

## 6 The Fallen Ones

The first time Kokabiel heard music was at his initial duty station, on the first day of his existence.

On that day, he opened his amber eyes, finding himself reclined on a narrow bunk among other bunks filled with creatures of his kind in a dark barrack. Like the others, he knew by instinct what he was and what his purpose was: a Virtue-ranked Sentry created to guard, patrol, and defend as a member in the angelic host. Silently, he slid off his bunk, pulled on his silver-gray gear, joined others in a briefing room to receive their orders, and reported for duty in a far-flung containment room on the edge of timeless space.

He was made to serve, made to follow orders, and he did so without question.

Yet, as he stood in the perimeter of that cold, metallic room, serving as impersonal watch, he was distracted by the Celestial Engineers’ work. Even with his eyes forward, he could sense Ariel, their leader, standing in the center of the room, surrounded by subordinates working in quick and dizzying concert, and soon picked up what they were doing.

Alpha Omega’s raw code for the creation of material spacetime tumbled before the Celestial Engineers’ monitors, filling the entire room with a resounding cacophony of bell-like ringing. Then the subordinates worked on their sequence of code, stitching together individual lines of track, and Ariel – conducting the process – merged the tracks into a unified piece. What resulted was a melodious harmony that began to emerge from the chaos, an organic unity that matched the growing creation that was spacetime, glowing in the middle of that cold, impersonal room. Finally, after a pregnant pause, Ariel made one finishing adjustment. Suddenly, the glow collapsed and then exploded outward in one, brief piercing note, and spacetime shone brightly, fully formed, with a haunting harmony that made Kokabiel’s eyes widen with wild surmise.

He was hearing music for the first time in his short life, and it was beautiful.

While some Sentry members cycled off and on watch over the next few days, Kokabiel chose to remain at his station, to listen to the complex music of spacetime as the Celestial Engineers refined the code behind the music. On one of those days, unusual movement made him glance sideways. There, he saw Ariel approach a startled member of his cohort, a female Sentry whose name was Miranda, and engage her in conversation. This surprised Kokabiel, as he had thought Celestial Engineer and Sentry kept to their own since their duties didn’t mix. But what surprised him even more

was when Ariel conferred with the dual CO’s of the containment room, and both Ariel and Miranda vanished together, portaled into the glowing, hovering mass that was spacetime.

Kokabiel, like the rest of his fellow Sentry on duty, remained outwardly unfazed by this break in routine, but he saw one member of the Celestial Engineers blurt out, “You can do that?” In response, two neighboring Engineers commented with mild sarcasm to his naïve surprise. Inadvertently eavesdropping, he learned the first one’s name was Setebos and the other two were Arakiel and Baraqel. Kokabiel suppressed the urge to roll his eyes at the display of petty friction between members who were supposed to be peers and fellow teammates. It spoiled his enjoyment of the spacetime’s crystalline music enough that, when given the opportunity to rotate off watch, he took it.

After a brief respite in the barracks, Kokabiel joined a cohort of Sentry out on the exercise fields in the busy interior of Heaven. There, he focused on performing various martial drills, overseen by the team lead. It was good to be active outside, moving in complicated, aggressive unison with his fellow Sentry.

Yet he was distracted by the clear, poignant sound of the Musicians practicing in the open-air pavilions.

The Musicians were the closest to what Central and Alpha Omega were: makers of the tangible out of the intangible. But unlike their coeval rulers, who made out of nothing, the Musicians made out of existing firmament, to join and shape unique forms that hadn’t existed yet as variations to Central’s foundational work; thus, Central and Alpha Omega had the ultimate say to whether their pieces was final or not. In consequence, the Musicians were as rigorous in their practice as the Sentry were, and – even distant as they were – Kokabiel could hear their music, an interplay of layered voices that formed images in his mind of beings not yet created. *Unicorns?*, he thought, pleasantly amused. But the images remained as images, for the Musicians would either leave incomplete their compositions or have one note slightly too sharp or too flat, so as not to inadvertently create something before its acceptable time.

“Kokabiel! Get your ass over here!”

Hearing his team lead’s voice, Kokabiel snapped at attention. The singing had so pulled at his attention that he had missed a cue, a call for sparring. “Yes, sir!” He jogged over to another part of the exercise fields, where he joined his sparring partner. He was Sentry, and he enjoyed his purpose as such.

And yet... and yet...

Later that day, as he lay in his bunk, he thought, *What’s wrong with me?* Kokabiel shook his head and was about to turn over to sleep when a Heaven-wide alarm sounded, loud and clear in his head. He stared, stunned into paralysis at first, before he, like the others, sprang out of his bunk and quickly pulled on his gear, forcing himself not to think what Code Crimson meant.

For it meant war had come to Heaven.

Who would win and who would lose was never in doubt.

Even though Seraph-ranked Lightbearer was the noblest and strongest of the heavenly host, he was still a creature, even with having a third of the host standing with him in his revolt against Central. Even though Seraphim, the highest ranked angels, made up most of Lightbearer’s army, whose combined strength was equal to the remaining loyal two-thirds of the host, none could defeat those who had the providence of Central’s power.

Kokabiel saw this power first hand, when he, Miranda, and other Sentry members witnessed the Archangel Michael nearly cleave Lightbearer in half. Lightbearer’s ichor – previously golden but now polluted with an ink-like substance that marked his fallen nature – poured out onto the slick, befouled battlefield. Lightbearer’s army only managed to evacuate him to safety as they fell back in retreat because Michael, the Sentry’s highest commanding officer, allowed them to escape.

“Why?” Miranda dared to question Michael, her violet eyes wide with battle-lust.

Kokabiel glanced sharply at Miranda and then at Michael but kept his mouth shut.

“Central’s orders, Miranda,” Michael responded, letting go the insubordinate tone of a Sentry member several ranks lower than he was. “We need to prepare for the War’s end.”

Soon after, Michael and Samyaza, the Celestial Engineers’ CO, gave orders for ten Celestial Engineer members to form a temporary squad, whose sole purpose was to create a penal dimension to house Lightbearer and his army, and for ten Sentry members to safeguard the Engineers and the dimension while being constructed. The Engineers formed an initial pocket dimension, still within timeless space but outside Sacred Space. Then they gathered the dark, oozing, toxic substance that erupted wherever Lightbearer and his army made camp; they contained it in stasis field packets, which they portaled to the empty dimension. Once they had enough construction materials, the two squads portaled to the place that was designated “Hell.” The Celestial Engineers began the unsavory work of creating a prison for ethereal creatures that were once the paragon of angels. The Sentry secured the perimeter and stood by, watching the nascent Hell come into being.

At his station, Kokabiel fought disgust and loathing as the dark substance molded and spread out around him. It took on an inflamed, sick color as it formed and hardened into bare plains, stone mountains, and desert valleys under a red sky thick with sulfurous clouds crackling with electricity. The substance’s exothermic reactions created a stifling, stinking heat, and he marveled that the Engineers were able to finish their work without anyone breaking down.

“We’re done,” Kokabiel heard a grim voice declare through his comm, which he recognized as Baraqel.

“Oh, thank God,” he heard Setebos’ relieved voice reply.

“Scared were you, Setebos?” Baraqel asked, forcing his voice to be light.

“Baraqel,” the deep alto voice of Miranda pointed out crisply, “you’re on the all-band.”

“Ah!” Setebos said, sounding embarrassed.

“Well, then,” Baraqel replied, “I confirm that we are done, Sentry Miranda.”

“... Copy,” she said.

When both squads returned to Sacred Space, Kokabiel observed, in the silent faces of both Sentry and Celestial Engineer – even Baraqel, whom Kokabiel could see his clenched jaw in spite of his breezy demeanor – that the time spent creating Hell perhaps did more psychic damage than any battle fought in the War in Heaven.

But there wouldn’t be many battles left, once Hell was waiting for Lightbearer and his army. On the last day of the War, Central’s Son, Alpha Omega, drove Lightbearer and his army out of Heaven, into a massive portal opening that split Heaven’s horizon into two. Everyone saw the rebels fall through, banished into Hell. Witnessing their screaming fall, Kokabiel trembled uncontrollably. He knew their punishment was just. He knew that he and the others who stood by Central were on the right side of the War. Still, he couldn’t stop his shaking, as their screams of fear, hate, and despair became the soundtrack to the image of Hell that was permanently in his memory.

He wanted to forget, but he knew that was impossible. Angels were sentient intelligence; they never forgot. Yet Kokabiel wanted to forget the screams, for they drowned out the memory of music that made him happy once upon a time.

When the humans fell shortly after their creation, Kokabiel was assigned to a newly constructed platoon called the Watchers, whose mission was to safeguard the humans from future incursions from Lightbearer and his ilk, especially to protect a rare sub-set of humans called Beatrices, whom Ariel and other high-level Celestial Engineers predicted would maintain some pre-Fall abilities

of the original humans – although none had been detected yet. The broad mission required an indefinite deployment to Earth, but since Kokabiel was made to serve, made to follow orders, he accepted the new assignment without question.

Yet, as he stood in the containment room of his first duty station, waiting to portal to Earth, Kokabiel noticed that the Watchers had one characteristic in common: they had all served in the creation of Hell during the War, with the exception of Samyaza, the Watchers’ newly appointed CO. The mission briefing did not explain that commonality, but Kokabiel knew it wasn’t coincidence. One notable difference, however was that – unlike the prior mission when Sentry and Celestial Engineer worked separately – two-person teams of one Sentry member and one Celestial Engineer member comprised the Watchers. The Engineer, designated the team lead, was to spot any anomaly, and the Sentry, following the Engineer’s lead, was to neutralize any hostile action.

Kokabiel’s partner and team lead was Baraqel. While he accepted that command structure, he felt the aloof coolness between himself and an angel whom he didn’t know personally but had seen work at a distance. Baraqel was competent and efficient, but he could be cocky as well. Kokabiel still remembered Baraqel’s flippant attitude to Setebos on the last day of their deployment in Hell, as well as on his first, long watch in the containment room, when Setebos was surprised by Ariel taking Miranda to a pristine, unfallen Earth. At that memory, Kokabiel glanced behind, seeing Miranda and Setebos stand awkwardly next to each other since they were each other’s partners. *I wonder what they’re thinking?*, he thought. Just moments before, Ariel – newly promoted to Samyaza’s previous position – had brought Setebos from the other side of Heaven and had kissed Miranda farewell before stepping away. Everyone knew that Ariel was Miranda’s lover and Setebos’ mentor, but Miranda and Setebos were merely friendly acquaintances to each other.

“Eyes front, soldier,” Baraqel said.

Kokabiel turned sharply towards Baraqel, who simply nodded in front of him. Kokabiel saw the portal before them.

“Time to go,” Baraqel said, a now-familiar forced breeziness in his voice.

Kokabiel noticed and, because they were partners now, said in a low voice, “You don’t want to go, do you.”

Baraqel’s green eyes twitched, but he didn’t reply.

When he was high enough so that any ground-level human who looked up in the sky would mistake him for a large bird of prey, Kokabiel switched from ethereal to material so that he could hear

the wind as he flew. His wings, the color of smoke and ash, blended in with the high clouds as he twisted and turned, spiraled and sped, the wind a constant roar in contrast to the rhythmic beating of his wings. Even after several yottaCalends on Earth, flying freely was his favorite part of his day, when his patrol would come to an end and then he would return to home base.

Truth be told, he was reluctant to return to home base, as he knew Baraqel was there – sulking.

Baraqel had been sulking as soon as they had seen their first human conflict from their mountain vantage point, and he had declared, “It’s not Lightbearer’s doing.”

“But they just slaughtered each other.”

“Yes. But it’s not anyone from Hell.” He turned away, dismissive of the small field of dead bodies below them. “The humans are fallen now; they don’t need Lightbearer’s help to act shitty with each other.”

Back then, Kokabiel observed, “You’re angry.”

Baraqel turned back to Kokabiel, replying, “Of course I am! Earth was perfect – PERFECT – and they fell and mucked it all up. And we’re just overglorified babysitters for these humans.” He gestured curtly below them. “Actually, we’re not even that – since there’s nothing we can do except watch them act like crazed animals with each other.”

Kokabiel stared at his partner. “So our orders then? Looking out for Lightbearer and his lackeys among the humans? Finding these mysterious humans called Beatrices?”

Baraqel gave a dismissive hand wave. “With Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, and Uriel monitoring as eyes in the sky and the Edenic Cherubim guarding the Tree of Life? Who needs twenty lower-level operatives crawling around the planet when you have those heavy weights serving as the Panopticon up there?”

“So – you think our role is useless? Then why have the Watchers at all?”

Baraqel frowned but didn’t answer.

“Or do you think that we’ve been deceived, that this is some kind of ruse to get us out of Heaven?”

Baraqel, realizing what treacherous territory Kokabiel was exploring, shook his head vehemently. “Forget it. Just forget it.” He sighed. “Look, I’m a Celestial Engineer, Kokabiel. I’m meant to design and FIX things. But my current duties – watching humans and then alerting when I see Lightbearer’s activity amongst them – none of that fits my purpose. None of that fits who I am.”

Kokabiel frowned. “What do you propose we do instead, Baraqel?”

Resigned and sullen, Baraqel replied, “Nothing. We follow our orders.”

And he had remained sullen ever since.

As Kokabiel approached a stand of trees that served as their temporary home base, he could feel his shoulders tense up, in preparation for dealing with Baraqel’s frustrated sulking yet again. But then he saw an unexpected golden blur appear from the tree tops, and it took a moment for Kokabiel to realize that Baraqel had flown up to meet him. “What is it?” he asked, surprised.

For Baraqel, instead of his usual grouchy gloominess, was animated. Even his green eyes looked as if they were shining out of his golden-haired head. “Samyaza’s called for an emergency meeting. All teams are to convene now.”

“For what purpose?”

“No clue. But it’s not even the next yottaCalend, so something important must’ve happened.”

Switching to ethereal to match Baraqel as they traveled, Kokabiel asked, “What if it’s bad news?”

Baraqel’s cheery mood didn’t waver. “Doesn’t matter. It’s something new. As far as I’m concerned, anything new is good news.”

As Kokabiel stood among his fellow Watchers in the natural amphitheater east of Eden, hearing Samyaza, their commanding officer, speaking before them, he wasn’t sure if he shared Baraqel’s optimism as he heard Samyaza’s briefing.

Lightbearer wasn’t even bothering with the humans, choosing instead to block the orbiting Archangels from communicating with the Watchers. Meanwhile, several Watcher teams, faced with the frustration of seeing meaningless human death around them, had chosen to “save” some humans that they had personally deemed worthy. One of those teams was Setebos and Miranda, which was unexpected and caused some uproar amongst their fellow Watchers. But what astounded Kokabiel was that Samyaza, unable to confer with the Archangels, still decided to amend the Watchers’ mission: from direct action only when Hell-caused activity was evident, to direct action to aid the humans at the discretion of the individual Watcher teams.

After another brief round of uproar, they quieted down, and Samyaza declared before twenty stunned Watchers, “We must ACT because the humans have lost their way, but we can guide them back. After all, we are ANGELS.” Kokabiel forced his face to remain still as Samyaza continued his motivational speech, assured that their new mission was still true to their purpose on Earth. He even gave any one of them the choice to opt out as a conscientious objector – but none of them did.

Kokabiel glanced at Baraqel standing next to him. He was taken aback to see his partner’s thoroughly delighted grin, as it was the first time he’d ever seen Baraqel smile since they had departed

Heaven. *Of course*, Kokabiel thought, still not knowing what to think of the new orders. *He finally gets to fix something.*

After their dismissal, but before the teams left to return to their assigned respective regions, Baraqel approached Setebos, saying, “I didn’t know you had heroics in you, saving that human girl from drowning – and curing her brain cancer!”

Miranda looked up, scowling. “That’s not why he saved Cora –” she began, but Setebos placed a hand on her shoulder, saying, “It’s okay, Miranda.”

Kokabiel, in a less obnoxious tone, asked, “Then why did you save her, Setebos?”

Setebos sighed. “Honestly? Because Cora had so completely lost hope that she was letting herself die – and I couldn’t let a little girl die like that, feeling utter despair.” He peered at Kokabiel and then at Baraqel. “We all remember what it was like, to be in Hell. That was where Cora was – in a human-made Hell. It swallowed up her soul. So how could I not pull her out of that?” He shook his head, remembering. “How could I not give her a second chance to have hope again?”

Miranda lightly touched his arm and declared, “It’s getting late, Setebos. Let’s go.” She gave a short, acknowledging nod to Baraqel and Kokabiel and took off, her blue-black wings quickly bringing her high into the sky.

“Take care,” Setebos said, and he followed his partner, his expansive wine-dark wings swiftly lifting him in five, long beats, catching up with Miranda, who was waiting for him.

Kokabiel was still looking at their colleagues’ departing figures when he heard Baraqel exhale hard. He turned and saw that Baraqel’s manic mood had dropped away, although he wasn’t sullen. Instead, Baraqel looked – puzzled? Sad? Kokabiel couldn’t tell. “Are you okay?”

His partner’s eyes met his. For the first time on Earth, Kokabiel saw trepidation in Baraqel’s eyes as Baraqel carefully replied, “I’m fine. It’s just –” He paused and then looked up into the sky, as if searching for an answer. “I hope we do this right.”

Several years had passed since the meeting east of Eden.

Kokabiel and Baraqel had resumed their patrol of their assigned region, assessing the humans from a discrete distance. But with their changed mission, their engagement with the humans had increased exponentially: whenever they saw any instance of toxic misery flowing out of a community of humans like a stab victim bleeding out, they entered the populace without notice. It was easier that way – putting the humans off-balance before they had a chance to protest. Suddenly appearing as foreign travelers, Kokabiel and Baraqel gave assistance to whomever was the leader of the settlement



– provided that the leader wasn’t the cause of the misery. If that was the case, then they aided in either rehabilitating the immoral leader or removing the leader and installing an ethical one. To ensure the security of the settlement, they also taught the residents how to care for themselves, with the tools of medicine, diplomacy, and appropriate technology. After making sure the settlement was stable and thriving, then they left as quickly as they had arrived, resuming their patrol.

Over time, the humans developed and shared stories about the mysterious men who would appear, perform wonders, and vanish. Kokabiel, still uncomfortable around humans, would let Baraqel do the talking, so the humans identified Baraqel as the leader of the duo. In their stories, Kokabiel was the Warrior (this Kokabiel didn’t mind) and Baraqel was the GodKing.

“Aren’t you bothered by that at all?” Kokabiel asked as they approached a small coastal village. Based on a quick surveillance, they knew its name was Kamret, just another human settlement that needed angelic help. “It’s as if they’re worshipping you.”

Baraqel wrinkled his nose in slight disgust, but then he shrugged. “Like I said before, it’s harmless. Once the humans’ civilization mature, we won’t be needed as much, and they’ll outgrow such superstitious behavior. We’ll just be imaginary stories passed down to their descendants.”

“Hmph.”

“What?”

“Us not being needed as much. Remember when you once said we may as well be babysitters for the humans? But aren’t we just that these days? Cleaning up their messes, making sure they don’t hurt themselves and others. And yet that village we had departed from two days ago – that was our THIRD time we had to restore order there. These humans – they don’t learn. I don’t see evidence that they’ll outgrow their own self-destructive tendencies.”

“But – okay, their fallen nature is a handicap. That’s true. But while alive, their souls still orient to Central, as originally intended, even with internal and external distractions trying to sideline them. Like Setebos realized, as long as they’re not in a microcosm of Hell when they die, then we’ve fulfilled our mission’s orders.”

“Even when they still confuse you for a god?” Kokabiel demanded.

Baraqel shrugged again. “Well, do YOU want to explain to them exactly what we are, then?”

Kokabiel frowned at that. “No.”

“Well, neither do I. I mean, they feel overwhelmed just understanding germ theory. So, Kokabiel,” Baraqel said, “patience. Everything will be sorted out in the end.” He glanced down, seeing

the community in panicked disarray. “There’s the largest house – it should be for the headman of this village.”

“Situational assessment unchanged?”

“Yes. Ergot poisoning.”

“Natural causes. Good. Then we won’t have to go all ‘warrior’ on them – dammit, spoke too soon.” Kokabiel saw a group of men emerge from the headman’s house, pulling along an emaciated girl who was crying out like an injured animal. “Humans and their scapegoats.”

Baraqel made a “tch” sound.

“You still think they’ll never need us, O GodKing?” Kokabiel asked wryly.

“Whatever,” Baraqel replied crossly. He squared his shoulders. “Standard HC.”

“Copy.”

All business now, they performed Standard HC. Still ethereal so that no living eye could see them, Kokabiel, performing the “hold” from above, spread a stun-and-stasis field around the entire village that froze every living thing in place. Meanwhile, Baraqel, performing the “cure” of the plan, scanned for those with ergot poisoning, which was the majority of the village. For each one identified, he dropped down to ground level, often phasing through walls, and cured the individual, clearing out the ergot toxin and even restoring body parts if the ergotism had caused gangrene to set in. Then Baraqel joined Kokabiel hovering above and, through the stun-and-stasis field, Kokabiel sent out a “find-and-destroy” command, which disintegrated all ergot from the village, whether in food, grain stores, or in the fields. Standard HC completed, they dropped down to ground level before the village headman’s house. Leaving their wings ethereal, both Kokabiel and Baraqel materialized, wearing regional clothing recognized as aristocratic members of a class-based, hierarchical military, and Kokabiel shut down the field.

Immediately, the village came alive again, but this time the humans felt a drastic change, as mortal panic turned into mass confusion. The girl choked back a scream as she saw two intimidating strangers loom before her; the men who had dragged her away for her execution fell back in fear. Even terrorized as she was, having been accused of witchcraft and cursing her village because she was the only commoner one who didn’t get sick, she didn’t run away but remained where she stood. She blinked back tears as she looked up, seeing two incredibly tall strangers shining like the sun and the gigantic beauty of their eagle-like wings.

Kokabiel noticed the girl’s awestruck eyes roving immediately behind and above both himself and Baraqel. *Wait*, he thought, *can she see our wings?*

In the assured voice of a commander, Baraqel boomed towards the doors behind her, through which the frightened men had escaped, “We request an audience with your headman.”

Baraqel and Kokabiel stayed for two weeks in Kamret.

Under their watch, the Kamreti learned botany, medicine, and safe agricultural practices. Also under their watch, they learned fair legal practices, including justice for the girl, an orphaned beggar named Lilith, whom the Kamreti nearly killed out of blind, irrational fear. For the only reason that she didn’t get sick was that she was so poor that she couldn’t afford to eat bread made from the ergot-infected grain.

“On behalf of Kamret, we are heartily sorry!” the headman had said on that first day, making public his apology for all to hear. On seeing the stern eyes of the two strangers standing on either side of Lilith, he added, “Of course, we will make reparations for your suffering.”

Her eyes downcast, she spoke how she always spoke to others: in a raspy whisper, barely loud enough to hear. “Thank you.”

By the end of a fortnight, Kamret was transformed, with a council vetted by Baraqel and a level of technological advancement that would prevent the irrational fear that had spurred Kamret into nearly murdering their own. Per their usual practice, Baraqel and Kokabiel left under cover of night, but – unlike the other times – they had a witness. Newly installed as a ward of the headman’s wife and unable to sleep that night, young Lilith looked out her window and saw the miraculous men that her people had called GodKings. She saw them take flight in the sky.

*Thank you*, she thought to them.

As he phased into ethereal, Kokabiel started, hearing a bell-like two-note harmony in his head. *What was that?*

They hadn’t intended to come back. Baraqel was certain that Kamret had rehabilitated and advanced enough that returning was unnecessary. Still, for due diligence, Kokabiel sent out a cursory eye-in-the-sky as their patrol brought them back again to the vicinity of that tiny coastal village nearly eighty years after their initial contact. One glance at the virtual vid screen made him swear.

“Dammit,” Kokabiel said, quickly assessing the man standing before a crude executioner’s block.

Baraqel studied the live-fed image floating above them.

“You’re seeing what I’m seeing, right? It’s that girl’s descendent.”

“Yes. Based on DNA percentage, it’s her grandson.” Baraqel zoomed out the image. “Hmmm. Ethnic mixing in the spectators. And a riot’s about to start.”

“OF COURSE a riot’s about to start. Dammit.” Kokabiel sharply waved away the vid screen as they veered left, bee lining for Kamret. “Why won’t these humans ever learn?”

Arriving at the location of the public execution, the two angels remained ethereal when they touched down. As the gross matter of human bodies went through their airy substance as they moved forward, they overhead the humans’ angry and fearful murmurings, gathering information. Thirty years ago, invaders who called themselves Tيروسians conquered Kamret, slaughtering the males and enslaving the females. Therefore, the males in the crowd were either Tيروسian or half-Kamreti, but the man who stood on the execution platform was full Kamreti – Rifan: grandson of Lilith, son of Lilith’s daughter Ewa, and the surviving heir of Ewa’s husband Adan, the slain Kamreti headman. Accused of planning a coup d’etat, Rifan was seen as an enemy by the Tيروسians and a liberator by the Kamreti women and the half-Kamreti, male and female. Regarding the silent, resigned man that was Rifan, Kokabiel and Baraqel saw that he was neither enemy nor liberator but another innocent person, caught in the crazed frenzy of a mob, just like his grandmother seventy-seven years ago.

By the time they reached the center of the public viewing area, the crowd had devolved into riotous chaos, as Tيروسian and Kamreti turned against each other. Enough space had cleared that Kokabiel and Baraqel could stop and drop on one knee. With wings still ethereal, they materialized, at first without immediate notice – until they stood up to their full, towering height. As they had intended, the humans ceased their violent aggression against each other as they screamed in shared terror.

Kokabiel sighed. *Predictable*. But then he noticed Rifan staring in an unexpected way, as human eyes roved from himself to Baraqel, and Kokabiel was struck by its familiarity. *Like his grandmother*, he thought, recalling Lilith’s eyes, like an owl’s in a face skeletal in its hunger. *Can this human really see our wings?*

Unlike the first time, rehabilitating Kamret only took a week. After all, Kamret’s infrastructure and technological advances were already in place and had actually advanced in spite of the Tيروسians, and the majority of the populace readily accepted Rifan as their new headman.

However, that shortened time still felt interminable, as Kokabiel and Baraqel had to deal with the ugly mess of the once powerful Tيروسian ruling family. Clearing the toxic influence of the Tيروسians, they removed Tيروس’ tyrannical sons from power in Kamret’s nearby village-states. While witnessing

as a neutral party Tiros abusing his daughter in front of Rifan and the newly re-activated Council of Kamret, Baraqel had to intervene before violence erupted between Rifan and Tiros.

Later, they settled Tiros, his two wives, his four grown sons, and a small retinue of six sycophants in a ship, whereupon – to ease the relocation – Kokabiel placed another stun-and-stasis field. Within that field, Baraqel wove a Lethe sleep, knocking out the humans as well as softening their memories so that they wouldn't be able to locate Kamret again. Powered by Baraqel and Kokabiel, who became ethereal, the ship swiftly sailed across a small sea to the native homeland of Tiros and his people. Once the humans were safely on shore and the ship was deconstructed to timber, they deactivated the stasis field and woke up the humans.

Bleary at first, they regained consciousness and looked around, stunned. Tiros' wives, sons, and lackeys began to sob bitterly. Angered by his loss, Tiros screamed and cursed at them for their failings. When he rose his hand to strike the younger of his two wives for sobbing the loudest, Kokabiel moved to fly down, but Baraqel said, “No – we're done here.”

“Can you seriously say that, Baraqel?” Kokabiel retorted, gesturing below them where Tiros' wife cowered, her pale, slender arms covering her head. But then one of the sons ran forward and knocked away Tiros' hand. Even as high as they were, they could hear Tiros' and his son's overlapping screams of anger and blame.

“Yes,” Baraqel said. “This is now an intrafamily affair, Kokabiel. Besides, we've overstepped our jurisdiction. We're on the other side of the boundary into Arakiel and Turiel's region.”

Kokabiel's eyes burned, reluctant to let Tiros remain with the ability to terrorize, even if only towards a small group of his own people.

“You forget, Kokabiel – I'm still team lead. Must I give you an order to leave?”

Kokabiel inhaled sharply but checked his anger. “No... SIR.”

“Good.”

They flew back in silence, faster than before since they didn't have to tow a ship filled with sleeping humans. Once on their side of the sea, they made camp at the nearest stand of trees, choosing the largest one as their roost. As they settled in for their nightly recharge, Baraqel said, “Sorry for pulling rank on you.”

From his cot on the other side of the room, Kokabiel shook his head, replying, “Nothing to apologize for. You were right.” He lay back, facing the ceiling. “I forget sometimes. That we're part of a platoon – that we have teammates out there, spread out all over this planet.” He sighed.

Baraqel regarded his partner’s profile – the only other angel that he had seen since Samyaza’s meeting, hundreds of years ago. “I know what you mean,” he replied. “It’s like we’re forgetting how to be part of the angelic host – when we’re dealing with the humans’ never-ending problems.”

“Different day, same old shit. ARGH!” Kokabiel rubbed his face with his hands. “It doesn’t help that we feel like we’re on half-rations all the time. Why do we feel so wiped out at the end of the day? Are some of humans’ weaknesses rubbing off on us?”

“What? NO. Impossible.”

“Why impossible?”

“You don’t know?”

Kokabiel sighed again. “I’m tired, okay? HUMOR ME, O GodKing.”

Baraqel shook his head but was glad that Kokabiel was in a better mood. “It’s because humans and angels are two completely different creatures, originating from two completely different planes of existence. Saying the weakness of a human rubs off onto an angel is like saying the weakness of a beast rubs off onto a human. If anything, it’d be the other way around – we’d rub off onto the humans, like how a human domesticates an animal.”

Kokabiel frowned. “Are you saying that we’re trying to domesticate the humans?”

“Well..”

“Because didn’t Alpha Omega personally create the humans, instead of giving the specs to you Engineers? So they’re more than just animals.”

“True, but – think back to Tiros.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Kokabiel –”

“Okay, okay. I got that waste of carbon in my mind. Now what?”

“He’s egocentric – a pure narcissist. He even treats his own family like tools to break if they don’t do what he wants. But Alpha Omega didn’t create humans to be that way – they’re meant to be social, interdependent, and empathetic. They’re meant to take care of each other. But humans fell away from that, resulting in a painful estrangement that they try to fix by haphazardly satisfying selfish desires that can never be satisfied.”

“So Tiros is an extreme example of fallen humanity. What does that have to do with domesticating the humans?”

“Well, a fallen human like Tiros is like a wild, unrestrained human, right? Since that natural pull towards peaceful interdependence got corrupted, we have to patchwork that back in them through guardianship and direct intervention. That’s what I mean by us ‘domesticating’ them.”

Kokabiel made a face. “Still... I’d rather not think of us Watchers as human herders.”

“Okay, so my metaphor’s bad,” Baraqel admitted. “But my point is, it’s impossible for a human to affect us. We’re just too different. Makes sense?”

“Makes sense,” Kokabiel said. But he noticed that his partner’s tone had that familiar supercilious manner that reminded him of Baraqel back then, when his partner misjudged Setebos with his breezy smugness because he had incomplete knowledge. Kokabiel thought, *You don’t know what I’ve seen.* “Baraqel.”

Baraqel, who had turned over to sleep, grunted, “Hmm?”

“I have something to tell you.”

Kamret was never far from Kokabiel’s mind.

Seventeen years had passed when Kokabiel and Baraqel had restored Rifan’s position as headman. In that time, the two Watchers had continued their patrol, but an uneasy awkwardness had returned between them since that night, when Kokabiel shared his certainty that Rifan and his grandmother Lilith were able to see their ethereal wings.

Baraqel had dismissed it, saying, “Your SOLE proof was how they looked at us?”

The memory of Baraqel’s words intruded Kokabiel’s thoughts as he flew high in the early evening sky, and he shook his head as if avoiding a pesky mosquito. Flying freely while materialized was still his favorite part of his day. His solitary patrol had come to an end for the day, and he was returning to the designated nightly roost, where he would reconvene with Baraqel. But the memory of his partner’s open skepticism was ruining Kokabiel’s enjoyment, and he found himself slowing down his flight and then stopping. Hovering in mid-air, he surveyed the land below him, an area of scrubby grass and jagged mountains very far east of Kamret, and then he looked west, seeing Earth’s sun dipping below the horizon line, making the entire sky explode in a palette of darkening orange, pink, and blue.

The human’s fallen home was still beautiful, and it made him miss Heaven even more.

*You’re wrong, Baraqel,* he thought. *You’re wrong about the humans. We’re more alike than you think.*

Then he heard music.

*What was that?*

It was a faint, lonely tune, a melody of echoing bells. It resonated in his mind, and it came from the west. Even though it was late in the day and Kokabiel was exhausted, he switched from material to ethereal and flew again, his curiosity driving him towards the source of the music. Only when he saw a familiar coastline did he realize that he was approaching Kamret.

*It's coming from here?* He touched down on the outskirts of the village-state but then immediately collapsed, as the music suddenly cut off. *Shit!*, he thought. He tried to stand but fell down again, an enervated shimmer on the ground.

“Idiot.”

Kokabiel looked up and stared as a golden blur, shining in the darkness, touched down next to him.

“How did you...” Kokabiel stopped; even his voice sounded thin and weak.

“You did a sending. So I’m wrong about the humans, huh?”

“I’m sorry –”

“Skip it.” Baraqel crouched down, slung Kokabiel’s left arm around his shoulders, and stood up. “You’re almost to nothing. Why did you fly out here even though you were already low on energy?”

Kokabiel shook his head.

“Right.” Baraqel did a quick scan and spotted the largest nearby tree. “Over there.” Quickly, before his own low energy level dropped further, Baraqel dragged Kokabiel to the base of the tree, whereupon both Watchers flowed into the tree as their resting roost.

Like with all arboreal-based roosts, they had arrived at a spare room with cots on either side of the room. The calm glow of the tree’s energy came through the ceiling, walls, and floor, casting the space in a soft, green illumination that enveloped the two Earth-confined angels in its gentle, restorative power. Baraqel set Kokabiel on a cot and then went to his own, lying down heavily with a loud grunt. After a few moments of lying in silence, Baraqel said, “Whatever it was that brought you back here, you should’ve waited till morning. What with the power issues we’ve been having, it’s reckless to miss a recharge session, especially when you were likely already hitting a low before you came out here.”

Having recovered enough, Kokabiel sighed. Then he said, “So... I unintentionally sent what I was thinking. So you also know what I was feeling.” He paused. “Are you angry?”

Baraqel shook his head. “I didn’t follow you all the way here, just to tell you I’m pissed off. Yes, I was angry at first, but I’d be a poor leader and teammate if I let that get to me. I mean – I know that I can be an arrogant asshole, Kokabiel.”



Kokabiel let out a snort of laughter.

“Occupational hazard. Except for Setebos, I think all of us Celestial Engineers are like that.” Baraqel yawned. “We really need to sleep. You can tell me tomorrow about the humans and why you’re back in Kamret.”

“Okay.”

“And Kokabiel? Next time you think I’m full of shit, just call me on it. That’s an order.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sometime after midnight, Kokabiel started, fully awake. The music had returned in his mind, but drowning out the original tune was a shrieking dissonance that made him angry. *What is this?* He glanced across the room. Baraqel was in deep slumber, and Kokabiel was loathe to wake him. *I’m sorry*, he thought, quietly slipping away from the roost and leaving his partner behind.

Following the music, Kokabiel arrived at the main gates of Kamret’s center and stopped. *Dammit!* He knelt down, not so much to see the rapidly cooling pools of blood around the two slain watchmen but to check an inky, sticky trail that flowed from the bodies and continued into Kamret. Human eyes would not be able to see the trail, but Kokabiel could. Even though it was human-based, he recognized it for what it was – for the first time he had seen it was in the War in Heaven, when the darkness of sin contaminated Sacred Space. He began to shake, and it angered him that he was afraid. As if to spite that fear, he prodded investigative fingertips into the dark trail.

The music in his head exploded into a deafening cacophony as he saw the three men who had slain the watchmen in his mind – fellow Kamreti – and knew their intention. He suddenly sprang up and raced towards the headman’s house. *They’re going to get her*, his thoughts raged, *they’re going to –!* Images of the men and what they wanted to do with the young woman that was Rifan’s daughter tore through him, and even though he was still not even a quarter recovered, Kokabiel fully materialized, including his wings, as he arrived at the pried open door of an obscured area of the manor house, just as the three men emerged with a young woman who was dazed, as if still asleep. As they stared at Kokabiel, shocked into confusion, Kokabiel realized that the music was coming from her.

The beautiful tune and the painful discord interwoven in that tune – she was the source.

And these men.

These men.

They were nothing.

What Kokabiel would do to them, then, wasn't immoral – merely simply cutting away rot, culling diseased cattle. He struck them down, one by one, his mind droning coldly, *This. Is. Nothing.*

But Kokabiel had sent, and it awakened the young woman, who responded to his murderous coldness with a keening scream.

Startled, he kneeled down, exhausted yet again. But as he placed one hand on the heap of bodies to stand up, he suddenly felt recharged, as the potent biochemical energy of the freshly killed men flowed into him. Feeling intoxicated and giddy, he thought, *Cattle, you say, Baraqel. Heb – time for slaughter.*

*No!*, Rifan's daughter cried out.

Kokabiel turned towards her and then laughed in manic delight. *You can send! A human can send! Tell me, since you know best, who are the unworthy ones, who are the ones responsible for these MONSTERS, for I will not leave until Kamret is CLEAN.*

She stared up at him, and even in the dark, he saw her eyes – so wide and so blue. She knew him – how she knew him, he would find out later – but what he saw most was her fear. She feared him, and even though it fed into a blood lust that he hadn't felt since the War in Heaven, even though he felt the need to drink more the intoxicating power of human lifeforce, he didn't want her to fear him.

The beautiful, aching music that brought him back to Kamret came from her, and he didn't want her to fear him.

*Please*, he sent, beseeching, *TELL ME.*

As all of Kamret awoke in disarray, panic-stricken by Rifan's daughter's scream, his wild amber eyes met hers, and he saw her give a small nod. With that assent, he grinned and whipped around, facing all of Kamret.

Without thinking, without stopping, Kokabiel strode through Kamret. His tunnel vision dictated by the woman several feet behind him, he grabbed his chosen prey, struck them dead, and absorbed their biochemical energy as their bodies hit the ground. He was barely aware of the screams around him and the vocal cries of Rifan's daughter warning those not in his sights to stay back, as he only paid heed to her frantic sending, *That one! That one! That one!*

With each sending, he received an emotionally charged snapshot of why the target was unworthy: An abusive father. A tolerated rapist. An unrepentant maligner. And more. The identities of so many more, thinly hidden underneath the veneer of respectable members of a sunny coastal

village-state, popped into his mind like poisonous mushrooms emerging from rotting flesh. They took so much, certain of their power, that taking their literal power for his own felt like justice.

Kokabiel’s sending before he took their lives – *DO YOU REPENT?* – was the sole remnant of his caretaker role, as Rifan’s daughter strained to reign in his single-minded destruction of the unworthy humans before his path.

*That one! That one! That one!*

It was well into late morning when Kokabiel became aware of Baraqel’s presence, when Baraqel materialized before all of the humans, grabbed him, and commanded, “Stop this!” But Kokabiel, overcharged and high with the human’s energy, laughed, “Ah, you found me!”, and shook him off. He stumbled and, unseeing, nearly fell onto Rifan’s daughter, but she stopped his manic motions, as she declared loudly for all to hear, “My lord, my lord, you are done. Please –”

“Are you SURE?”

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

He grinned, his amber eyes wild and intoxicated. “You are welcome. What is your name, young woman?”

“It’s – it’s Lilith, my lord.”

“Lilith.” The familiar name made Kokabiel grin even more as he saw Baraqel’s startled expression. “See? Why can’t all humans be this GRATEFUL?” But as he said this, he suddenly felt Lilith’s fear of him overwhelm her, which angered him. *Don’t fear me, woman*, he sent, but his words were violent, and he saw Lilith flinch. Unable to stop his growing anger, he looked above himself, declaring, “I think I’ll fly around a bit,” and launched himself fast and high into a bright, cloudless sky, to distance himself as much as possible from himself and fragile young woman below.

In a dense forest at the foothills of a nearby mountain, Kokabiel took out his rage onto the trees. He flew over and through the thick canopy, exploding massive branches that lay in his path. He felled more and more treetops until he had burned through the overdose of human energy, and his anger dissipated, leaving a hollowed-out emptiness. When Kokabiel touched down in a clearing, exhausted yet again, he collapsed onto the ground. He barely registered the presence of Baraqel, who had followed him, touched down next to him, and asked, “Why did you hide your path to Kamret from me?”

Struggling to stay awake, Kokabiel sought out Baraqel’s green eyes.

Baraqel, his leader.

Baraqel, his partner.

Baraqel, his only companion from Heaven for all of these years.

“My friend,” Kokabiel whispered, his body phasing to ethereal, “she is a Beatrice... and we are fallen – can’t you feel it?”

Baraqel stared, feeling Kokabiel’s shame and grief in the sending behind the words. He let out a pained sigh and then, switching to ethereal, lifted Kokabiel off the ground. Finding the nearest, largest tree, Baraqel set Kokabiel at its roots, bound him with the tree’s life force, and gave a short-acting Lethe sleep as he placed his hand over Kokabiel’s closed eyes. “Rest, old friend,” he said.

Within the security binding, Kokabiel’s unconscious body relaxed.

Baraqel sat down heavily and stared up into a sky still bright and cloudless in the waning day, as if looking for an answer. He wanted to deny what Kokabiel had said.

But he would be lying.