

## 14 THE BEATRICE

*Who am I?*

He closed his eyes.

It was time for Creation.

He opened his eyes to the sound of a persistent, repetitive chime, which stopped once he sat up on top of the narrow bunk of his private sleeping quarter. He slid off the bunk and automatically searched underneath, where his gear was. He pulled on his gear and then walked toward the bare wall, which divided into two and opened up. Once outside into the wide corridor, he joined the others, walking to the briefing room.

If one were to ask him if he knew who they were, he would have said that he was one of them. However, he recognized no one, and if he tried to see any one person’s face, the image would grow vague and indistinct, as if he were seeing through water. He shook his head and kept his eyes forward.

Once in the briefing room, he stood at attention with his cohort and tried to listen to their commanding officer, but just like his inability to see his CO clearly, he heard his CO as if underwater, the person’s voice muffled and confusing. Afterwards, he reported to the containment room to perform his assigned duties, although what those duties specifically were he wasn’t sure.

As he settled in before his monitor, seeing arcane figures that seemed to swim as if they were living things trying to escape his gaze, he glanced at the glowing sphere in the middle of the containment room. In the center was a planet. He stared at it, squinting his eyes to bring its image into focus even though doing so gave him a headache. It was a rocky world, its surface primarily blue ocean, interrupted here and there with various brown-and-green landmasses. A name flickered into his mind, at first indecipherable but then distinct in one flash of recognition. *Earth!*

Suddenly, he felt a sharp ache in his ears as a new sound reverberated around him. He closed his eyes, dizzy with pain.

It was time for War.

He looked across the tactic’s table to his superior officer. However, try as he might, the image and voice of this officer remained vague and indistinct. Nevertheless, when the officer beckoned him and the others in the tactical tent to step outside, he followed. There, he saw a massive ship mowing down the blurred members of an army, the ground below becoming slick with honey-colored ichor and hemoglobin-rich blood. He heard raucous, jubilant yells through the comm in his ear and from his peers in front of him, but mixed in those cheers were the sickening cries of the injured and dying. He felt a dizzying wave of dread and nausea and dropped to his knees.

It was time for Peace.

He stood up and walked across war-churned ground. He stopped when he reached an area untouched by war: a green plain surrounding a lone mountain. Growing at the foot of that mountain was a small fruiting tree. Exhausted and completely alone, he collapsed underneath the tree, and inexplicably he began to weep.

*Why am I crying?*, he thought, unable to stop. His teardrops became a trickle that became a steady stream that became a river that flowed from the tree outward, across the plain. It began to freeze not that far away. The icy river was the color of his eyes. It soon overran its banks, flooding the plain and even covering him in its ice. He then realized, *I've lost something – what was it?*

His frozen eyes stared above.

*Who am I?*

The ice pressing down his eyelids, he closed his eyes.

It was time for Creation.

He opened his eyes to the sound of a persistent, repetitive chime, which stopped once he sat up on top of the narrow bunk of his private sleeping quarter. He slid off his bunk and automatically searched underneath where his gear was. He pulled on his gear and then walked toward the bare wall, which divided into two and opened up. Once outside into the wide corridor, he joined the others, walking to the briefing room....

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In a space reminiscent of the containment room of long ago, Setebos lay locked in stasis, hovering above the floor as if lying on an invisible operating table. Only one other creature remained. Having emptied the room of Uriel and the others after their failed attempts to infiltrate the icy barrier that encased Setebos like a burial shroud, Ariel waited for Cora and David to arrive.

As he stood, Ariel remembered the last time he saw Setebos reclined: underneath Heaven's Tree of Knowledge during twilight, fretting about the reality of angels falling from grace. Part of him wished Setebos had never gone to Earth, to spare him this present pain of being trapped between Heaven and Hell. But if Setebos had stayed in timeless space, then the Cora of the here and now wouldn't exist, Ariel would never have met Zoey, and AJ wouldn't have been born. All of their timelines were entangled, and sparing Setebos from pain would have prevented the joys of many others.

“Now you know for yourself, old friend,” Ariel murmured. “Free will complicates everything, especially when love is involved.” He felt a pressure change behind him, and he turned around to see the quantum transfer of the open portal. He saw Setebos' son step through first. “David,” Ariel acknowledged, noticing immediately Setebos' energy signature active in the man's eyes.

“Sir,” David replied, instantly recognizing him. He looked around, feeling out of body, as the deep knowledge that was in his head didn't match his own lived experiences. He turned around when Cora stepped through. He saw Ariel nod towards her and close the portal with a small hand wave. *I guess we're doing this*, he

thought.

In the close quarters of the stasis room, they all stood around Setebos’ floating form. Ariel said to David, “You have Setebos’ sight and knowledge, correct?”

“Yes,” David replied. He shook his head. “It feels strange, suddenly KNOWING. Like having a program uploaded straight into my brain.”

Ariel nodded. “That makes the process easier. Both you and Cora, in sharing Setebos’ energy signature, will be able to touch the field around Setebos, unlike me and the others who were repelled whenever we tried. David, you’ll need to place your palms directly on the field around Setebos’ temples. As soon as you find a thin spot in the field, visualize opening it, like a key opening a lock. Cora, you’ll need to place your palms on the field around Setebos’ heart. As soon as David unlocks the field, visualize pushing into a heavy yet unlocked door. Just like Zoey was able to enter her brother’s psyche because of their mutual emotional entanglement, so will you with Setebos.”

“Will it be like Jamie’s interior space? Some type of Hell, wherein I’ll have to search for Setebos?” Cora asked, trying not to sound nervous.

“Yes,” Ariel said, “although what that would look like I have no idea. As we’ve discussed before, Setebos being locked in like this is a phenomenon the angelic hosts didn’t think was even possible.” He shook his head, feeling powerless. “Let’s get started.”

David and Cora placed their hands, palms down, on their assigned areas. The force field felt thick and electrical, but it didn’t bounce them off. With a slight additional pressure, they pushed through and made contact with the icy layer.

“How long will it take --” Cora began.

“Got it!” David interrupted.

Startled, Cora pressed down. Suddenly, she collapsed on top of Setebos.

“WHOA!” David exclaimed, as his body was thrown back.

“Are you okay?” Ariel asked. He held out a hand and helped David up from the floor.

“Yeah.” David shook off the last bit of residual electrical blow-back. He ran his hands through his dark hair, exhaling. “Her soul made it inside Setebos’ psyche, but as soon as she did, the field slammed shut the opening. I won’t be able to open it again on the outside.”

“So Cora needs to find Setebos, to open the field from the inside, or else she’s trapped?”

“Yes, sir.”

Ariel folded his arms. “Hmmm.” He stared at Cora’s body slumped over Setebos’ hovering form.

David also stared at the two unconscious persons before them. *My mother and father*, he thought, still feeling astonished at the fact. “I know why Setebos’ condition is like this, sir.”

“Oh?”

“The Reboot sequence was supposed to selectively delete Fairy’s and my existence from Setebos’ memories,

right? But in doing so, the sequence went out of control since Setebos’ sense of self had become entwined with those memories. All this --” David made a curt hand gesture “-- was a defense mechanism by Setebos’ psyche, to try to freeze what was left of him. But even in the short period of time I had contact with Setebos, I’ve seen the damage. It’s extensive.” He shook his head.

Ariel regarded David’s information. “Are you worried about Cora?”

David’s answer was quick. “No, sir.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” David replied, “I know Fairy. And she’s amazing.”

“Hmmm.”

David glanced sharply at the angel but decided not to argue, reminding himself, *He’s AJ’s DAD*. He coughed, to cover up the awkward silence. “So, sir, what do we do now?”

“Now? Now we observe for any changes in Setebos and Cora.”

“You mean, we wait.”

“Yes.”

David sighed. “I hate waiting.”

Ariel smirked, crossing his arms. “Welcome to my world.”

For Cora, the subdued lighting of the stasis room suddenly disappeared, and she found herself in a tiny, one-room military-style sleeping quarter that would only accommodate one person. The gray room was empty and spare, with no window nor obvious doorway. However, while the room was spare in material things, it was not silent, as a persistent white noise static was just within earshot, enough to make Cora feel uncomfortable and eager to find a way out. She ran her hands along the three blank walls and jumped back when one of them split open, revealing an exit. She carefully stepped outside, finding herself in a bright yet empty wide corridor, its walls, floor, and ceiling the same nondescript gray as the sleeping quarter.

“Hello?” she called out. Her voice echoed down both ends of the corridor. *Setebos*, she sent again, *can you hear me? It’s Cora. Where are you?* She stood in the corridor. All around her, she felt the same jumbled static. However, this static was louder, like what the old-time analog televisions would have between channels. It was distracting, and even when she covered her ears, she heard it. *Argh, won’t it shut up!*, she thought. But then she realized that her anger wasn’t helping, and she forced herself to breathe. *Calm down*.

Letting the static become part of the background, she mentally searched for the focused signal of Setebos amongst the static’s white noise. Picking up on a faint echo, she walked down the corridor, ending up in a large, empty room, with a raised dais on one end. She slowly walked around that cavernous room, trying to pick up the signal again amidst the static, and then walked out. Walking around, she thought she was following the signal but then realized she had returned to the same cavernous room.

Picking a different direction, she followed the signal again, but then she lost it, as the white noise grew

louder. She stood staring at the gray walls around her, paralyzed by the thought that she was lost. *Don't look*, she said to herself. *This isn't real anyways*. She closed her eyes and continued to walk through a maze of corridors that, by its hypnotic sameness, had induced confusion and fear. Trusting her own inner compass to follow Setebos' signal, even though she saw nothing, she walked, all the while her mind flooded with maddening white noise.

She ended up in a place where the white noise suddenly cut off. She opened her eyes, seeing a large room that reminded her of a control center. But instead of a bank of workstations on one side of the room and a large screen on the other side, the workstations formed a wide horseshoe around a massive glowing sphere situated in the center of the room. Curious, she walked up to the sphere but abruptly stopped.

In the center of the sphere was the Earth. It was new and pristine, the oceans dark blue against the brown and green of the continents, the striated clouds of the high atmosphere marbling the planet. She reached out, but her hands passed through the Earth as if it were made of light and smoke, trailing a bit of blue and white from her fingertips. Next to the Earth was its Moon, luminous in its powdery gray-white. It was the Moon of the beginning, so of course it wouldn't have the lunar outpost, yet it still filled Cora with bittersweet memories that caused her heart to ache. The longer she stood before this glowing sphere of the Earth and Moon, the more melancholy sadness held her, and she became reluctant to leave.

But then she noticed that she couldn't hear Setebos' signal, even though she felt relief not hearing the distracting static. She shook her head to clear it from its melancholy musing, steeled herself to endure the white noise again, and stepped outside of the room. At once, the white noise slammed into her mind, but among its jumble, she felt the signal again, leading to outside the building. After traversing another maze of corridors with her eyes closed, Cora stepped outside but then quickly clapped both hands over her nose and mouth as the stench hit her. All the while, the white noise continued to buffet his mind. Afraid of what she would see, Cora opened her eyes.

The ground, as far as her wide, horrified eyes could see, was dark and wet with blood and ichor, churned up and jumbled with dismembered, headless bodies from humans and angels. Half buried in the mud were arms and legs, torsos and wings. She stifled a scream, forcing herself to survey the macabre landscape underneath a placid, gray sky. Like a glowing, silvery line, the signal ran from the building, through muck and corpses, all the way through the fields of death.

*Oh Gods, Oh Gods*, her mind chattered. She forced herself to walk across that unhallowed ground, her body jumping with sharp jerks every time she stepped on a submerged body part. In her terrorized mind, she thought she could feel those dismembered corpses twitch every time she took a tentative step. She had seen war. She had been in battle. But this landscape, and her walking across it with one squelching footstep at a time, felt like sacrilege: a living, named person violating the helpless, nameless dead. She fought the urge to turn back to the building, where the only creature being hurt was just herself. Automatically, without conscious thought, she sent fervently, not even knowing whether it was to Setebos or to another she was sending, *Forgive me, forgive me*,

*forgive me....*

After a time, the terrain changed, and the white noise again reduced to just within earshot. The fields of death were behind Cora, and the ground was more firm and solid. But she also noticed that the air felt colder, and her feet crunched on grass frosted over with ice. Looking ahead of her, she saw a tall, narrow mountain that was more a massive butte than anything else. At the bottom of the mountain grew a lone, gnarled tree, looking tiny in the far distance. Cora looked down, seeing the silvery signal trail run across the grassy plain covered with a thick layer of ice and terminating at the base of the tree, where the signal was strongest. *Are you there?*, she sent, receiving no reply. Her feet coated with bloody mud, she made her way through the icy plain, taking careful, measured steps, leaving muddy footsteps behind her.

The air grew frigid, and Cora shivered violently, but she pressed on. The closer she got to the tree, the larger it became until it loomed over her. Up close, it seemed to have grown out of the base of the mountain, its trunk, slick with ice, wide with a complicated branch-and-root system that reminded her of a banyan tree. Trying to gain sure footing over an icy ground grown unstable by the tree’s roots, Cora stepped closer to the tree, where the signal was strongest. She slid, stumbled, and began to fall forward. Catching herself with outstretched arms, she winced, gasping as the pain shot up her palms and wrists. When she opened her eyes, she stared down at an ice-encased face.

*Setebos!*

His eyes were closed, his body lying between two thick roots and entirely entombed in a thick layer of ice.

*No! No no no you shouldn't be like this! You were supposed to be safe – you were supposed to be happy!* Her body aching with cold and her wrists hurting, she kneeled beside Setebos and placed her palms on the ice, directly over Setebos’ heart. She visualized melting through the ice, focusing the angelic energy into her hands and downward. The ice melted but, before his chest could be exposed to the frigid air, the ice refroze, thick as before. She focused more energy into her hands and sent in fast cycles of energy transfer, reaching deep within herself, sending out, reaching deep again, and sending out. Her body was freezing, but her hands burned.

When she could see Setebos’ chest just underneath a thin sliver of stubborn ice, she used her hands to pound and rip away the ice, shutting her eyes tight against the pain that radiated up from her wrists. Finally, the ice was unable to reform, and she broke through, reaching Setebos. But then the white noise static suddenly increased in volume, making her feel sick and nauseous.

*So tired*, she thought, as she felt her energy stores tapping out. Her energy transfer to break through the ice so exhausted her that she could feel herself becoming emptied of it, for the first time in her long, unnatural life, and it frightened her, that she wouldn’t have enough to bring back Setebos. She feared her impending long-sought mortality, and with that fear, the white noise grew even greater.

“NO!” she cried out loud, her voice shattering the white noise around her.

Digging deep within herself, she let her anger, fear, regret, and guilt come but not conquer her, using her negative emotions to fuel her fight against her exhaustion. Striking Setebos’ chest with bloodied fists grown

cold and numb, she sent her memories -- her childhood, her time with Malech, her time with Setebos, her work as a Beatrice, their child growing up and finding love and a family. She sent her desires, of wanting that love and family as well, from him. She sent who Setebos was: an imperfect, infuriating creature of light whom she couldn't live without. *DAMMIT, Setebos, WAKE UP!*

The ice on the vast field behind her sublimated in a massive wave of fog that dissipated, revealing a white expanse of hazel herb flowers. The gnarled, banyan tree transformed into a majestic belajoun, its branches spread wide in a welcoming canopy. The air grew warm and bright, the beginnings of springtime, and the mountain before them became weathered ocean limestone, its peak covered in verdant green.

But Setebos remained still and cold.

Battered and empty, Cora's fists dropped to her lap. Too tired to send, she spoke out loud, her voice barely above a raspy whisper, "Please. Please come back to me." Shivering uncontrollably, she bowed low, her forehead touching his chest, and her tears fell. "Setebos. I should've never let you go."

"Something's wrong," David said.

"But the ice sublimated," Ariel declared. "We just need to be patient."

"No," David replied. He pointed to the tears flowing from Cora's shut, unresponsive eyes. "Fairy's crying. And that field is still there." He reached out, touching the force field that enveloped both Setebos and Cora, and while it didn't repel him, it didn't let him in either. "DAMMIT. I know that Fairy's in trouble."

"Hmmm." Ariel walked over to Cora. With his palms held a few inches above her back, he did a deep assessment. After a couple of seconds, he said, "Well." He turned to David. "You were right."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning she's almost depleted of Setebos' energy signature. When the last of that angelic energy is exhausted from her body, her mortal body won't be able to stay here any longer because it's alive."

David stared at Ariel. "But her soul's still sealed up with Setebos! What'll happen to Fairy if her soul can't return to her living body?"

"I'm not sure," Ariel admitted. "This has never happened before."

"GREAT." David threw up his hands. "My family is just one big fucking miracle, isn't it. Setebos shouldn't be able to be in an angelic coma, yet here he is! Fairy shouldn't be an immortalized human being, yet here she is! And I'm not supposed to be some kind of chimera freak, being purely human -- except for the bits where I AM NOT -- yet here I am!"

"David," Ariel said. "Calm down."

"ARGH!" David struck the field in frustration. "We're just one fucking tangled mess." He started pacing, fuming. But suddenly he stopped. "SHIT. Wait." He clapped his hands on his head. "I know what to do!"

"Oh?"

"We ARE one tangled mess. We're entangled! AJ's work is in entangled communication. I know how that

works now! I may not be able to send my soul or even my energy signature through the field, but I should be able to communicate with Fairy and Setebos – right? And since this coma is just Setebos’ defense mechanism, then if I can just reach him, to get him to stand down, then Fairy’ll be free and he’ll wake up.”

Ariel nodded. “We can assume that Cora has restored Setebos enough, based on her current energy status, so your plan should work.”

David looked at Ariel. “You knew all this, didn’t you, sir.”

“Hmmm.” Ariel shrugged. “If Cora was able to release Setebos alone, then your role in opening the field for her would have been enough. As it stands, what with Setebos’ condition being much tougher to resolve, it’s good that you’re here as a fail-safe.”

David stared at him, but then he shook his head, smirking. “I can see where she gets it.”

“Who?”

“AJ. Your daughter. Being so matter of fact that way. It’s infuriating.”

Ariel shrugged again. “There’s a huge chunk of her mother in AJ as well. Speaking of which, do you know what you’ll say to your parents?”

David positioned himself so that he stood between Setebos and Cora, resting one hand on the field over his father’s forehead, the other over his mother’s back. “Yes.”

Cora was so exhausted that she didn’t notice the voice over the persistent white noise.

“Fairy.”

Her breaths were low and shallow as she shivered.

“FAIRY.”

She raised her head. “David?” She looked around, bewildered. “Where are you?”

“I’m in your head, Fairy. Just like when you talked to me when I was a kid.”

“How --?”

“It’s ’cause I’m your son. Look, I’ll explain later. What are you doing right now?”

“Besides giving up?”

“FAIRY.”

“I’m doing nothing, David. Leaning against Setebos’ chest and crying like a little girl.”

“Well, just rest for now. Okay? Your energy level is so low that Ariel says that you won’t be able to get back into your body if you keep doing what you’ve been doing.”

Cora sighed. “What’re you going to do?”

“I’m going to give my father a stern talking to.”

She stared into the air. Then, in spite of her exhaustion, she started laughing.

“Remember what you said to me? To use my words?”

Cora smiled weakly. “I love you, my boy.”

“I love you, too, Fairy. See you soon.”

He opened his eyes to the sound of a persistent, repetitive chime, which stopped once he sat up on top of the narrow bunk of his private sleeping quarter. He slid off the bunk and automatically searched underneath, where his gear was. He pulled on his gear and then walked toward the bare wall, which divided into two and opened up. He was about to step outside into the wide corridor, where he would join the others to walk to the briefing room, when he heard a voice declare behind him.

“You don’t want to go out there.”

He started. “What?” He looked back into his sleeping quarter but saw no one. “Who’s there?”

“Before I answer that,” said the disembodied male voice, “who are YOU?”

He opened his mouth to answer but realized he had no answer, even though he felt that he knew. He frowned, but as he tried to remember, his thoughts slipped and slid beyond his reach, as a prickly, electrical sensation emerged behind his eyes and in his ears. He shook his head, as if trying to shake it off, but the discomfort persisted. “I – I,” he stammered. His conscious mind clamored, wanting to leave the room, but his body, especially his heart, felt a deep dread at the thought of leaving.

“You don’t want to leave until you know, don’t you,” the voice said. “That’s good.”

“Why is that good?” he cried out, and he was surprised by the pain in his voice.

“Because you’d rather know instead of being comfortably ignorant.”

“But you’re not telling me anything!”

The voice chuckled. “All right, then. My name’s David, although that means nothing to you. And right now, I would rather be with my wife, who is currently waiting for me. Yet here I am – talking with you. It kills me that I’m not with her right now because I love her. Do you even know how that feels like? Have you ever had someone who was willing to wait for you, no matter what?”

He was about to answer “No,” but then realized that would be a lie. He stared into the close confines of his sleeping quarter and -- as he wondered why it wasn’t larger, with a high, rocky ceiling -- he brought a hand to his chest, his fingers clutching to where his heart would be.

“You didn’t say no,” the voice said. “What’s her name?”

“I... don’t know.”

“Really? Then she couldn’t have been that important to you.”

He became angry at that. “No! It’s just... I lost,” he began, but then he staggered backwards, as the prickly sensation became a painful stabbing. It felt like hot daggers, forcing him to his knees as it tried to rip away the incipient thought from his mind. He felt dizzy and nauseous, but he held onto his answer and spoke it out loud, afraid that the answer would disappear in his confusion. “My Cora.”

Suddenly, a searing wind blew away the room, as if it were smoke, and he found himself before a massive tree, under which were two persons. He exhaled sharply, seeing Cora’s gaunt form, her body wet and cold, her

hands torn, fractured, and bleeding. She was kneeling before the other person -- and the other person was him.

“You’re wrong,” the voice said. “She’s waiting. She’s been waiting. She’ll always be waiting. Don’t you remember?”

He stood up and staggered towards her, but when he reached for her, his hand went through her, as if he were smoke. “I’m a dream, aren’t I.”

“Something like that,” the voice said. “So what do you want to do?”

“To wake up.”

“Good call.”

He turned to the sleeping form that was him, and he knew who he was. “David? My name is Setebos, but you knew that already. So why are you helping us? How are you helping us?”

“Ah that. Well,” David said, “you actually knew me, when I was a newborn.”

“What --”

“I’ll see you soon when you and my mother wake up.”

Setebos groaned.

Startled, Cora sat up, falling back to Setebos’ side.

Still feeling cold and stiff, he sat up, blinking as if newly born, as he recalled all of his memories and all of Cora’s sendings. His wine dark wings, long imprisoned in him, emerged and spread wide, like a butterfly released from its cocoon. But then he saw the exhausted woman with the broken and bloodied hands sitting next to him. He looked at her; he knew her. He reached for her hands and, holding them in his, he healed them, as her healing factor was gone. She had poured out all of the angelic energy that was in her to break through to him and heal his damaged spirit. Both he and she knew that she was mortal once again.

But then he felt a shift in her energy signature – now entirely her own, yet grown solid, strong, and perfect. Fully restored to his unfallen status, Setebos knew what had happened, and he smiled at her, ecstatic. “Cora,” he said.

Then everything around them became a blinding white as they woke up.

The force field around Setebos and Cora flickered and then winked away as they awoke. Still holding Cora’s hands in his, Setebos shifted his body so that he stood on solid ground. The stasis room faded away, revealing a sun-filled garden, with two massive fruit trees, grown and twined together, in the center. Ariel and David stood to the side, as witnesses to Setebos and Cora’s return.

“Ariel!” Setebos exclaimed happily. Then he saw the other person, a man who resembled Cora’s brother Peri and yet had his own silver gray eyes. Even though Cora had shared with her sending David’s upbringing, he still found himself astonished to see this grown man as his son Caliban. “David?”

“Yes, sir.” David grinned.

Cora looked around, seeing where Setebos’ stasis room had been hidden all of that time. “This is the Garden Paradise, on top of Mount Purgatory,” she said, marveling.

“Yes,” Ariel said.

“But how can I be here?” she asked. “I’m mortal again; I’m still alive.”

Setebos turned to Ariel and then to David. “Well, gentlemen, what do you see?”

David, his mind full of the arcana of angelic knowledge, gave a whistle of appreciation. “Fairy, you are mortal,” he said, “but your mortal lifespan is over.”

“WHAT?” Cora frowned. “I don’t understand -- I’m not dead!”

“It’s a rare honor, Cora,” Ariel said. “You’ve crossed over without having to give up your mortal body to death.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means,” Ariel said, “your body is both immortal AND fully human.”

“So you don’t have to leave Sacred Space because you belong here,” David added.

She stared, incredulous, as the enormity of what she was now hit her. “But where would I live?”

“Well, Cora,” Ariel explained, smiling, “since you’re Setebos’ Beatrice, you can stay with him.”

Setebos blushed as he said, “If you want to, Cora.”

“Oh!” Cora replied with joy. She suddenly sprang forward and kissed Setebos deeply and passionately. But then she broke free just as quickly, stammering, “What am I doing?” She reared backwards. Looking down, trying to pull back her hands, she cried out profusely, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry! You were always afraid that I would – and you’re – you’re restored! I shouldn’t be doing that, I shouldn’t --”

Still holding her hands, Setebos said, “Please look at me.” He waited until her dark eyes met his silver gray ones. “You’re my Beatrice, Cora. There isn’t any ‘shouldn’t’ between us anymore.” Then he pulled her towards him in a tight embrace and returned her kiss, with the same zeal and feeling, if not more.

David, feeling a little embarrassed, turned to Ariel and murmured, “AJ will have my head if I don’t get back. We still haven’t had a proper anniversary, sir.”

Ariel chuckled and quietly opened a portal. David stepped through first, Ariel second, and the portal shimmered away.

Setebos and Cora weren’t offended when they forgot to say goodbye.