

3 THE GODKING

One of them asked, “Why are we meeting here?”

“It’s not even the next yottaCalend.”

“Has something happened? New orders from Central?”

“We haven’t heard from Central in a while – is that why?”

“Is it Lightbearer?”

“Why ARE we meeting here?”

The ten teams of Watchers had convened on a natural amphitheater, on a hilly highlands east of Eden, called to rendezvous by their leader Samyaza. But Samyaza hadn’t arrived yet. As they waited, they questioned each other, wondering if one of them had knowledge or an inkling of what the meeting was about. They had all answered to each other, “I don’t know,” which only fed into their bewilderment.

Setebos was about the check his comm once more when Samyaza finally arrived. He and his fellow Watchers then stood at attention, fanned out as they were on that natural amphitheater. Samyaza’s face was unreadable as he strode to the amphitheater’s stage and looked up at his twenty Watchers.

“I’ll get to the point,” Samyaza said. “Our communications link with Central has been blocked, and has been for some time.”

Setebos glanced at Miranda’s face, but her reaction remained stoic.

“Communication with the Archangels above Earth has been spotty as well, and I’ve only received one transmission from Uriel since last yottaCalend. ‘Lightbearer hacking communications system – maintain current directive.’ The Edenic cherubim and I have attempted to re-establish a clear channel, but there is no signal. So --” Samyaza paused and scanned the faces of the Watchers, “with the cherubim tasked with guarding Eden’s gates, then we are effectively the only active agents of Heaven on Earth. What that means is that we need to revisit our directive.”

Setebos felt his face become incredulous, which Samyaza noticed.

“Question, Setebos?”

“Yes, sir. What do you mean by ‘revisit?’”

“Interesting that you should ask – since it was your report of your team saving a female human from suicide and then curing her cancer that comes to mind.”

“WHAT?” Arakiel exclaimed. He spun around, facing Setebos who stood behind and above him on the amphitheater’s slope. “You did WHAT?”

Other Watcher teams murmured, surprised as well, as Setebos and Miranda’s report was not widely known. Samyaza held up a hand, commanding silence. “I’ve gathered and analyzed each report from all teams, and

even though Setebos and Miranda’s action is the most blatant, no team has refrained from engaging the locals in some way, despite lack of Lightbearer activity. For instance,” he pointed at Arakiel, “you and Turiel warned a local and his family of an impending earthquake, as early as the first yottaCalend.”

Arakiel and Turiel frowned, having their past actions made public, but they didn’t deny it.

“Although the letter of the directive states that we do not engage the locals unless there is clear evidence of Lightbearer’s malicious activity, I believe that the spirit of the directive has allowed these instances of direct action.”

Miranda leveled her violet eyes on Samyaza. “Sir?”

“Lightbearer’s original intent was to vandalize creation, and he has done that, in causing the humans to fall from their original state. Therefore, humanity’s judgment in practicing their free will is so compromised that it’s no surprise that Lightbearer doesn’t have to inject himself into human affairs to continue his work. The poisonous effect of his action back in Eden began immediately and continues to this day.”

“So what you are saying, sir,” Miranda said, choosing her words with care, “is that all of our ‘unsanctioned’ engagements with the humans have actually been following the directive all along?”

“Yes.”

Miranda exhaled loudly.

“YES,” Samyaza agreed, understanding. “That allows more freedom of judgment and discretion on everyone’s part. As we all know, we’ve all witnessed that the humans are both capable and willing to destroy each other, which defeats the purpose of their original creation, as well as jeopardizing our own mission to keep them safe. I believe that in order to follow our directive, we must render aid to humanity, to help restore them to a position of strength, so that they will be able to withstand a direct onslaught from Lightbearer and his army, if and when that time comes.”

The Watchers stared speechless and then the outbursts came.

“What do you mean by ‘render aid?’”

“Do the Archangels know?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Isn’t that going too far?”

“Sir, are you SURE?”

Samyaza held up his hand again and waited for his Watchers to settle down. “No, I am not sure. My new understanding of the directive doesn’t come from knowledge but from my faith in what we are capable of doing, for why Central created this unit with us specific angels in the first place. I believe we were not sent here to witness humans build, fight, die; build, fight, die; build, fight, die – this futile cycle of meaningless life. As Setebos and Miranda’s report states, the human child Cora wanted to die because she lost hope, and even her father accepted her death because he lost hope. But we all know the location where all hope is lost: Hell.”

Setebos flinched, remembering the sight, smell, sound, touch, and even taste of that place of abomination.

“I believe we were not sent here to stand idly by, to witness humans create Hell on Earth. We must ACT because the humans have lost their way, but we can guide them back. After all, we are ANGELS. Humanity needs us, especially with Lightbearer wreaking havoc just beyond this world’s borders.” Samyaza gestured to the natural location around them. “I brought you here because this understanding of our directive is beyond the scope of FOB Eden. I must be honest – I may be wrong. With our communications link compromised, I can’t confirm this with either the Archangels or Central. But I believe, as your commanding officer, as a Dominion-ranked angel in God’s army, but also as your fellow Watcher, that I’m right. Therefore, any Watcher who has a conscientious objection to our revised directive is free to stay in Eden. I want all actions in this unit be done because you chose to do so, not because you were merely ordered to.”

Free will always complicates everything, Setebos thought, reminded of Ariel’s words so long ago. Now he was faced with a choice: abandon his unit or stand with them. He glanced at Miranda and saw that she was looking at him as well.

What do we do?, her eyes clearly asked.

Samyaza waited. Setebos and Miranda waited. They all waited.

But no one broke ranks.

“All right, then,” Samyaza said. “Let’s begin.”

#

We train.

“This is called *Penicillium chrysogenum*, and this is how to cultivate it.”

We advise.

“Here’s when to use it.”

We assist.

“Any questions?”

Even with the allowance of direct action, Setebos and Miranda still preferred to limit their engagement with humans. As a result, when they found themselves having to teach two feuding villages how to get along with each other, they hoped it wouldn’t take more than a week. After all, one of the villages – which Setebos thought of as Village B -- was an offshoot of the other, being founded by a son of the village headman of Village A. But all that meant was that familial rivalry spiraled into communal feuding that further spiraled into outright battles.

Seeing two pre-Industrial villages fight over grazing rights and boundary lines with as much fervor as if they were rival princedoms made the two Watchers’ eyes twitch with exasperated annoyance. Then a herd of sheep from Village A became infected with some unspecified epidemic, and Village A blamed Village B for the disease with no evidence whatsoever for the accusation. Before long, one shepherd from Village B killed a shepherd from Village A to avenge being dishonored, causing the two villages to declare war with each other.

From their treetop perch, Miranda turned to Setebos and asked, “Can we just let them fight it out? It’s just so damn stupid.”

Setebos ticked off the increasing casualty count amongst both humans and sheep. “No.” He flew down from their perch and, upon reaching ground, became material.

Miranda sighed. “Time to teach the humans.” She followed in Setebos’ stead.

After one month with the two feuding villages, Setebos and Miranda left the now allied neighbors. The two villages buried their dead safely and honorably, treated their battle wounded warriors with best medical practices such as anesthesia and aseptic techniques, treated their sheep for foot-and-mouth disease with proper veterinary care, and applied innovative diplomatic tools such as mediation and contracts. Setebos and Miranda slipped away in the night, as the villagers had wanted them to stay, especially Setebos whom they particularly revered. Setebos and Miranda quickly resumed their patrol for the next human population that would need their help, traveling by foot, as they didn’t need to hurry.

Once they were sufficiently far enough, Miranda said, “I’m glad that we helped them out – GodKing.” She smirked.

Setebos groaned. “UGH. I wish they would stop calling me that.”

“Can’t be helped. You have a reputation for being a leader and a miracle worker.” She reached her pale arms behind her head for a long, cat-like stretch.

“But I’m not the only one – you do as much, if not more!”

She shrugged, still smiling. “Blame the patriarchy. I’m just a FEMALE, remember?”

He frowned at that. “Miranda, even with all that new knowledge, all that advanced *techne*, the humans still hold these immature biases. What kind of human progress can there be if they keep believing in these backward ideas?”

“Hmmm.”

“And that ‘GodKing’ bullshit.” Setebos shook his head. “Even when I keep telling them I’m just a creature, just like them, they keep wanting to WORSHIP me. UGH!”

Miranda shrugged.

“I mean, we make sure we look like them – we even keep our wings immaterialized!”

“Setebos.”

“WHAT?”

Miranda placed a hand on Setebos’ shoulder. “You’re starting to sound like me. Calm. Down. Either that, or do you want a mountain to beat up?”

Setebos snorted at that, then sighed. “I’m just tired, Miranda.”

She patted Setebos’ shoulder and then resumed her cat-like stretch. “I’m tired, too. And not the existential kind – I mean the physical. We’ve been getting tired more easily and sooner these days, and that’s weird, isn’t it?”

“Well, we have been more active, what with the expanded directive.”

“True. But something feels off.” She shook her head. “Ah, I’m rambling. Hey, I wonder how the other

teams are doing.”

“It’s not a competition, Miranda.”

She turned and punched lightly Setebos’ shoulder. “I KNOW. But it’s been a while since we checked in.” With a quick hand gesture, she pulled up a virtual vid screen before them, saying, “Baraqel and Kokabiel are the closest.” She brought up an aerial view. “WHAT.”

Setebos peered at the image. “Is that – is that an observatory?”

They both had stopped walking as they stared at the large observatory’s dome opening up, and the telltale laser of an adaptive optics system appeared.

Miranda gave a long, appreciative whistle. “Just how far in advance are we allowed to show?”

Setebos regarded the image, taking in its meaning. “Miranda.”

“Yes?”

“You’re right.” Setebos’ brow furrowed. “Something is off.” He shook his head, stifling a yawn. “But I’m too tired to analyze all that standing up. We need to make camp soon.”

“Right.” Miranda waved away the vid screen, and they resumed their travelling.

As was their habit, they found a small grove of trees and switched from material to ethereal, their respective essence finding roost in the roots of the largest tree. From their perspective, they had arrived at a small green room, with wooden cots on either side, the walls of the room glowing with the lifesap of the tree, both illuminating the room in a golden twilight while invigorating the two angels. While in the past the invigoration was a nice perk, like a dessert that was nice to have but didn’t need, these days the tree’s lifesap had become a needed recharge, as necessary to the angels’ health as food, sleep, and water were to humans. They stripped off their gear, leaving only the bare minimum for decorum, and stretched out on their respective cots.

Miranda pulled up the vid screen again, enlarged it so both she and Setebos could see, and said, “Okay – we’ve made camp. So what about this screams ‘off’, other than this thing is far above what even I think Samyaza expected?”

“It’s not only this – okay, it’s THIS, but also what you said earlier, about getting more tired sooner and more easily these days. Have you noticed that we’re starting to depend on making camp to recharge every evening, or else we’d feel like crap the next day? We didn’t used to do that; we certainly didn’t do that when we first arrived Earthside and also for the first couple of yottaCalends. I’ve noticed that we started to depend on the night roosts after that meeting east of Eden.”

“Meaning --”

“Meaning, what if the communications blackout has also compromised our quantum energy entanglement with Heaven? What if, in addition to a communications blockade, it’s a resources blockade?”

“... Well, shit.”

“Yeah. So, if we’re effectively on reduced rations, having to depend on the land for survival, then we’d have very little energy resources to do THAT.” Setebos pointed at the observatory. “So where is Baraqel and

Kokabiel getting their power? A power station? But it takes power to create a power station as well -- neither of which those angels have in their impaired state, and certainly not the humans, as undeveloped as they are. Either way, that observatory – with those LASER BEAMS -- shouldn't be able to exist.” Setebos shook his head. “Something's off, and my thought keeps going to Lightbearer, even though I'd be shocked if Baraqel would have anything to do with him.”

“It's not Lightbearer. For one, we'd all be alerted if Lightbearer made it Earthside, and two, Michael himself would come down from orbit and personally beat his ass back to Hell.”

Setebos chuckled. “Okay, then. Any ideas?”

Miranda stared at the vid screen. “I've got nothin'. Honestly, I'm still kinda shocked, realizing that we're essentially parasites of this poor tree here.” She reached out a hand and patted the wall in appreciation, then sighed. “God, I miss home.”

At a loss to think of an answer to the observatory's existence, Setebos decided to switch subjects. He asked, “When was the last time you heard from Ariel?”

Miranda waved away the vid screen. “Just after the second yottaCalend – a few years before our meeting about the expanded directive. Then the communications blackout happened, and then...” She shrugged.

“You must miss him.”

“No shit.”

“... Sorry.”

Miranda smiled. “Nah, I'm just giving you a hard time. What can I say? It is what it is.” She paused. “Although – sometimes I wonder.”

“About what?”

“If Ariel is trying to find a way to talk to me – to fight for me on his side. I wish I knew.” Miranda touched her lips, remembering. Then she turned over, facing the wall. “Let's get some rest, Setebos.”

“Okay.” Setebos stared at Miranda's back before turning over as well.

“And?”

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

“SERIOUSLY?”

“As I said, free will always complicates everything. Especially when love is involved.”

“What?”

“You've never engaged in an intimate companionship, have you.”

“WHAT?” Setebos woke up with a start, the dream Ariel's voice fading quickly. He found himself sweating, despite the cool confines of the resting roost. He glanced across the room and saw that Miranda was still asleep. He shook his head. *Should've swapped out pulling up the vid screen*, he thought. Aerial surveillance was usually easy,

what with sending up a bit of your essence to serve as a flying eye in the sky. But with their reduced stamina, Setebos suddenly realized that Miranda sustaining the vid screen last night was probably why she – normally an early riser – hadn’t woken up before him.

Yet, Setebos was curious about what they had seen. With the image of last night’s vid screen in his memory, he called it up in an offline version, a small ghostly rectangle floating about a foot from his face. He sharpened the focus and then enlarged one specific corner – of an illuminated entrance to the observatory. There, he saw two persons: one he recognized as Baraqel, his fellow Watcher and Celestial Engineer. The other an unfamiliar young human woman – whose arms clung intimately around Baraqel’s waist.

“WHAT THE HELL?” he exclaimed, sitting upright.

At the sound of Setebos’ outburst, Miranda woke up. She looked around blearily, breathed in deeply, and was fully awake. Sitting up, she looked over at Setebos. “Are you reviewing the image from last night? What did you find?”

Setebos brightened up the image and expanded the screen so that the image of Baraqel and the unknown woman were nearly life-size in the close quarters. “THAT.”

Miranda stared at the image. “No. Way.”

Setebos stood up from the cot and started to pull on his gear. “I need to see Baraqel.”

“No comm?”

“Not in this case. I have to see what’s been going on with my own eyes, without anything being staged on my behalf. Who is that woman? How did that observatory come to be? And where is Kokabiel?”

Miranda nodded. “I take it that you want me to stay here.”

“Yes. Something’s gone wrong, and we’re still responsible for our assigned area.”

“Sentry duty, in other words.”

“Yes.”

She stretched and yawned, looking like a long, muscular cat, and stood up. “Good.”

Setebos waved away the vid screen and began to leave.

“Setebos.”

He paused. “Yes?” Gray eyes met violet eyes.

“Be careful.”

If you as an angel was “born” – so to speak -- as a Celestial Engineer, then you knew certain pieces of arcana by instinct, knowledge that native-born Sentry or Musician or any number of non-engineer angelic occupations would have to learn afterwards, on a Need to Know basis. Therefore, when faced with a force field that divided his and Miranda’s patrol area and Baraqel and Kokabiel’s, Setebos knew exactly how to weaken it enough for himself to pass through. However, that practical knowledge didn’t lessen his surprise, that Baraqel felt the need to put a force field in the first place.

“What is going on?” he murmured. As he disengaged two ethereal lines of force, he felt the existence of an alarm, which he carefully set aside, intact, as he slipped through. Once on the other side of the field, he suddenly felt giddy, as an onrush of energy swept over him, as if he had dove into the sea. He hadn’t realized just how diminished the power that he and Miranda had been operating under as they had performed their duties until he entered Baraqel and Kokabiel’s patrol area.

“What is going on?” he repeated, stunned.

For, against his will, he had become embodied.

Setebos shook his head and shoulders, trying to regain his composure, because he felt a little high. It was like a human being given a powerful dose of amphetamine. The world looked brighter. The sky looked bluer. It was too much, and he found himself sitting down heavily on the ground. Breathing heavily, he closed his eyes. Forcing himself not to become overwhelmed by its potency, he concentrated to get a reading for what kind of energy was infusing the environment around him, for any tell-tale signatures. After a moment, he opened his eyes, stunned that he knew: it was angelic energy, plus another – a human’s. Maybe the woman’s. And while the human’s was unknown, he could specify the angel’s: Baraqel’s. By whatever science or alchemy, the two lifeforce energies that were usually separate and confined within angelic and human creatures were merged into one, and it was amplified and ubiquitous, saturating the environment. Just like Miranda had sought out Cora’s grandmother many years ago, Setebos tried to pinpoint the source of that power, but it was coming everywhere, and he started to feel as if he were drowning.

His comm activated.

“Hello, Setebos,” Baraqel greeted.

“What --”

“I noticed the overhead surveillance last night. From the Sentry Miranda, yes? So I made certain to portray an image that would bring you here, my old comrade.”

Setebos gritted his teeth. “The woman – not real...?”

“She’s real. But she wasn’t at the observatory last night, and she certainly wouldn’t have been gratuitously clingy like that.” Baraqel’s voice sounded amused. “But I’m being a poor host. The sensors in the shield read your energy signature, and while you thought you had displaced the perimeter alarm, you actually set off a trap. Allow me to disentangle you from that --”

Suddenly, the energy around Setebos lessened in its intensity, and he was able to breathe normally, even though he felt dizzy and also remained embodied.

“—and arrange transport to the observatory since you’re likely in no condition to travel here on your own.”

Setebos looked up and saw an autonomous vehicle hovering two feet above the ground before him, its door slowly opening with a soft hiss. He hesitated, remembering Miranda’s warning. But Baraqel was right – he was in no condition to fly or even walk. He climbed into an interior that was all soft cushion with no obvious dashboard nor controls. The door closed, and it began to move quickly. With the aerial image of the observatory

in his mind, Setebos knew how long it would've taken him to fly there; the vehicle was just as fast. Soon, it came to a stop, and the door opened again with the soft hiss of pneumatics.

Setebos had recovered enough to hop out of the vehicle, whereupon it closed its doors, settled down, and powered off. He walked up a wide pathway to a nondescript domed building, its massive door opening for him automatically. Inside, the observatory was one cavernous room, with a large telescope in the center, surrounded by computational machinery. But it was not the usual instruments of an astronomical observatory that arrested Setebos' steps. It was the presence of a clear, glass case, in which a young man was suspended upright, his eyes closed. Assessing this figure, Setebos saw the concentric lines of energy emanating from this person, who, he perceived in shock, powered the entire observatory. He stared and then stepped back.

“How --” Setebos stammered, seeing both angelic and human energy in one creature.

The young man's eyes opened, and he communicated without speech directly into Setebos' mind. *I will explain.*

#

Kokabiel was Sentry, and as such he knew not to question orders.

When he was ordered to guard the Celestial Engineers' containment room, he did.

When he was ordered to battle Lightbearer and the renegade Seraphim, he did.

When he was ordered to partner with a Celestial Engineer, he did.

When he was ordered to do nothing to help the fallen humans, he did.

When he was ordered to do everything to help the fallen humans, he did.

He did, he did, he did.

It was not enough.

Kokabiel clenched his fists.

It would never be enough.

Baraqel, in being a Celestial Engineer whose prior work involved collaboration and adaptability, always had an easy rapport with the humans. While both Kokabiel and Baraqel together would intervene to assist the humans advance their development – medicine, technology, diplomacy, among other tools – it was Baraqel whom the humans would call their GodKing.

“You should be bothered by that,” Kokabiel once declared. “It stinks too much of Lightbearer's ambition.”

“It's harmless,” Baraqel responded. “The immature superstitions of those who cannot tell the difference between science and magic. They'll outgrow it the more they are civilized.”

“Hmph.” Kokabiel doubted that. In seeing all the so-called miracles and wonders that he and Baraqel had given to the humans, these humans should have been happy. And still they remained unsatisfied, as they fought amongst themselves to feed their pride and their greed; their lust and their envy; their gluttony and their wrath. Worse still, these humans became complacent, indulging in a moral laziness that assumed that, whatever troubles they would get themselves into, their kind and merciful caretakers would always and forever save them

– a trap of co-dependency that made Kokabiel twitch and restless.

Whenever Kokabiel was that way, Baraqel would say, “Patience, Kokabiel.”

“Why should I?”

“Because,” he would say, smiling, “we’re domesticating the humans.”

And that reply always made Kokabiel angry, as it made him feel as if he were a slave to cattle. But he would say nothing.

Nothing.

But not anymore.

This is nothing.

The three slipped into the village, killed the night watchmen, and surrounded the headman’s house. They broke in, kidnapped the headman’s daughter, and made their way outside.

Kokabiel stood before them. Before, he would incapacitate all human criminals and then bring them to the local village’s elders for judgment. But these clever humans could and would escape any human-made incarceration, to commit another crime, starting the tedious cycle again.

Not anymore.

This.

He struck.

Is.

He struck again.

Nothing.

The headman’s daughter screamed, awakening the house and the entire village.

The bodies of the three kidnappers whom Kokabiel had been tracking lay on the ground in a messy heap. He placed one hand on the bodies, to stand up from his kneel, when he suddenly felt recharged, as he involuntarily absorbed their biochemical energy. He stood up, surprised. *Cattle, you say, Baraqel.* He smiled. *Time for slaughter.*

No!, the headman’s daughter cried out, hearing for the first time the voiceless speech of angels.

Baraqel awoke from his night roost. *Who was that?* He looked around. *Where is Kokabiel?*

Tracking Kokabiel and that other voice, Baraqel arrived at a nearby village, where he saw a monstrous yet miraculous sight. Kokabiel was on a rampage, grabbing humans and striking them dead. But he was not random in his choosing, as a young woman yelled at many of her villagers to stay back while she voicelessly communicated with Kokabiel, directing him to the corrupted ones within her village, preventing him from taking the innocent. She looked at him, eye-to-eye, her fear palpable but her bravery greater than her fear, as she did damage control in the presence of an angel gone mad.

Baraqel, like Kokabiel, didn’t even bother to hide his wings, as he grabbed Kokabiel to bring him back to his senses. But Kokabiel, refreshed from absorbing the lifeforce of so many humans, was physically stronger.

Baraqel couldn't hold Kokabiel, who spun and flailed, laughing, nearly crashing into the woman.

“Look out!” exclaimed Baraqel, as he caught her as she fell, avoiding the hulking body of Kokabiel. At her touch, Baraqel felt a sharp electricity, and he stared after her as she righted herself, even though he could feel her trembling in his arms.

“Thank you,” she murmured, and then she tore away, saying aloud to Kokabiel so that her villagers could hear, “My lord, my lord, you are done. Please --”

“Are you SURE?” Kokabiel asked, squinting at her, assessing her worth.

“Yes, my lord. My village is... is cleansed. I thank you.”

Kokabiel, intoxicated with power, smiled. “You are welcome. What is your name, young woman?”

“It's – it's Lilith, my lord.”

“Lilith.” He looked at Baraqel. “See? Why can't all humans be this GRATEFUL?” He looked at the night sky. “I think I'll fly around a bit,” and took off.

Lilith, who had kept herself together, collapsed to the ground, her legs buckling underneath her. “Oh my God,” she said, looking at the carnage around her. But she didn't cry, even as the other living humans around her – including her own father, the village's headman -- wailed hysterically. “Oh my God.”

Baraqel said, “I have to make sure Kokabiel doesn't get into more trouble, but I'll be back to help you.”

She looked at the extraordinary and fearsome angel before her, stunned.

“Lilith, I'll return. Okay?”

“Yes,” she said.

Baraqel glanced down at her one last time. He felt that sharp electricity, hitting him in the chest, and took off after Kokabiel.

Not long after, he found Kokabiel flying over and through the thick canopy of a dense forest, massive branches exploding before the angel's path. Baraqel hovered above, waiting and watching until he saw Kokabiel touch down in a clearing, his strength spent, and collapse onto the ground. Touching down, Baraqel checked Kokabiel. Barely conscious, Kokabiel stared at Baraqel without seeing and whispered, “We are fallen – can't you feel it?” Then he passed out, his body phasing from material to ethereal.

Baraqel sighed deeply. He lifted up Kokabiel, placed him at the roots of the nearest, largest tree, and wove a quick security binding from the tree's lifeforce. He hesitated, but then placed his hand over Kokabiel's eyes, giving a modified Lethe sleep to Kokabiel. “Rest, old friend.”

When Baraqel returned to the village, just before dusk, he saw that the able-bodied survivors had surrounded Lilith. They were screaming and throwing rocks at her, accusing her of controlling Kokabiel to kill at her command. Even Lilith's father, the headman of the village, did nothing to stop the mob, fearful that they would turn on him as they had turned on his daughter. Enraged, Baraqel landed from above, covering Lilith with his wings.

“ENOUGH,” he said.

The mob stepped back, frightened.

“This girl saved your lives,” Baraqel declared. “But from what I see, none of you deserve mercy.” From underneath his wings, he could feel Lilith tremble, and still she didn’t cry. “Go and bury your sinful dead.” He watched as the mob dispersed, and under his watchful eyes they gathered the dead in carts and wheeled the bodies outside of the village, to bury in a mass grave. Once he felt Lilith was safe, he lifted away his wings, to see the young woman having fallen in a fitful sleep.

The headman came forward and kneeled down in supplication. “Take her,” he said.

“What?”

“You are right – my daughter saved us, while I did nothing. No one is worthy of her, my lord.” He looked up, his eyes wide with fear. “Please take her before someone kills her out of envy.”

“I --” Baraqel began.

But then Lilith woke up and heard the last part of her father’s words. She stood up on pained, wobbly legs, stumbled forward, and slapped her father’s face. “I am not cattle to be traded.” She looked back at Baraqel. “If it’s to be, it will be by MY choice.” She added, *Right?*

Even though he was exhausted, Baraqel’s heart beat hard and fast. *Yes*, he replied.

After that day, everything changed.

Kokabiel felt most alive when the criminals gave chase. It was a game that amused him and passed the time before the inevitable capture, execution, and consumption of their energy as his reward. Because humans were fallen, there would always be those who deserved punishment by death, so Kokabiel still had a purpose for his fallen existence.

As for Baraqel, later – but not too much later – Lilith made her choice. Quietly, with only the two of them on a high mountain, the Watcher Baraqel became husband to Lilith and, like Adam and Eve long ago, they learned what it meant to be married under a cool night sky filled with stars. When Lilith became pregnant for the first time, Baraqel asked, “Don’t you want to be with your people?”

“No.” Lilith looked around her, the home of stone and trees that Baraqel had built for her.

“But there’s nothing to fear now, from them,” Baraqel said. “Kokabiel and I made sure of that.”

“It’s not that.”

“Oh?”

“Don’t you know?” She placed Baraqel’s hand on her smooth, round belly. “I’m not exactly human anymore.”

Baraqel stared at his hand, as he felt a surge of energy flow from his wife to him, yet she remained unharmed. He looked up at her smiling face.

“I belong here.”

After a gestation of only six months, Baraqel and Lilith’s first child – a large, healthy boy with a hearty cry – was born. Baraqel held his son, feeling the beginning potential energy of a creature who would be greater

than either human or angel. When Lilith fell asleep, still nursing their son, Baraqel slipped outside and looked up at the night sky.

He had found purpose as a husband, a father, and protector of his Earthly home. Yet he found himself weeping heavily, as the long-delayed grief of the loss of Heaven crashed down on him.

Kokabiel, who had been guarding the gates of their home, for Kokabiel also lived with them, was also looking up. Hearing his fellow Watcher weep, he said, “We can try to make a home here, Baraqel, but it’ll never be enough. We can try to create some semblance of Heaven here, but it’ll never be enough. We can try to pretend to be like the humans, but it’ll never be enough.” He chuckled and raised an imaginary wine glass. “Welcome to the fallen world, little boy.”

“You’re not helping, Kokabiel.”

“I never said I was.” He clapped a hand on Baraqel’s shoulder. “I must say, however, you still have that Celestial Engineer in you.”

“What?”

“Needing to fix things, to create. The idea of coupling with a human female is... strange to me. But the product of that coupling – you can feel that energy signature of that child, right? It’s stronger than both human and angel, a powerful hybrid made from fallen nature: a nephil.”

“Nephil?” Baraqel frowned at the name. “*The fallen one?*”

“Because he’s made entirely out of fallen nature – a fallen angel and a fallen human.” Kokabiel gave Baraqel’s shoulder an appreciative shake. “This new creation is beyond Alpha Omega and Lightbearer – I’m impressed.”

Baraqel shook off Kokabiel’s hand. “I didn’t become a father because of that.”

“Sure,” Kokabiel said. “But that’s the result. You truly have become the humans’ GodKing.”

“Shut up.”

“You’re not saying I’m wrong.” Kokabiel moved to go inside. “And don’t worry. I won’t tell Lilith anything about what we’ve said. Wouldn’t want to upset the new mother. Anyways, I should say hello to the new creature. After all, I’m his ‘uncle’, right?” He chuckled at that and went inside.

Baraqel remained outside. He turned on his comm. “Samyaza? Are you there?”

Like always, he was met with silence.

“If you’re listening – you were wrong. You bastard.” He switched off his comm and returned to his wife and child.

Baraqel and Lilith would have six children, and just like their short gestation, their growth to adulthood was fast, being fully grown in only five years, as they were born instinctively knowing what their father knew – just like the way of angels. But unlike angels, to Baraqel and Kokabiel’s amazement, the nephilim’s energy levels increased exponentially as they grew, with only having to eat like normal humans. Their power so overwhelmed the limited confines of their material bodies that it flowed outward in concentric waves, effectively recharging Baraqel and Kokabiel so that they both no longer needed to recharge daily, unless they chose to.

However, the blessing of this overabundant power was a curse to the humans, as deadly radiation. Even with Baraqel and Kokabiel’s thorough training, the nephil children could not control the power that poured out of them, like six suns walking upon the Earth. Wherever they went, the local area became a radioactive wasteland, and any human who lived too close became sick with radiation poisoning or even cancer.

In conflict with his role as the humans’ protector and his children’s father, Baraqel said to them, “You are all grown, which means you are responsible for the care of this land. I’ll assign each of you a role, and you must do your duty without question. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father,” they said, their voices eerily similar to each other, their expressions impassive and tranquil. While having power greater than either human or angel, the inverse was true for their psyche, for they had personalities that were less than human or angel, as if their accelerated gestation and growth had stunted them in spirit.

Then Baraqel divided his six children as far apart from each other and from centers of human populations, placed them in protective shielding, and shunted as much of his children’s energy as possible into powering advanced technologies: Two for a defensive shield around their land. One for an extensive network of electromagnetic vehicle paths. One for an observatory with advanced optics to peer into the material universe. Two for an energy grid that powered everything else.

It was not enough to allay the humans’ fear, who saw the six nephilim as impersonal monsters, and one day, while Baraqel and Kokabiel were patrolling the land, a desperate human infiltrated their home and tried to kill Lilith.

No!, Lilith cried out, in the speech of angels, and both fallen angels flew back, to see Lilith struck down. Enraged, Kokabiel slew the human, and he took off, to take his revenge on the rest of the humans. Baraqel didn’t stop Kokabiel, as he stayed to save his wife’s life.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Baraqel said, as he staunched the bleeding while carefully sliding the knife from Lilith’s heart. With all his medi-training as a Celestial Engineer, he physically saved Lilith’s life, but psychologically she was changed: from the caring woman that he had married to the vengeful mother of inhuman offspring.

“Is Kokabiel killing the unworthy humans?” she asked softly.

“Yes.”

“Good,” she replied, her eyes closing in sleep. “May he kill them all.”

Baraqel stared, feeling as if his entire world and the foundation underneath it were falling apart, and he placed his hand over her eyes. “I’m sorry, my love,” he said, and placed a permanent Lethe sleep. When Kokabiel returned, manic and wide-eyed and high from the hunt, he saw the aura of Lethe sleep around Lilith and cried, “What did you do?”

“We’ve broken her,” Baraqel said. “We’ve broken everything.”

With a strangled cry, Kokabiel attacked. The battle between the two former Watchers went on for some

time, but in the end, it was Baraqel -- the Watcher who cared too much, who still had children to watch over -- who prevailed. Stripping Kokabiel to his basic quantum particles and put in permanent Lethe sleep, Baraqel imprisoned him into the very tree where Kokabiel had slept that night of his first rampage. In time, Kokabiel would become part of the tree, his sentience lost, which would be the closest to a peaceful death any immortal creature could ever have.

With these things done, Baraqel walked across a dead land, to his home where Lilith lay sleeping, forever.

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The nephil of the observatory was then silent, as he regarded Setebos, who was weeping.

“I have seen enough weeping, Setebos.”

Setebos looked up and saw Baraqel stepping from behind the telescope. He quickly wiped his eyes. “How long ago was this?”

“Long enough. These days, I stay here, with my first-born son. We look at the stars and think of what could have been.”

“What could have been?”

“If we weren’t fallen.”

Setebos trembled, afraid. “So our persistent communications blackout, our reduced energy, they aren’t Lightbearer’s doing--”

“Lightbearer. That’s a name I haven’t heard of in a long while,” Baraqel chuckled. “No. We fell the very moment we agreed with Samyaza -- when we chose what our directive was supposed to be, instead of what Central gave us back in Heaven.”

“What -- what do we do?”

“Well, my old comrade, whatever you do, don’t do what Kokabiel and I did.”

“The force field --”

“It’s to quarantine this land. You’re here only because I let you in.”

“Why?”

“As a warning. Go back to your land and tread lightly.” Baraqel paused. “I think Miranda being your partner may help lessen the impact of your and her fallen nature because she has Ariel to remember, to remind you and her of who you both used to be. But as for the other Watchers...” He looked at his son. “Listen, Setebos, what happened here -- with me marrying a human woman and discovering that our children had this great power -- it’s probably happened to the others, as well.”

“Do you know for sure?”

“No. But it’s likely.”

Setebos regarded both Watcher and his son. “That force field isn’t just for quarantine, then.”

“Heh.” Baraqel gave a small smile. “Yes -- it’s also to keep out any curious Watcher who has ideas of invading.”

“How – how did we come to this, Baraqel? To not trusting each other?”

“We’re fallen, remember?”

Setebos flinched. “What about Samyaza?”

“That old bastard? What about him?”

“We need to find him – see how much he knows.”

Baraqel shrugged. “You and Miranda can try. But my place is here.” He shook his head. “I’ve done enough harm as it is.”

The observatory door opened, and waiting just outside was the autonomous vehicle, powered up and hovering, its door open as well.

“Here,” Baraqel said, tossing a large canister.

Setebos caught it. “What’s this?”

“A battery of nephil energy. That should sustain you and Miranda for a while.”

“Baraqel... I...”

Baraqel waved him off. “Go home. And Setebos?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t come back.”