, like a damn parasite, sip just enough of my host’s life energy so that I wouldn’t become an absolute insensate. Jamie was my last host. But with his psyche already sealed up with Miranda, I essentially became him, living out his miserable, homeless life. When his body became terminally ill, I expected to be able to leave his body, as I had done with previous hosts. But I couldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because Jamie’s sealing away was an all-or-nothing act. In sealing Miranda, he had inadvertently sealed me with them as well. We were at an impasse until Zoey, who had been looking for Jamie, found him.” He shook his head, remembering in amazement. “You know about sending, right?”

“Yes.”

“When Zoey found Jamie, dying in a hospital bed, she involuntarily sent her own psyche into Jamie’s interior world.”

Cora stared at him. “SHE COULD DO THAT?”

“Yes. Shocked the both of us when she and I saw each other the first time, in what felt like a dense forest. As we learned to trust each other, we navigated Jamie’s psyche, to the center of his self, and broke through

Jamie’s seal. There I battled Miranda, who had been verbally torturing Jamie for years, trying to break him, while Zoey coaxed her brother to open himself further. In the end, Zoey saved her little brother from Miranda – but she also saved me as well. In the parlance of Sacred Space, she is a Beatrice, that is, a human who leads a fallen creature back to unfallenness.” He paused. “And she is my Beatrice.”

Cora saw Ariel shake his head again, as if the angel was waking up from a slight daze.

Ariel continued, “The problem still remained: Miranda had escaped. With Zoey already known by Heaven and safeguarded by me, then she was safe from Miranda. So that only left Jamie and Zoey’s father, Zack Fitzpatrick.”

“What did Miranda do?”

“Hitched a ride on Zack’s dying soul to here. The Purgatorial Sea.”

“WHAT?”

“Zack drowned in a vast ocean on Earth. An old navy man, he was sailing alone when a storm caught up with him. Zoey didn’t even know her father was still alive when she found out he had died.”

“Why?”

“That’s a long story.” Ariel sighed. “But I’ll tell you the short version. When she was a girl, Zoey was molested... and Jamie witnessed it once and had his first psychotic break.”

Cora stared, unable to speak.

“Even though Amy, their mother and Zack’s wife, assured him that he wasn’t to blame for what happened to their children, Zack couldn’t forgive himself, so he left the family. Even decades later, he still couldn’t forgive himself, but he did send to Amy, who had died years ago, his sorrow and contrition for leaving her and their children. That was what saved him from Hell, but it was also what attracted Miranda’s attention.”

Cora saw Ariel stare over the placid waters of the Purgatorial Sea.

“It happened here – Miranda trying to lock Zack into her damnation while staying anchored in Sacred Space. It pained me, to see a person I still loved... show how demonic and brutal she had become to a fellow creature. Thank God, that once she saw that Mara and Halim had been safe in Sacred Space all along, she realized that she had been living in a false reality. Thank God that she cried for my help so I could finally DO something.” He gave a soft smile of relief tinged with melancholy. “Of course, once Zack was freed, he arrived safely to shore, and he and Amy are somewhere up the mountain. Still, for Miranda it was a painful process.”

“Why painful?”

“The Purgatorial Sea is called that because it purges the darkness that would hold back any Heaven-bound creature. The more a creature has darkness within, the more painful the process. As I held Miranda under those waters... she screamed.” He grimaced.

“So she was restored as an unfallen angel? Like you?”

“No.”

“But --”

“As Miranda had hoped, Miranda finally became Malech: a human husband and father.”

Cora was dumbfounded. “HOW?”

“The Purgatorial Sea reduced Miranda to basic quantum particles,” Ariel explained. “Then we used Zack’s residual human matter to create a male human body for the particles to form a re-creation – a Reboot on the individual scale. Malech became a living, breathing human being for a brief moment before I induced cardiac arrest --”

“WHA --” Cora interrupted.

“—leaving a human soul behind, Heaven-bound.”

Cora shook her head, clearing her thoughts. “You had to kill him because human beings who are still alive aren’t able to exist in Sacred Space, right? Is it because this is a place for ethereal creatures? Not material ones?”

Ariel peered at her. “You are both astute and stubborn. I can see why Setebos loves you.”

Cora looked down, unsure how to respond. In her arms, little Caliban still slept. She asked, “And Halim – he was nephil, but you said he is with Mara, too. So could nephilim go to Heaven?”

“No.”

“So he’s human, too, I assume. How did that happen?”

“Halim was still an innocent baby. So with the intercession of his mother, the Reboot took care of the transformation alone as soon as he hit the flood waters.”

Cora winced, as she imagined what that must have looked like, a dying young mother and her baby falling from the sky into an endless deep below. She walked in silence beside Ariel for several spans before she asked, “Ariel, why did you bring me and Caliban here?”

Ariel stopped walking. “Cora,” he said, “can I explain something before I answer your question?”

Cora stood upright, trying not to feel anxious. “All right.”

Ariel glanced up, as if seeking guidance, and then began. “There is a peculiar aspect of transcendent space you need to know. Time works differently outside of the material space of your world. In the transcendent realm – here in Sacred Space, there in Lightbearer’s Profane Space – everything is in the Eternal Now. That’s why it’s called timeless space.

When anyone from timeless space looks at material space, it’s like flipping through the pages of a book. We are both the writers, readers, and characters of a book that’s already written, and the various storylines therein are our lives. We can flip backwards or forwards anywhere in the book and stop where we need to stop. Then we can drop into the storyline at that specific spot.

That’s how my people feel like when we go from Sacred Space to Earth. My current self’s conscience feels time as one continuous sequence, but I can jump into any time period on Earth from the farthest future to the earliest of Earth’s creation, as long as I don’t jumble my own storyline or complicate others’ – and as long as doing so is necessary and allowed.

Cora, from my vantage point, you are from my far past, from a time and place when I was a lost, fallen

angel. From your vantage point, I am from your far future, from a time and place that doesn't even exist to you at all. But from the objective reality of the transcendent realm, we're both temporally equals in the Eternal Now. That's how I'm able to speak to you, here and now. And I'm speaking to you, here in the Eternal Now, because your storyline shows that it's time for you to jump ahead in time, to preserve the safety of the Fitzpatrick's timelines, as their guardian.”

“WHAT?” She stared at Ariel, shocked. “SERIOUSLY?”

Caliban started waking up again, fussing.

Ariel sighed and soothed the baby one more time. “Cora,” he said, “you really do show up there, as an active agent in Jamie's, Zoey's, and Zack's timelines.”

“But why not you? Aren't they your – your history?”

Ariel shook his head. “It's precisely because I'm part of their timelines, either as a clueless, desperate fallen angel or a witness of Zack's struggle in the Purgatorial Sea, that I'm locked out of their earlier timelines – to avoid ensnaring them, causing catastrophic time paradoxes. However, Cora, you don't have that problem.”

“But--”

“Look” Ariel interrupted, “Central has allowed you to play this active role of service, as opposed to the original plan of wiping your memory of Setebos and your son and having you die in the Reboot. And, no, I don't know why either. That's beyond both of our current timelines. Maybe our timelines will converge and both a future you and a future me will know--”

“Stop.” She held up a hand. “I'm... overwhelmed.”

“Sorry.” He began walking again.

Cora saw his resigned shoulders and walked again as well, catching up with him. “You know, even though you don't look anything like him, you do remind me of Setebos.”

“Heh. Well – funny that. You remind me of Zoey.”

They walked together, an awkward silence falling between them.

“All right,” Cora said.

“What?”

“I'll go. Especially since it's clear I don't have a choice in the matter.”

“Cora--”

“And especially since I did knock out Setebos for refusing Heaven's offer and gave him up to Uriel. I'd be a damn hypocrite if I were to refuse, right?” She looked at Ariel. “You were Setebos' mentor and superior officer. So I trust you.”

Ariel returned her gaze. “Thank you.”

“So how exactly do I do... umm...what I'm supposed to do?”

“You can ask her yourself since we're here.”

“Her?” Cora looked around, noticing that they had walked to the other side of the island even though it felt

that they hadn't walked that long. At the foot of the mountain sat a young woman in white, sitting next to a sleeping figure. She followed Ariel as he approached the young woman. Close up, Cora discovered that she looked very young, just a teenager, and she stared when she saw a baby looking just a few months old, strapped to her back, sleeping as soundly as little Caliban.

The figure on the ground, also sleeping soundly, was Malech.

With the vision given to her in Sacred Space, Cora could see that Malech was fully human, a young man not much older than herself in appearance. With Ariel's explanation in her mind, she also realized who the baby was -- Halim, the nephil turned human -- as well as who the young woman was.

“I am Mara, Malech's Beatrice,” she said. “And you are meant to be a Beatrice, too.”

#

It was 4:00AM.

Once upon a time, when eighteen-year old Jamie Fitzpatrick had a home and family, he once read that 4:00AM was a magical time, the “witching hour,” when the supernatural world would give signs of significant purpose to receptive persons living in the mundane world.

Bullshit, he thought.

Jamie had witnessed a girl get shot by her so-called boyfriend, taking a bullet meant for him. He had seen her die in his arms as the club security neutralized the shooter and others called 911. He had endured hours of giving testimony to the police, being around people from the dance club who also witnessed the murder. He left the police station, with the club pressing charges, and walked into the cold, early Sunday morning. Passing by a bank building with an outside clock, Jamie saw what time it was.

It was 4:00AM.

He walked to the center of a bridge overpass, closed for repair, with an empty highway far below.

Her name was Lexa, a girl just as homeless as he was. Jamie was new at being homeless, while Lexa, even being younger than he, had been homeless longer. She was despised, being an exotic dancer with occasional places to stay, depending on where her so-called boyfriend TK wanted her to be. Yet Jamie could see the golden spark of kindness in her, as she shared her bread with him under the bridge only three months ago, when she saw him shivering on her way to work. Lexa was the first and only girl he would love, and he was utterly helpless to protect her.

He closed his eyes, remembering how helpless he was to protect his sister Zoey, how helpless he was to stop his father from leaving, how helpless he was when his mother died and his teenaged sister, just barely graduated from high school, had to shoulder the responsibility of taking care of his psychotic, lazy ass.

He began to learn forward.

“Don't.”

His eyes flew open, and he whipped around to the source of the voice. Under the cold streetlights, he saw a small, dark-haired woman, looking not much older than he was. However, as he stared at her, he noticed that

the waves of color flowing around her was off, that she was much older than she looked and was not all entirely human. With a panicked cry, he asked, “Are you real?”

With two quick steps, before Jamie could run or pull away, Cora bridged the distance between herself and Jamie and grasped his arm. “Yes,” she said, and then she sent.

She sent the memories that Ariel gave her: A crazed fallen Miranda trying to break an older Jamie without success. Two angels fighting in a storm-filled sky. An older, joyful Zoey holding an older Jamie.

She sent her own memories, of the last city before Setebos’ island, with its vast refugee camp outside the walls and street-level uprising and child suicide bombers inside the walls. She sent the beauty of the Earth from space, the beauty of the Moon.

She sent her fear and her hope, her faith that Jamie was stronger than he thought. She sent that he had a reason to be, a reason to stay with the living a little while longer until his sister could release him to the waiting arms of his family in Sacred Space. Even an awaiting Lexa was somewhere on that mountain. When she was done, she found Jamie collapsed against her, crying.

“Please be real,” he cried. “Please be real.”

“I am, Jamie.”

“I’m scared,” he said.

“I know, but you can do brave things.”

“Can you stay?”

“No. But I’ve given you all you need.”

He nodded, exhausted. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Then Cora passed a hand over his eyes, giving Lethe sleep. Within the Lethe, she blurred the identities of herself, Ariel, Miranda, and Zoey, leaving intact the landscape and emotions of the memories. She left echoes of many creatures across space and time looking out for him, even as he would live most of his earthly life seemingly isolated and alone.

“The city can be pretty, too, Jamie,” she said, as she helped him stand up and walk to the overpass’ edge – but this time as a viewing spot, to see the twinkling lights of a city still asleep but waking up soon.

Feeling dizzy, Jamie grabbed the edge of the overpass, and he leaned a little against it. He caught his second-wind, shaking his head. *This was always Lexa’s favorite time*, he thought. *Witching hour*. Then he crouched, his head down, and sobbed against the cold concrete. Afterwards, as the sky turned from inky darkness to the twilight blue of a new day, he stood up before any authorities could find him and, alone, he walked back down into the waiting city below.

#

In the various places Cora had been when she was looking for Setebos, she tried to make sure not to make close bonds with anyone. While she succeeded most of the time, a few times a person would slip into her heart. One was the man who had wanted to marry her all those eons ago. The other was his grandmother, whose dark

face reminded her of the smooth bark of the belajoun tree and whose rich, tranquil voice reminded her of her beloved Ina. When Cora had to disguise herself, she chose the appearance of this wise woman, clothed in the white and blue of a wizened nun.

Thus twenty-two year old Zoey Fitzpatrick, caught in her own sad, angry thoughts, didn't notice the nun quietly sharing the same backrow pew, sitting on the two far left seats. When the Order of the Mass came to the taking of Communion, Zoey remained sitting, her head bowed down with clenched fists. When it came time for Cora to stand up, she bent down and touched Zoey's arm.

Zoey started at the touch of a soft, dry hand. She looked up, for the first time seeing the gentle smile of the beautiful, elderly nun who had sat next to her from the beginning of the service.

In Ina's voice, Cora said, “Be not afraid is easier to say than do. But try. Be not afraid to forgive. And live.”

“I --” Zoey stammered but stopped, trying not to cry.

Cora knew what that felt like. She touched her forehead, giving her another bit of spiritual strength, and continued down the pew for that service's Communion. Even though her faith was older than the man-made institution that this church's rites were celebrating, this particular Eucharistic Rite was a remembrance of her own people's deep theology, so she joined the other celebrants. Afterwards, she left, but not before seeing from afar Zoey, who decided at the last minute to join the other stragglers, partaking the Communion Rite of her people.

Stepping only three years forward and many thousands of miles away, a hidden Cora witnessed twenty-five year old Zoey visiting the island grave of a man who had hurt her long ago. With one final gesture of peace and forgiveness, she whispered, “Goodbye.”

Ah, Zoey, Cora thought, her heart pained with love and pride for this brave woman. *That makes this easier.* She moved again, thirteen years earlier, when Zoey was twelve years old, a rape victim recovering in a hospital bed.

Rain beat down the island, and Cora was hidden in the drenched gloom of a nighttime storm. She saw the man, a young priest who violated the vows of his position and his faith, arrive at the beach. He entered the storm-churned sea, fighting against the waves that kept pushing him back to land and to life. Then she saw the other man arrive – Zack Fitzpatrick, Zoey's father. At first, Zack seemed satisfied, watching his daughter's rapist attempt to drown himself. But when the other man seemed to change his mind and Zack, hate and vengeance darkening his soul, began running towards the man, Cora sent.

She sent to the man a memory of the future, of Zoey eventually forgiving him for his heinous transgression. She also sent, her ethereal voice booming with the authority of Sacred Space, *If there is even a shred of holiness left in you, you will not let this girl's father bear the sin of murder.*

The man looked up, seeing Zack for the first and last time and then seeing Cora just behind Zack. Stricken, he nodded and then moved back towards the sea, fighting against the waters to fulfill his suicide. Cora witnessed Zack, staring into the sea as his quarry disappeared under the crashing waters and then never came back up.

Even with the man’s life ended, Cora knew that his presence would haunt Zack for the rest of his life, and she wished she could take that guilt away, to spare a family whose painful future she had seen.

Don’t, Cora, she reminded herself. She sent into Sacred Space, *I’m done*.

Like before, the portal came from within her, and with a slight tug, she was back onto the rocky beach of the Purgatorial Sea. Waiting for her was Ariel, his arms cradling Caliban, who was awake and playing with one of Ariel’s white feathers.

“Where’s Mara and Malech?” she asked as Ariel transferred her son to her arms.

“Going up Mount Purgatory,” Ariel said. “Malech woke up as soon as you finished, and Central requested both Mara and Malech to report for a debriefing.”

“So I did everything right?” Cora asked.

“Yes.”

“Oh, thank the Gods.” She cuddled Caliban, who still held tightly in one chubby fist Ariel’s feather. “Uh, this feather...?”

“It’s fine. I gave it to him, since he seemed so fascinated.”

“You materialized your wings?” she asked.

“At one point. Caliban looked a little bored.”

Cora snorted, stifling a laugh. “When you said that you would look after Caliban, I must admit I wasn’t so sure about it at the time.”

“Ah. There’s something about me that I should say, which I can say now that you’re done with the Fitzpatricks.”

“What’s that?”

“I helped Zoey have a child.”

Cora stared at him. “What – wait. HOW?”

“It’s similar to what Setebos did, but in Zoey’s case it was intentional. Induced parthenogenesis, but I spliced the egg with DNA from one of Zoey’s stem cells. So she has a non-clone daughter. Her name is Ariel James, but she prefers AJ.”

“Ariel James.” Cora blinked. “Ariel... after you? And James... after Jamie?”

“Yes.”

“But why were you allowed? And why didn’t you tell me this earlier?”

Ariel put up a forefinger. “One: to fix the injustice of Zoey’s infertility caused by her childhood trauma.” He held up a second finger. “Two: to give Zoey the experience of being a parent so that she could understand and forgive her father.” Three fingers. “Three: to have a place for your son to be when he grows up. That’s why I couldn’t tell you earlier. Because you didn’t need to know until now.”

Cora shook her head. “You’d think I would get used to not understanding the complicated planning of Heaven but – a place for my son when he grows up? What does that mean?”

“Remember when Uriel said that your son is to grow up as a normal human being, raised in a family living farther in time from the Reboot?”

“That seems like a lifetime ago, but yes.”

“That will still happen. However,” Ariel said, seeing Cora’s face fall, “you will be instrumental in placing Caliban with his human family and overseeing him as his personal celestial guardian.”

Cora’s faced changed with many emotions, finally settling on confusion. “What do personal celestial guardians do?”

“Well, Cora,” Ariel said, with a shrug and a smile, “as they say in Earth’s modern parlance: you get to be Caliban’s fairy godmother.”