

9 THE DUALISTS

FOUND YOU.

Setebos flinched. Cora’s sending struck him, as if a massive weight had been thrown at him, for she had sent everything that had happened to her since she was eight years old.

“You --” Cora started to say, but then she fell into a coughing fit, still recovering from her drowning. Her hand that had grabbed Setebos’ arm slipped off as she curled up, her lungs burning and her sides aching with each wheezing cough.

Still crouched next to Cora, Setebos shook his head, regaining his composure, and remembered the last time he helped her recover from drowning, when she was a little girl. It had been a long time since he’d done any healing, but this time he only needed to focus Cora’s own healing process. He placed both hands a millimeter above her back, where her lungs were located, and gave a small but sharp push of energy. Immediately, Cora was able to breathe in clear, deep breaths. He quickly broke contact, stood up, and backed away.

She sat up, both hands against her chest, assessing her own breathing.

Setebos warily regarded her. From appearance alone, she looked like a young woman in her mid-20s. However, based on her own memories now swirling in his mind, she was over a hundred years old. In that respect he and she were similar: on the outside looking young and ageless, while having lived for a long, long time.

“Feeling better?” he asked.

She looked up and blushed a little, as she realized that she was wearing very little clothing – and so was he. “Y-yes.”

“Good.” He reached down, grabbed one of her hands, and yanked her up to a standing position. With the other hand, he made a twitching gesture above him, moving aside the atoms of the cave ceiling and creating a wide, vertical hole so that he could see the clear blue sky outside. “Then you can leave.”

“What --” Cora began, but then she felt herself being swung up and flung through that hole, landing hard on her butt, on the outside on top of weedy grass. The hole sealed shut, so neatly that no one would ever had known a hole had been there.

She stared at where the hole used to be.

“WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED?” she exclaimed. She sent, *Setebos!*

He didn’t reply.

Dammit, Setebos! I know you can hear me!

Silence. And then he replied, *Please just leave.*

Cora slammed her fists into the earth. *No! My Gods, if I have to risk drowning again – I can't help you.*

WHY?

Silence.

WHY?

Cora – it would kill you.

So? What if that's what I want? You MADE me immortal, Setebos – you took away my humanity! You need to fix this! I'm sorry. I can't – I can't hurt anyone anymore. Please leave.

Cora felt the fear in Setebos' sending, and it angered her even more. *NO. I'm not going anywhere. You hear me, Setebos? I'm not going ANYWHERE.*

Silence.

She sighed. *A long time ago, you once said, 'As long as there are enough people like you in the world, this world can never, ever truly be evil.' There aren't enough people like me anywhere, Setebos.* Cora closed her eyes, her anger mixed with a pained sadness that exhausted her. *And everyone I've ever loved are dead.*

Silence met her again. She reached out for Setebos, but she felt a psychic wall blocking out her sending, as palpable as the wall that the Kaldachi discovered on their eastern border all those decades ago. He had shut her out.

She looked up, at a beautiful blue sky.

“You damn coward. I'm not going anywhere.”

#

Setebos' island had plenty of rocks.

Fortunately, rocks were useful.

Cora got to work, gathering lots of rocks, setting them aside to a part of the island that had scrubby plants and a higher elevation than its surrounding area. One of the rocks she shaped into a “this'll do” hand axe and took it with her to the nearest island that had trees: little spindly things, since Setebos' island didn't have trees. Cora made multiple trips to harvest some of the little trees, felling them with her “this'll do” hand axe.

Once she had enough, she returned to her storehouse of rocks and got to digging out the outline of a largish circle. Then she started stacking the rocks, morticed together with soddy earth, creating a circular wall – with one opening serving as an entryway -- that rose just high enough so that she could sit up comfortably in the circle. For the roof, she latticed together some of her spindly logs, creating an oval, placed a tarp from the boat on the oval, and weighed down the roof with a layer of smaller rocks and more soddy earth, packing everything together. By the time she was done, Cora had a serviceable little shelter, a mound rising from the ground.

While the shelter was primitive, her boat was not, and she was grateful for its solar panels and salt water treatment apparatus so that she needn't worry about finding drinkable water. She peeled strips of bark from the other spindly tree logs and fashioned rope and baskets from them, all for catching fish or whatever sea life

she could eat, as her travel stores in her bag were getting low. Being careful to remain steady in the boat, Cora could trawl for some fish, and she used the salt byproduct of the water treatment process to preserve her catch. With a little bit of foraging on the island, she found enough edible weeds to balance her sea diet, and she quietly gave thanks to Ina for teaching her how to survive off the land.

With the remaining rocks and some of her spindly logs, she made a workable fire pit, even finding a largish flat rock that could serve both as a cooking surface and an entrance barricade, if need be. It took her one, long week to complete her impromptu homestead, and she thanked the gods for the mild weather and the hospitable tiny island chain where she would be staying for a long time.

I can wait, she sent. *I can wait till the end of the world.*

After two months, Cora had fallen into a comforting rhythm of maintaining the homestead, foraging or hunting for food, spot bathing herself the best she could, and resting -- either in her little home or outside. Since the weather was pleasant, she preferred to rest underneath the stars at night or the brilliant sunshine during the day. During sunrise and sunset, Cora would notice the sky looking particularly striking in color, which meant that more particulate matter was being sent up in the atmosphere, and she wondered which parts of the world were in active wars at that moment.

One evening, the wind picked up speed as the temperature started to drop. Cora looked at the clouds from the horizon building up and roiling towards the island chain. *Hard rain's coming*, she thought. It would be the first one that season. She gave her little house an appreciative pat, went inside, and barricaded the door.

I'm still here, she sent.

She didn't expect Setebos to be listening to her.

But he was.

#

When Setebos first arrived at the remote archipelago of small islands, he vowed to stay away from the affairs of the world forever – or at least until all the humans were gone.

He abandoned the trappings of his previous life, whether that be Celestial Engineer, Watcher, or – God forbid – the humans' GodKing. Cloistered in the largest island's caverns, he conserved his diminished energy and stilled his mind by inducing suspended animation. Enveloped in near darkness, he remained ethereal with only the cold light of the blue glow worms that twitched high above on the cavern ceiling keeping him company. Reminding him of the vast star field beyond Earth, Setebos would observe with melancholy until he slipped into unconsciousness. When his energy stores ran low, he would rouse himself like a ghostly, lethargic bear waking up from its hibernation and make his way to the shore of the internal lagoon. If he wasn't too depleted, then lying down on the dark, rocky shoreline with the waters lapping against him would be enough to top off his recharge.

But if his needs were critical, he would leave the dark interior for the bright surface. Depending on his whim, Setebos would float on the glittery surface of the cold ocean or fly up to rest on top of the island, splayed

out like a shimmery starfish in the tall weeds. Outside, he would absorb the sunlight just like a plant would, feeling the warmth and energy of the solar radiation do its work.

That was his life: the peaceful, cyclical balance of long hibernation and short energy replenishment. Setebos preferred to stay awake as briefly as possible, to return to suspended animation as quickly as possible. For the longer he stayed awake, the more he risked that the regrets of his past and the anxiety of his future could overwhelm him.

Cora’s arrival threw everything off balance.

The day she arrived, he awoke earlier than expected, which he should have suspected was unusual but was too groggy to dwell on it at the time. (Later on, he suspected that Cora’s proximity to his island triggered his early awakening.) Seeing Cora washed up ashore on that day distracted him from recharging, but when she grabbed hold of him, sending her message to him, she also sent a jolt of energy – his own energy signature mixed in with her own – that reminded him of the nephil-saturated world of Baraqel and his children. Supercharged, he was able to create that hole in the ceiling of his cave with ease, and he evicted Cora as quickly as he could lest he become tempted to see her as a high-caliber recharging station for himself.

In order to keep her out of his mind and his cave, Setebos pulled up psychic walls, which he could only maintain while awake. So, in the two months that Cora had occupied his island, he – knowing that most humans were diurnal sleepers – stayed awake during the day and slept at night, a pattern that created long hours of him being awake and dwelling on thoughts he would prefer not to remember nor speculate on. When his thoughts became too overwhelming, his resolve would slip, and he could hear Cora’s sending, even though she couldn’t tell that her sending reached him.

You damn coward.

I can wait.

I’m not going anywhere.

And then --

What a lonely place.

So tired.

I’m still here.

During those times, he would recall Cora’s own memories, from her childhood years before he met her on that bridge to the moment just before she jumped off her boat, thinking, *Ob Gods, I don’t want to do this*. Her thoughts and actions of the past century gave him knowledge of what he had missed during his self-imposed exile. It was as he and Miranda feared – the ultimate disbandment of and utter strife between the Watchers, the rise of their nephil children and themselves as unquestioned GodKings over their humans, and the indiscriminate revelation of technology too advanced for humans to understand logically and use ethically.

But also during those times, when he would recall Cora’s own memories, he would feel guilty. *You took away my humanity*, she had sent. Her words reverberated in his head as a crazy quilt of her memories flashed through

his mind. The burning of her grandmother’s body and shoveling the ashes and bones in an urn. The concussion she received while training as a young man in Malech-Miranda’s army. The man who discovered that she was a woman and fell in love with her, whom she rejected, not because she didn’t love him, but because she wanted him to marry a woman who could give him children and who could grow old with him. The grief she felt when she later found his grave, buried next to his foreign wife, with a gravestone inscribed with his military rank and death in a senseless war. The wars, all those wars she witnessed in her travels, and the soldiers becoming younger and younger as the machines of war chewed up able-bodied humans and vomited mutilated corpses.

Setebos had traveled by sky, so his energy signature was faint as he had journeyed the Earth for his final hiding place on the other side of the planet. In tracking him, Cora could only travel by land, as air transport was reserved for the military and the GodKings. In keeping with her time as a soldier, she continued her guise as a young man, to keep herself safe. Nevertheless, as the journeying became more treacherous for any human, Cora often stayed at a village, town, or city for long stretches of time. She would take up residency, learn from the locals, and become a productive member of her community in a small, unassuming way, like being a gardener, a carpenter, a teacher.

As the technology advanced, so did her learning: a structural engineer, an agronomist, a medical doctor. She witnessed many acts of depravity and corruption from the authorities, but she kept silent, not wanting to endanger the ordinary folk who befriended her. For, inevitably, she would leave since she didn’t age, and that fact would’ve drawn too much attention the longer she stayed. A few times, when Cora made the mistake of having close bonds with a person or family, she would resort to having herself killed – either in an accident or as a victim of an act of crime or war – so that they could let her go. Suffering death and yet her healing factor bringing her back, Cora would recover in pain and then sneak away, to begin anew her journey, to find Setebos.

That was her life: the perilous, cyclical balance of solitary traveling; reviving and thriving in safe havens; lying to and then ripping herself away from individuals who grew to love her; and returning to her treacherous search. By the time she found him, Cora had preferred to stay in town as briefly as possible, to return to her search as quickly as possible. For the longer she stayed, the more pain she suffered when she would have to leave everyone yet again, regretful that she was unable to stay and save them.

And everyone I’ve ever loved are dead. Her words echoed over these memories, and he spent his waking hours feeling guilty and angry at the woman who made him feel guilty.

Because she was right.

It was nighttime. Setebos should’ve been asleep, but he was awake, watching agitated waves washing upon the shore of his lagoon. Just like Cora topside, he was waiting out the storm, but for a different reason from Cora’s, which he refused to admit to himself – except that his psychic walls were down.

Topside, Cora heard the storm coming in, and she realized she had underestimated its strength. *Oh Gods*, she thought, gritting her teeth, *it’s a hurricane*. She hunkered down in her squat dome of a shelter, hoping that it would hold but knowing that it wouldn’t. She didn’t cry out for help. She didn’t pray to anyone. She just braced

herself. She waited for the roof to tear away, for the winds to rip apart the stones and sod, for the rain to wash her off the island into the cold, dark sea below, for her to suffer yet another death-by-drowning, only to come back again and again and again, in a never-ending cycle of pain and death and life. *I hate this*, she sent, her eyes squeezed shut in the howling darkness as fear overtook her, knowing that no one was listening.

Suddenly, Cora realized she wasn't alone. She opened her eyes, seeing a silvery, glowing Setebos phase into her tiny shelter, barely contained in the close quarter. Touching her arm, Setebos gasped, as if breathing for the first time, and the rest of his body materialized, his arms supporting her as the ground beneath them disappeared. He and Cora fell down in a sickening drop. After clearing the hole, into the high cavern below, Setebos' wings – the color of dark wine – materialized and shot outward, slowing their descent. He glanced up, and the hole sealed up, just in time to see Cora's shelter rip away from the island as if it were made of straw. He flew further into the cave, away from the choppy waters of the lagoon. When they arrived at the center-most area of the island's cavern system, with its higher elevation, thick walls of limestone all around them, and innumerable glow worms bathing the space in their soft, blue light, Setebos set Cora down gently.

“I'm sorry, Cora,” he said.

Without thinking, she still clung to him, as she sobbed, like the frightened young woman that she still was, in spite of the decades that had passed and the people she had lost. Setebos sat down, his wings around both of them like a warm, feathery blanket, and surprised himself as he felt long-held tears fall from his eyes as well. He bowed his head, his own dark hair mingling with Cora's, and said, his voice ragged, “I'm so sorry, little one.”

At that, Cora broke away and pushed him back. “You better be!” she exclaimed. “And I'm not so little, you – you –”

“I know you want to hit me,” Setebos said, “and I'll deserve it.” He folded back his wings, laying them compactly against his back, and dropped his arms to his sides.

She stared at him. “Yes, you damn well deserve it!” She angrily wiped her eyes with her palms. “But I won't.” She inhaled deeply, exhaled, and looked around, seeing the wonders of the cave and hearing the hurricane wreaking its worst just beyond the island cave walls. It was all too much to take in, and she shook her head. “I'm too tired right now.” Ignoring Setebos, she started to lie down where she sat.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I'm doing? I need to sleep.”

“On bare ground?”

She sighed. “I've slept on worse.”

“But that's not very comfortable --”

“Look,” she interrupted, “it's obvious you want to do something, so just do it, okay? Between being terrified and then crying like a child in front of you, I'd really just want to be unconscious for a little while.”

“... Right.” Then Setebos realized that the rescue and flight had wiped him out. “Ah – Cora, there's

something I need to tell you... about your healing factor and me --”

“You mean the fact that you can use me to power you up?”

Setebos stared at her, mouth agape. “YOU KNEW?”

Cora grunted as she sat up. “Miranda was my mentor – remember? She trained me how to use this – this THING in me. Of course she’d explain how your people would see me, if they were to know what I had. Also, even though she never asked, I would help Miranda recover after a campaign, if she didn’t have time to recover the usual way – with trees, right?”

“She told you everything.”

Cora gave him a look.

“... So you know about Miranda --”

“And you? Of course.” She yawned. “I’m surprised you don’t already know. I sent that with the rest of my memories the first day here.”

Setebos stared at her again, his mouth agape.

Cora shook her head. “Oh Gods, how can someone as old as you be so clueless?” She suddenly chuckled. “Miranda was right.”

“About what?”

“It’s hard to stay mad at you once they get to know you.”

“Well... I’m still sorry for what you went through.”

“You better be,” she said. Then she struck his shoulder.

“Hey!” He rubbed the sore spot. “I thought you said you were tired.”

Cora smirked. “I am. And I just gave you an extra boost, so I’m even more tired. Since you insist, are you at least going to make me a cot or what?”

Silvery gray eyes met mahogany brown eyes. Setebos was stunned by how much this woman reminded him of Miranda. Maybe that was why she didn’t go insane, enduring everything that she had gone through. “Yes, ma’am.” He stood up and walked past Cora, stopping a few feet away. He raised his arms like an orchestral conductor, about to begin.

“Setebos?”

“Yes?” He turned, looking back.

She looked away from him. “Thank you.”

#

The water was like blood. Warm, salty, life-giving.

At least that was what Cora kept saying to herself, as she calmed her fear of deep water, floating on her back. She arched her back, her limbs splayed out like a jittery starfish, blinking against the bright sun above her and the ocean water splashing on either side of her head, stinging her eyes. For the millionth time she asked, a hint of panic creeping in her voice, “Tell me why the hell am I doing this again?”

From her boat, which Setebos had retrieved from the open ocean when the hurricane blew it away, he replied, “So you don’t drown every time you have to swim.”

“But I can recover every time.” She shifted a little, trying to see his face.

“That doesn’t negate the fact that drowning is still awful -- EYES FORWARD.”

Cora, who started to sink, moved to looking straight up, and she arched her back, which had sunk. She sighed. “And you are doing what again?”

“Making sure you keep good form and don’t panic,” he said.

“And?”

“And figuring out how to pull that angelic energy out of you without killing you. Which is another reason that you should finally overcome your panic response in water – because you WON’T be able to recover if I do fix you.”

“So have you figured it out yet?”

“No.”

“So... why am I doing this again?”

Setebos sighed. “Just float, Cora.”

It had been three weeks since the hurricane, and the weather had remained calm and clear. In the first week, for Cora’s sake, Setebos had created a stairwell that went from the center “room” of the cavern to a permanent access hatch topside of the island. Cora had reconstructed her little shelter, refusing Setebos’ help, but only used it during the day. At night, she would return to the cavern, to a private area where Cora’s cot sat, partitioned from the rest of the cavern with a wall that Setebos made from the limestone. In that time, Cora would insist on staying outside during the day, in spite of Setebos’ misgivings of prying eyes.

“We are in the middle of nowhere, Setebos.”

“Still...”

“I’m not a damn mole rat!”

“FINE.”

Topside, Setebos had assessed Cora’s condition. The first time was awkward. She had tried not to look at Setebos’ face as his hands, palms down, hovered just millimeters over her body. Even though clothed, Cora had felt flustered as he methodically moved his hands, starting from her head, all the way to her feet. She had to lie face up and then face down, as he did a scan of her body from the back. She could feel her body tense against her will, as she felt a creeping warmth cross that gap of a few millimeters, from Setebos’ hands to her body.

After what felt like an unbearable amount of time, he had said, “We’re done.” Rolling over and then sitting up, she saw Setebos sitting close by, his brows knitted in deep thought.

“Well?”

“It’s as I thought. When I rid your body of your cancer, making sure that it would never come back, I

miscalculated the longevity of the energy transfusion. It was supposed to dissipate in a day. Instead, it lodged itself in your cells’ mitochondria, becoming part of its structure and enhancing its function.”

“Wait.” Cora had medical training in her past lives. “My mitochondria are what powers my entire body.”

“Yes.”

“That means a bit of your energy is what’s keeping me alive.”

“Yes.”

“And that’s what you meant by ‘It would kill you?’”

“Yes.”

“Huh.” Cora had considered the information, nodding, “Well --”

“I refuse to do anything that will kill you, Cora, so don’t even ask.”

“But --”

“I don’t care that you’ve lived far longer than your allowable life expectancy. I’m not doing it.”

She had given him a hard, long stare. “Well then. You’re just going to have to figure out how to fix me without killing me.” She had stood up and then left him to walk off her anger.

That first week, Cora and Setebos avoided each other as much as possible, as the fact that they were living together felt unbearably awkward: a fallen angel who had been hiding from humans (especially human females) and a human female who had been seeking him at great cost to her well-being. But at the end of that first week, as Cora lay in her cot on the other side of the wall, she couldn’t stand the tension any longer, sat up, and sent for the first time since the night of the hurricane.

... *I*, Setebos began but then suddenly stopped.

Cora walked out, a blanket draped and wrapped around her since she didn’t have a dressing gown, and waited on the other side of the wall. She saw Setebos arrive. Even though he was ethereal, she could see him, thanks to her condition. As if in self-defense, he remained ethereal, as he stood a polite distance away. She repeated out loud what she had sent.

“Get over yourself, Setebos. I don’t want to have sex with you.”

Even ethereal, he flinched as if struck.

“It boggles my mind that you forget that I know this. Miranda told me EVERYTHING, and you have my memories of that.”

Setebos grumbled, “It’s not as if I do a daily itemized inventory of your past, Cora.”

“Well, maybe you should.” She sighed. “I’ve seen what those so-called GodKings and their nephil children have done. I’ve seen how corrupt human beings can do to each other and to innocent people – Setebos, I’ve experienced it! So I know why the leaders of your people would want to start Earth all over, and I don’t blame them. No way in hell would I do anything or let you do anything to have your leaders fault you with anything, so can you PLEASE stop thinking the fate of the entire world depends your actions?”

“But what I did to you --”

“Was an accident,” Cora declared. “So how you fix this – however it turns out – I’ll accept. Because I forgive you, Setebos. For all those years searching for you, as shitty as they were, they were not all bad. I’ve met people who reminded me of what humanity is meant to be, and I’m grateful to have met them. Once you fix this, if I’m alive to live out more years, I’ll leave this place. I’ll leave you in peace. But if I die --”

Setebos started to speak, but Cora finished quickly.

“-- then it would be another accident because at least you tried to save me. Again. So.”

He stared at her, unsure of what to say.

“So... friends?”

He blinked. Then he gave a snort of laughter and nodded. “Friends.”

“Well, friend, have you figured out anything?”

“No. I’m still working it out.”

“Huh. What do you propose we do in the meantime?”

He looked at her, this brave, small woman with the big brown eyes. “I’ll come up with something.”

Thus began the “Have Cora Overcome Her Fear of Open Water” project in the second week, which continued into the third.

Cora slowly paddled over to the boat, her eyes still facing up. Once her left hand touched its side, she flipped over and swam to the back.

Setebos said, “I didn’t say you were done.”

“Yup, you didn’t.” She hoisted herself onto the boat. “That’s because *I* say I’m done. According to that sun, it’s past noon, and you may not need to eat, but I do.” She grabbed a towel and started drying her hair.

As Cora dried herself, Setebos regarded her. Her wetsuit was one of his old skinsuits, which he had materialized and, with some angelic tailoring, modified so that it fit Cora. She was lithe and strong and, to his mild shock, beautiful. He looked away, saying, “Your usual?”

“Fish and weeds – YUM.” She raised her right arm triumphantly.

While Cora rummaged in the boat’s food stores for her lunch, Setebos’ eyes wandered over the ocean waters. He noticed a small pod of dolphins moving in a wide circle that grew smaller in its circumference. After a few minutes, he saw the surface of the water become choppy with innumerable fish, glinting just underneath the water’s surface. Then he saw each member of the dolphin pod take turns swimming and leaping through the gathered ball of fish. He watched, admiring a method both playful and frighteningly effective in feeding the entire pod. As he let his mind wander where it willed, his eyes widened.

“Cora,” he said. He looked behind him, to the other side of the boat.

“What?” She was raising a piece of dried fish to her mouth.

He smiled, shaking his head. *Silly woman*, he thought. “I’ve figured it out.”

“About what?”

“About getting that angel energy out of you.”

Cora’s hand lowered the fish. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

She stared at him. Her heart began to beat quickly, but not out of joy. “That – that’s great!” She shook her head, smiling. “Finally!”

He nodded. “I’ll still need to work out the specific details, but that won’t take long.” He turned back to watching the dolphins feeding on their bait ball. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Seeing Setebos’ attention back to the ocean, Cora let her smile fade as she replied, “Ready when you are, then.”

#

Everything felt oddly familiar.

Cora was on her back. Her body, clothed in a simple shift, followed the shoreline of the inner lagoon. From head to toe, the warm, dark waters lapped against one half of her body. Kneeling next to her, on the water side of the shoreline, Setebos stretched out his arms so that one hand was two inches over her eyes and the other was two inches over her feet. He slowly brought his hands together at the same time, but instead of meeting together, the hands crossed, making a wide circular motion around Cora’s midsection, and then moved outward again. The waters followed Setebos’ motion, making an outline around Cora’s body, as if massaging Cora from the outside, while Setebos manipulated from inside out, making a body length ellipse over her.

“You okay?” he asked, pausing.

“That... felt weird.”

“How?”

“Like I had pins and needles where your hands went over, but now they’ve gone away.”

“Painful?” He asked. “Spots in your line of vision? Headache?”

“I’m not going to have a seizure, if that’s what’s you’re asking.”

“Doing the second pass, then.”

“Okay.”

Setebos resumed the energy flow, and he made another ellipse. This time, it was slightly smaller in circumference, as he gathered more angelic energy from the mitochondria underneath his hands within the ellipse. With each successive pass, the ellipse grew smaller in circumference and the concentration of angelic energy pulled from Cora’s mitochondria increased. Slow, steady, cautious, and exact were his hand motions, as the ball of energy within Cora grew smaller and denser, like a neutron star being formed from a supergiant. Setebos focused on this ball, trying to make it as compact as possible, so he could contain it in Cora’s appendix and excise the vestigial organ as cleanly as any surgical procedure.

He was so focused at the task that he was startled when Cora cried out, “Wait!”

“Cora?”

“It’s not – it’s not where it should be.” Cora started to breathe in slow, deep bursts. “Too high up... acute

pain.” Her hands clenched into the rough sand. “Check... the pelvic area.”

He stared at her. “Cora --”

“Do it!”

Alarmed, Setebos released his hold on the ball of energy that he had methodically gathered, and Cora’s breathing returned to normal, even though her face looked feverish. From above, he saw the angelic energy returning to its previous mitochondria, like surviving fish of a bait ball resuming its ebb and flow amongst a coral reef. But he did as Cora asked, assessing her pelvis, until he paused at one specific area. He probed further.

OH MY GOD, he sent.

Cora scrambled to stand up, wincing, the cloth of her dress clinging to her. Setebos moved to help her, but she shrugged off his assistance and marched away from the shoreline, not looking at him.

“Cora --” Setebos started.

She stopped walking. She turned back, staring at him, and was about to speak when her eyes spied something out on the water. “Who are you?” she asked.

Setebos then turned around and looked outwards from the shore. He saw a tall, imposing figure walking towards them, moving on the deep water as if the ocean was a piece of dark glass. “Uriel,” Setebos said, alarmed.

The Archangel’s face was placid and unreadable as he glanced first at Setebos and then settled his gaze on Cora. He paused in his walking. “Congratulations,” he said to her. “It’s a boy.”