

## 7 The Regent of Kamret

Baraqel sat, witnessing Kokabiel sleep.

Angels seldom sent to each other. The preferred method of long-range communication was through their hard-wired comms, and Baraqel was no exception. Whether in Heaven, Hell, or Earth, Baraqel had never sent to a fellow angel. Even through the years as Kokabiel’s partner, he had never sent. Doing so would involve a level of vulnerability that Baraqel found uncomfortable.

But Kokabiel had sent, when he whispered, *“We are fallen.”* He laid bare his entire existence, as a duty-bound, yet conflicted, Sentry on one hand, and then as a creature who felt so ashamed of his desire to follow a human that he had tried to keep his sojourn to Kamret secret from a fellow angel. He shared the pleasurable high of the bodily execution and then lifeforce consumption of sinful humans – but also the painful shame and guilt of doing so as he compelled that same human to check his morbid need for slaughter, her sending shaken with fear, *That one! That one! That one!*

*“She is a Beatrice. We are fallen. Can’t you feel it?”*

Baraqel was unsure of what to think, what to do.

He needed time – to process the reality of his and Kokabiel’s situation, to work through the rising waves of anger, fear, and self-loathing that threatened to overwhelm him. His mind clamored, searching for the event that led to their current state. *We never should’ve interacted with the humans, you bastard Samyaza*, he thought, hostility towards their absent commanding officer washing over him. Then his rage expanded as he thought, *We never should’ve come to Earth. It’s all fallen, and its curse spread to us because of these humans – these humans, Goddammit –*

Baraqel dropped his head into his hands, as he realized where his dark thoughts were going. *No. They’re not to blame*, he thought. *Not the humans. Not Kokabiel. Not even Samyaza. Samyaza gave us the order, but we all knew that he was cut off from the Archangels. We could have said no. But we said yes. Yes. That’s where it started. Oh God.* He rubbed his face. *Fallen angels trying to save fallen humanity! We should – we should stop. Just go away –*

“Lilith,” Kokabiel murmured in his sleep, “please don’t fear us.”

Baraqel blinked. He suddenly remembered how he left Kamret: the young woman’s legs buckling underneath her as she had stared at the destruction around her – the bodies, the screaming, the wailing. All she had said was “Oh my God. Oh my God.”

“I’ll be back to help you,” he had said to her. “Lilith, I’ll return. Okay?”

And she had turned to him, her blue eyes wide, barely comprehending and yet trusting. “Yes,” she had responded softly, and a mild shock had passed between herself to him.

He stared at his hands. He expected to see the dark, sticky ooze of the fallen, but instead he saw an unfamiliar fluorescent blue, the tell-tale sign of another’s energy signature flowing in him. He then noticed that he didn’t feel exhausted, even though his night-recharge period had been cut short when a voice had awoken him from his sleep. He suddenly recognized that voice had been Lilith’s, the moment when Kokabiel had arrived before her in the dead of night, and she had screamed.

*Her sent fear awoke me, he realized. She also... transferred some of her energy to me? How is that even possible?* He stood up, realizing that too much time had passed. *I left her alone – oh God.* He was a Watcher, and he had left an innocent woman in danger. Although reluctant to leave a still-sleeping Kokabiel alone, Baraqel had a promise to keep. He leapt up and gained speed.

Kamret had erupted in violence.

Fearful of Lilith, the people of Kamret turned against each other instead, as if the GodKings’ arrival had ignited an explosion of hidden secrets. The enablers of the slain fought with the slain’s victims, who celebrated with macabre triumph their predators’ deaths. But while Kokabiel’s executions left bodies that looked as if his chosen quarry were merely asleep, the humans were crude and messy. With fists, clubs, and knives, they left gashed wounds, broken bones, and spilled blood.

Lilith’s father Rifan, who had emerged from his stupor only to scream and wail as Kokabiel wrought death and destruction, sunk to the ground, shocked, and not even Lilith’s cries of “Father! You need to stop this! Father!” could rouse him as he murmured, “Why would the GodKings do this to us? Why?”

Hours later, as the sky turned to dusk, the survivors’ fear of the headman’s daughter faded as they saw her helplessness, and their need for a scapegoat fell upon her. Lilith found herself surrounded by a mob who seemed more beast than human. “No! Please, listen –” she began but was cut off as a stone hit her shoulder, and she yelped in pain, like an injured animal. Her cry spurred the mob, who began to pelt stones at her, and she cowed low, her slim, brown arms, slick with blood, shielding her head. *Father, she sent, Father, help me!*

Rifan started, as if he himself had been struck. But he only shut tight his eyes in pain and fear.

*PLEASE,* Lilith begged in her sending. Suddenly, she felt a shadowy presence above her, and she cried out, but then strong arms encircled her, and a healing warmth covered her with the softest of feathers.

“ENOUGH,” Baraqel said.

Lilith buried her face into the angel’s chest, her blood smearing crimson against his silver-gray cloth.

“This girl saved your lives,” Baraqel declared, his green eyes flashing with anger, “but from what I see, none of you deserve mercy.” From underneath his golden wings, he could feel Lilith tremble, and still she didn’t cry. “Go and bury your sinful dead.”

Under the darkness of his wings, Lilith sent, *Thank you... for coming back.*

*I said I would, Lilith.* He kept watchful eyes as the mob dispersed. *Rest for now.* He felt her warm body relax into his as he watched the other humans gather the dead in carts and wheel them away. Meanwhile, he searched through her mind, following the latent history of her energy signature, to confirm Kokabiel’s belief.

*Go backwards,* Baraqel thought. *Go backwards in time.* Lilith had shared some her energy to Baraqel as thanksgiving. *Before.* She had directed Kokabiel through sending. *Before.* She dreamt of Kokabiel’s memories and felt his repressed desire to have been created a Musician instead of a Sentry. *WHAT – no. Focus.* She had called for them on a lonely hill beside the sea, with the memory of an ancient family song in her heart. *Before.* She heard the song from her father Rifan, who had recognized what Baraqel and Kokabiel were before she was ever born. *Before.* He had heard the song from his mother Ewa, who had learned it from her own mother Lilith, who had recognized what Baraqel and Kokabiel were. *Before.* The elder Lilith had learned the song from a long line of ancestors whose names were lost in time, yet all originating from humans of the very beginning. *Oh... They had opened their innocent eyes amidst the celestial music of Creation – and saw Alpha Omega smiling like an overjoyed new father.*

*Oh my God.*

Baraqel shuddered with recognition, and his initial reaction was to push her away, fearful that his fallen status would hurt her. Yet, he felt her wounds heal under his safety and care, and when he carefully lifted away his wings, he saw that she had trusted him enough to fall into a fitful sleep.

As if broken from a spell, Rifan darted forward and knelt down in supplication, his prematurely grayed head bowed low. “Take her,” he said, his voice ragged.

“What?” Baraqel asked, startled.

“You are right – my daughter saved us, while I did nothing. No one is worthy of her, my lord.” Rifan looked up. His brown eyes were large in a face hollowed from self-neglect and fear. “I cannot

protect her,” he declared, loudly enough so that several Kamreti who were within earshot could hear. “My lord, please take her – before someone kills her out of envy.”

“I –” Baraqel began.

But then Lilith awoke, hearing 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 declared, her voice strained with contained fury. Her mind blazed with the image of the limp bodies of the kidnappers who had taken her when she was helpless in her sleep-walking: Miraz, Belis, and Uvilan – the three senior members of the Council of Kamret.

Baraqel was taken aback. As his green eyes met Lilith’s fiery blue ones, he was reminded of Lilith’s mother Zaia, who had violently forsaken her own father Tيروس, all those years ago.

“If it’s to be,” she said, “it will be MY choice.” She added, *Right?*

Lilith’s sending unnerved Baraqel, and his heart beat hard and fast. *Yes*, he replied, unsure if what he was saying was right or wrong.

With that response, Lilith sunk down and buried her face in her hands.

*My child... thank you.*

She looked up, astonished, for it was her father’s voice in the sending. She stared, unmoving, when he reached out and embraced her, murmuring through his tears, “I’m sorry, my child... I’m so sorry.” But then, suddenly, he collapsed.

*No*, she thought.

Her father was heavy, slumped unconscious against her.

*NO!*

She saw Baraqel pull her father off her and do a quick health assessment. *DAMMIT!*, she heard Baraqel’s thought in her mind. Desperate to have a shred of privacy after a night of exposed secrets, she scrambled to her feet, saying, “To the manor house! Please bring him to the manor!” She began running, and Baraqel, carrying her father, followed her, all the way to the manor house, all the way to her parents’ bedchamber.

Over two-hundred people died that day, when the GodKings returned. The dead, which included the Head Watchman Ord, had been buried in a hastily-dug mass grave on the outskirts of Kamret during the darkness of night, but when the sun rose on the next day’s morning, Baraqel declared that the slain – whether by Kokabeil’s hand or human hands – have proper burials. Whether guilty or innocent in life, in their death they would have fair treatment. The survivors obeyed, for they

were terrified of a GodKing to whom many knew – through fast-spreading gossip – Rifan had given his daughter before taken ill.

Sitting by her parents’ bedside, Lilith felt empty. Except for her parents, she was alone in their bedchamber, as the house attendants were too terrified to be in the presence of a woman who kept company with the dreaded GodKings. But Lilith had been in the GodKings’ minds, as they had been in hers, when she had inadvertently summoned them. The exchange of memories and intentions was raw and shocking. Thus, even in a short time, she had realized they were not all powerful beings but creatures just as flawed and conflicted as she was.

Exhausted after overseeing the progress of the burials, Baraqel came into the bedchamber and said, “You’re still here.”

Without even turning to look at him, Lilith nodded her head.

“Did you get any sleep at all?”

She shook her head, and before Baraqel could respond, she asked, “Did you?”

He walked forward, until he was standing next to Lilith, and crossed his long legs, sitting down. Baraqel was so tall that, even on the floor, he was nearly eye-level to Lilith. He regarded the two sleepers. “When Kokabiel wakes up and comes here, we can try again –” he offered, but Lilith only shook her head again.

“You already physically cured them – both of them. There is no material reason that my father and mother aren’t awake except that they don’t WANT to be awake.”

“Lilith –”

“Isn’t that what it means to be fallen? That what we think are the right choices are actually the wrong ones? ‘It doesn’t take much for fallen humans to act shitty against each other.’ That’s what you said. So what does it matter if they are related to each other?”

He gaped at her. “That’s terrible – to think that your own mother and father would be that way. Especially from a Beatrice –”

“Stop it. You’ve never felt what it means to be abandoned by your parents because they think it’s best for you. I have.” She clenched her hands in her lap. “What good is it to be a so-called BEATRICE when my own people hate me? When my mother won’t wake up, no matter how much I have begged and prayed, despair eating at me every day since I was a little girl? When I’ve had to fight against hating my parents, for abandoning me? Even my father – him not waking up just makes physical what he’s been like emotionally, for years and years.” She stared at her hands, and with her

newly awakened sight could see the fluorescent blue energy emanating from them. “How can I save others, when I can’t even save myself?”

Baraqel responded softly, “I’m sorry. I didn’t understand.”

She looked up and saw Baraqel’s green eyes, startled to see them bright with tears. “I – I can’t handle this right now.” She sprung up and began to stride away.

“Where are you going?”

“To my room. To sleep,” she replied curtly, and she left her parents and Baraqel behind her. Lying on her bed, she tried not to think of the past nor the future. *Breathe*, she thought. *Breathe*.

She heard a knock on her door and, seeing the dim quality of light in her bedchamber, was alarmed that she had been asleep for several hours. “What is it?” she responded, leaving her bed and slipping on a dressing gown.

“Lilith.”

She froze. Then, steeling herself, she went to the door and swung it open. She looked up and saw the sad, amber eyes of the ashen-haired fallen angel before her.

Without preface or pleasantries, he asked, “Are you afraid of me?”

She stared, not moving.

Kokabiel shook his head. “I’m sorry,” he said and then began to turn away.

Suddenly, Lilith realized the truth of him – that he was afraid that she saw him as a villain. “Kokabiel.”

He stopped. He turned to look at her.

She replied, “I’m not afraid of you.”

He frowned, unsure whether to believe her or not. “Why not?”

She gave a small, sad smile. “Because I’m more afraid of me.”

With their wings carefully hidden, Baraqel and Kokabiel stood by Lilith as she oversaw the rebuilding of Kamret. But not even the powerful influence of the GodKings could restore the trust that lay in tatters as everyone’s secrets had been laid bare. The remaining two members of the Council of Kamret were no exception.

Lilith shook her head in disbelief, as the young page kept his eyes downcast after giving two sealed documents. “So Lord Arim and Lord Erlan will not even give me the honor of relinquishing their positions face to face,” she said, “that they have a messenger boy do the deed instead.”

“I – I am s-sorry, m-my lady,” the page replied, his voice shaking and avoiding the gaze of the two GodKings, who stood at a discrete distance, on one side of the headman’s chair.

“You’re not at fault, young man. You can leave.”

“Th-thank you, my lady.” He made a hasty bow and left the main hall.

With the young page gone, only the GodKings and Lilith were in the main hall, as Lilith had suspected what Arim and Erlian’s response to her summons would be, and she didn’t want any gossiping mouths around her. She let her stern face slacken as she folded with care the two letters of resignation.

“Cowards,” Kokabiel said in a low voice.

“Gently,” Baraqel chided.

“No. Rather than face the shame that they had been swayed by Miraz to side against Lilith and her parents, they run away and hide.”

“Yet they knew nothing of the kidnapping plot,” Baraqel reminded Kokabiel. “If anything, Rifan knew that he was at fault, for so neglecting his duties that Miraz could overpower the Council.”

“Still,” Kokabiel asked, “are these two men so broken that they can’t face Lilith and at least make peace with what happened?”

Lilith responded softly, “Sometimes men’s pride is a hard burden to bear, Kokabiel.”

He rolled his eyes and gave a dismissive “Tch.”

“Especially when they are afraid,” she added.

Kokabiel frowned but didn’t deny it.

“I... had hoped,” Lilith carefully began, her eyes on the two letters in her hands, “that some part of the Council would remain. My father once told me that Arim and Erlian had been there, when he stood on the execution block. They were among the many half-Kamreti who rose up. They were the youngest two on the Council, while the other three were the most senior.” She glanced up, eyes flashing with accusation. “You – you two were THERE, when Miraz joined the Council of Kamret!” But then she sighed, letting the anger go. “This must be what my father felt back then – when everyone in Kamret was afraid and turned to him to be a leader – and he was the most afraid for failing them.”

“Lilith,” Kokabiel started, his tone apologetic.

“It’s not your fault,” she interrupted, “that they still fear you. You weren’t in your right mind that night. But...” She paused. “I know that at some point you two will have to leave. You have other responsibilities – I know that. I just... need to be ready when you do.”

Both angels stared at her, unsure of what to say.

She shook her head. “ARGH!” she suddenly exclaimed. “Enough of this! It’s late – I should have my dinner. And shouldn’t you two be readying your nightly roost?”

Baraqel blinked. “Ah – yes,” he confirmed.

Lilith stood up, tucking the letters in the folds of her vestment. Shrugging with a half-hearted grin, she said, “After all, I’m a Beatrice, right? I should be fine.”

“Of course,” Kokabiel replied.

Accompanying Lilith just outside the main hall, Baraqel and Kokabiel watched her walk to the dining area, attended by nervous maid servants who met her farther down the hall. Once the two angels left the threshold of the manor house, they switched to ethereal before taking flight, and Baraqel declared, “We have to fix this.”

Receiving the sending behind Baraqel’s spoken words, Kokabiel replied, “That’s... major.” He paused. “The commitment required for this and the consequences – are you certain?”

“No. But do you have a better idea?”

“No.”

“Well then.” After flying in silence, Baraqel said, “Look, it’ll also be a big commitment on your part, so if you have any objection –”

“I’m in, Baraqel.” Kokabiel glanced at his partner. “You sound worried.”

Baraqel gave a small smirk. “I’d be a fool if I weren’t.”

As Lilith marched towards a broad, canopied tree that lay on the outskirts of Kamret, her mind raced with what she had experienced since she had awoken that day.

The manor house maids and attendants were calm and cordial, greeting brightly, “Good day, Lady Lilith,”

After breakfast, she overheard one of the attendants whisper to another, “Amazing, isn’t it – to be betrothed to a GodKing! Hopefully, he’ll be able to heal Lord Rifan and Lady Zaia.”

She came down to the main hall and stopped short, seeing Arim and Erlian at the Council table, who rose upon her appearance and bowed in greeting.

“My lady,” Arim – the older of the two – declared, “we are surprised to see you today! Aren’t you and Lord Baraqel still in conference, finding a solution to Lord Rifan’s malady?”

“Ah,” Lilith stammered, “of... of course. How... are you and Lord Erlian carrying on?”

“All is quiet, my lady,” Arim replied.



“Yes,” Erlian agreed. “After the violence and turmoil that had happened, we are thankful for the peace and order that have returned to Kamret, Lady Lilith.”

“And we will do our best, to honor your father’s sacrifice, my lady,” Arim added.

Boggled, yet forcing her face to stay neutral, Lilith replied, “Thank you, Lord Arim, Lord Erlian.” She nodded towards the two councilors. “I – must meet with Lord Baraqel now.” Turning away from them, she thought, *What is going on?*

Although reluctant to return to a space that still filled her with dread, Lilith went to the secret servant’s room, disguised herself into commoner’s clothes, and slipped outside. Walking about during a bright, busy morning, she listened and observed. Still undetected, she had arrived at the gates of Kamret itself and was not surprised to see them unguarded. She slipped out and began to march towards Baraqel and Kokabiel’s designated home base, on the far outskirts of Kamret.

In her mind’s eye, Lilith’s memories of what happened were still fresh and painful. Miraz, Belis, and Uvilan planned to kidnap her, forcing her father to relinquish his title as headman to Miraz. Lulling Ord and another watchman into dropping their guard, they murdered them and – with years of serving in the manor house – knew the manor house’s weakest entrance was the hidden side servant’s door. Lilith had sleep-walked there, so they didn’t have to move too far inside to take her away with them. But then Kokabiel had arrived, heeding the call that Lilith had made hours earlier through her awakened abilities as a Beatrice. His rampage began, barely constrained by Lilith, a rampage that incited deadly violence amongst the Kamreti in the streets until Baraqel arrived. Then her father, for all to see and hear, gave her to Baraqel before collapsing, and Lilith endured the subsequent weeks of rebuilding, under the atmosphere of fear and hostility by her own people.

But those memories were not what her people remembered, when Lilith woke up that morning. To her people, they remembered that Lord Rifan collapsed during a meeting of the Council of Kamret. In the subsequent power vacuum, Lord Miraz usurped the title of headman, with Lords Belis and Uvilan on his side. However, loyal to Lord Rifan were Lords Arim and Erlian, and Kamret erupted in civil war, with many casualties on both sides. The fighting had even come to the manor house, and though still ill, Lord Rifan tried to protect Lady Zaia and Lady Lilith and would have been slain if not without the miraculous return of the GodKings. Like their intervention seventeen years earlier, they ended the coup d’état and, in the subsequent weeks, helped to rebuild Kamret and to reconcile its people. In gratitude, Lord Rifan, before his health worsened, betrothed his daughter to Lord Baraqel. Honoring Lord Rifan’s earlier decree, Lords Arim and Erlian recognized Lady Lilith as

his heir, and they would serve as the remaining Council of Kamret while she ruled Kamret as regent, Lord Kokabiel protected Kamret, and Lord Baraqel sought a way to cure Lord Rifan and Lady Zaia.

When Lilith had walked, listened, and observed that morning, she reconstructed what her people believed to be true of what had happened. They were memories of betrayal and heroism, all having a happy ending – and their memories infuriated her because they were not true. Except for her two sleeping parents and Lilith, all of Kamret were living a false belief, stemming from changed memories, and she knew who changed them.

Arriving at the foot of a massive tree, she slammed a closed fist against its trunk. *I can't believe you did this! WHY?*

Suddenly, Lilith felt a strange floating sensation, and she found herself staring from outside her physical body for a brief moment. Then her ethereal self slipped into the trunk, and Lilith stumbled into a small room bathed in a low, green light. Her eyes darted around, first at Baraqel, who lay in deep sleep in one cot, and then at Kokabiel, who had sprung from his cot on the other side of the room as soon as he had heard her sending. She began to exclaim, but he put a finger to his lips. Quickly, he pulled on some clothes (for he was wearing very little) and motioned her to follow him. A narrow, spiral staircase emerged from one corner of the room, and they went up until they arrived at a smaller room with two floor cushions before a low table – more an enclosed patio than anything else, as the entire space looked like green-colored glass, through which Lilith could feel the warmth of the sun.

“Are we still in the tree?” she asked, sitting down when Kokabiel settled down on one of the cushions.

“Yes,” he said. “We’re in the canopy.” He regarded her. “I should be surprised that your ethereal self was able to enter here. But you’re a Beatrice. So...” He tapered off.

“Well, I’M surprised.” She stared at her still solid-looking arms, bathed in diffused, green-tinged sunlight. “It’s unsettling, feeling that my body is outside while the me that feels like ME is in here.”

“Yet here you are. Angry. So you know what Baraqel and I did.”

Kokabiel’s blunt words brought Lilith back to the reason she came there in the first place. “You changed their memories. You changed EVERYONE’S memories! Why would you do that?”

“To keep you safe.”

Again, his direct words took her aback. “Safe? SAFE? What about my people? Going into two thousand brains and tampering with them – changing my people’s perception of reality – would you call that SAFE?”

“No. I call that risky.” Kokabiel held up a hand as he saw Lilith rise up, about to yell. “But not for your people. Did you notice that Baraqel is still asleep while I am not?”

Lilith settled back down. “Yes,” she replied, grudgingly.

“He shouldn’t be. Baraqel is a master of Lethe sleep, which lulls minds and, when needed, softens memories. There’s a reason we usually approach humans disguised as human beings. It’s not good for people to know we Watchers exist. Usually, if he or I accidentally reveal our true selves to a few humans, Lethe sleep is a simple, quick task. We become like a dream to them.” Kokabiel paused, sighing. “But I created the worst case scenario when I came to Kamret, and Baraqel had to do damage control. We only wanted to alter enough of what happened, so that our true identities would remain hidden and you and your parents would be safe in a stable environment. And even though tweaking two thousand people’s memories is a massive undertaking, it should not have been too difficult.”

“But...” Lilith said, expectantly.

“But Baraqel underestimated the strength of human free will.”

Lilith exhaled in exasperation. “Of course he did.” She shook her head. “What went wrong?”

Kokabiel sighed again. “While I secured the perimeter of Kamret, so that only those within that boundary would be affected while sequestering you and your parents, Baraqel sent out a global Lethe sleep command, which would remove and replace the identical pieces of memory from everyone, all at once. Doing so required that everyone to behave like one mind, one brain, one will. But Baraqel encountered a handful of spontaneous resistance to the command, which would have jeopardized the whole venture.”

Lilith frowned, confused.

“What I mean is – if any one person remains unchanged, then the entire Lethe sleep command falls apart. And because these rogue minds could spread its resistance to the already-linked minds, Baraqel had to add patches to the original global command. This required more memory manipulation, which cost more time and energy on his part. But that’s when he and I realized – that in order to maintain the permanence of the change, Baraqel would have to remain in close proximity to Kamret, to refresh the Lethe sleep.”

Lilith stared, aghast. “Kokabiel! Why didn’t you stop him?”

He replied, matter-of-factly, “We were nearly done at that point, and Baraqel accepted the constraint.”

“Of all the – ARGH!” She threw up her hands. “Is that why everyone has this expectation – that Baraqel and I are getting MARRIED – as cover for why he can’t leave?”

“Yes.”

She sprang up.

“Where are you going?”

“To give Baraqel a piece of my mind!”

Kokabiel reached over and grasped her arm. “Please don’t.”

“WHY?”

He exhaled, deeply. “Because he’s recovering. Because he’s exhausted.”

“I don’t care if –”

“Because he’s still grieving.”

Lilith stopped. She looked down and saw Kokabiel, and for the first time she realized that he was grieving, too. “Why?”

“You were in my head, Lilith. You know why.”

She sat back down, and Kokabiel released her arm. They sat in silence for an uncomfortable moment before Lilith asked, “Does it hurt that much? To be fallen?”

He shook his head. “You fallen humans,” he said, sounding like Baraqel. “You’re used to it – even a Beatrice like you, you were born into it. It’s like asking a fish if it’s wet. How would it know unless it knew what it felt to be dry?” Kokabiel gave a mirthless chuckle. “Heh – Baraqel and I are like fish out of water.” He looked at her. “I guess you can say – it feels like suffocation.”

“.... I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he replied with a shrug.

“That’s a lie.”

“Right,” said a tired voice. “But what can you expect from fallen angels who made an entire village liars?”

Lilith glanced up and saw Baraqel stepping off from the staircase. His face looked care-worn and sunken, and he winced, as if in pain.

“Baraqel,” Kokabiel began, rising.

But Lilith sprang up again, reaching Baraqel first, and placed a hand on his arm, a fluorescent blue blooming from within her. The blue rushed outward, from her hand to Baraqel, who gasped sharply. She stumbled back, feeling a little dizzy, and she felt Kokabiel catch her.

“Why did you do that?” Baraqel chided, his voice sounding much stronger.

“Feeling better?” she asked in response. She regained her footing, and Kokabiel loosened his grip.

“That’s beside the point – HEY!” Baraqel exclaimed after Lilith lunged forward and punched him hard on the chest.

“THAT’S for meddling with my people’s memories without my permission, you arrogant asshole!”

Kokabiel, regarding both Lilith and Baraqel, burst out laughing.

Turning to Kokabiel, Lilith, still angry, marveled. “How can you even laugh?”

Kokabiel shook his head, laughing so much that he couldn’t talk. He doubled over, as if in pain, tears streaming from eyes. But then the tears wouldn’t stop, as the hysterical laughter turned to gulping sobs, and he dropped to the floor, his body shaking.

Dismayed, Baraqel crouched down and placed a hand on his partner’s shoulder.

Standing before them, Lilith felt Kokabiel’s tears wash her anger away. “Don’t,” she commanded.

Baraqel looked up, bewildered.

“Lethe sleep won’t help. It just covers up the pain. You know that.”

*But, Baraqel sent, I don’t know what else to do. He himself was on the verge of tears. I – I don’t know what’s right or wrong anymore.*

Lilith took in the sight of them: the one curled and trembling on the ground like a wounded animal, the other wide-eyed and frightened like a child. Both of them reminded Lilith of herself, and she thought, *They want to protect me – but who’s going to protect them?* Softly, she fell to her knees. Even with her small arms, she was able to embrace them both.

For she was their Beatrice – and they were her fallen angels.

*I’m here, she sent to both of them. I’m here.*

The problem was the stubbornness of human free will. Specifically, the hardened stubbornness of Rifan’s free will and Baraqel’s inability to break through it.

Baraqel sat before Lilith’s sleeping parents, his elbows resting on his knees. He sent again to Rifan, *Just let me in – please, just let me in.* But he felt his sending bounce off, as if Rifan had built a wall around himself.

In a way, he had.

As far as Baraqel could tell, Rifan had slipped away from consciousness in order to find Zaia on his own. Rifan had some nascent abilities of a Beatrice, so perhaps he could do it, connected as they were as husband and wife. But, as Baraqel knew from his service in the War in Heaven and his service as a Watcher, fallen creatures couldn’t be saved unless they wanted to be. Zaia had chosen to fall away from her family, so even if Rifan found Zaia, Zaia may not want to come back with him. Knowing how single-minded Rifan’s love for his wife could be, he wasn’t going to come back without Zaia. Thus, they were at an impasse.

*I could help you,* Baraqel sent. *Just let me in.* But he felt the psychic barrier and the silence, and Baraqel rubbed his eyes, frustrated that he didn’t have enough strength to breach that barrier. *I can’t do this by myself,* he thought. *Maybe if Kokabiel was still here....* He stopped that train of thought, sighing.

For Kokabiel was not in Kamret, having left a month ago to resume his patrol of his and Baraqel’s assigned Watcher region.

At first, Baraqel tried to convince Kokabiel to stay, as their fallen condition seemed to make the resumption of his duties pointless, even dangerous.

But Kokabiel said, “If we were like Lightbearer and his ilk, then we would already have fallen straight away into Hell. Or, at least, the Archangels would have come down and put us in quarantine.”

“So?” Baraqel replied.

“So, our time here on Earth HAS affected us so that we are more like the humans – fallen humans. Since Central grants humans a grace period, until their death, to navigate through their fallenness, then that grace period might extend to us as well.”

“But we’re immortal,” Baraqel pointed out.

Kokabiel shrugged. “Okay, perhaps it’s when our deployment ends – I don’t know! But I’m restless, having stayed in Kamret far longer than any other human settlement that we’ve been. And even with their memories altered, Lilith’s people still find me threatening. I’ll always be the ‘Warrior’ to them.”

Baraqel sighed but didn’t dispute Kokabiel’s words.

“Also, since you figured out that we fell after Samyaza’s meeting ages ago,” Kokabiel continued, “then we were already fallen when we resumed our patrols, helping the humans. After all,

Lilith wouldn't have been born unless we had intervened in Rifan's execution. So would you still say that my Watcher duties, even while fallen, are pointless?”

Baraqel frowned at the thought of Lilith not existing. “All right,” he said. “But what if you revert back to what you were that night? Lose control, slaughter humans, and feed off of their fading biochemical energy?”

“Well, it's not as if they'll need it once their souls separate from their bodies.”

“Kokabiel.” Baraqel gave him a stern look.

Kokabiel shook his head. “All I can say, old friend, is that you just have to trust me. Thanks to Lilith, I'm aware of who I am and what I'm capable of doing. So I'll spare those who deserve sparing, but if justice requires their death, then I'll do what I did that night.”

“Ask if they repent?”

“Yes. Thus giving them the chance to avoid eternal condemnation.”

“Still following your angelic orders, even now.” Baraqel exhaled. “Lilith won't be happy about you leaving.”

“No doubt,” Kokabiel replied, and when Lilith found out the next day, she punched his shoulder. “Ah,” he said.

“But I thought you were tired of being a Sentry,” she pointed out. “Didn't you want to be a Musician?”

Kokabiel snorted. “It doesn't matter what I want, Lilith. Even fallen, I'm still Sentry, and I have my duties.”

“Yes, I know,” she said, “but... it's not fair. You'll be all alone.”

Kokabiel only shrugged, and Baraqel shook his head.

“When are you leaving?” she asked.

“Now,” Kokabiel replied.

“WHAT?” Lilith looked at Baraqel. “Did you know this?”

But Baraqel looked gobsmacked as well. “You didn't tell me it would be today.”

“I know,” Kokabiel said. “That way, you two won't have time to convince me to stay.”

“Kokabiel –” Lilith began, but she stopped when he reached out and embraced both of them.

“Take care of each other,” Kokabiel said, his voice soft.

“My dear –” Baraqel began.

But Kokabiel quickly let go and left before he could change his mind.

Baraqel remembered seeing Kokabiel’s dark form recede into the sky. It was the first time, in his entire existence, that he was isolated from any other angel for more than a day, and he didn’t know what to feel, being left behind. Whatever that unfamiliar feeling was, he was glad that Lilith was there, standing next to him.

But, as he stared at Lilith’s sleeping parents, he started to feel useless.

Kokabiel was on duty, patrolling in his role as Sentry. Through his comm, he had notified Baraqel that – now that they knew that they were fallen – he had noticed that he had continued radio silence from Samyaza and the other Watchers. “Central may not be quarantining us,” Kokabiel said, “but we seem to be unconsciously self-quarantining each other – keeping our fallen status private. If the other teams are like us, then I know why.”

“Why?”

“We have something of our own to protect. We’ve become territorial.” Kokabiel paused. “Should I initiate contact with the others?”

Baraqel heard the trepidation in his partner’s voice. “No. Continue as you were.”

“Copy.”

So Kokabiel continued his duty, protecting Kamret.

Meanwhile, Lilith spent her days in the main hall, engaged in duties as Kamret’s regent. She would hear the grievances of the members of Kamret and consider the counsel of Lords Arim and Erlan. It would have been good, if Baraqel’s Lethe sleep command had made the people of Kamret kinder and more virtuous. But a mere memory change of events couldn’t change the fallenness of human nature. The calm, peaceful Kamret of the first few days reverted to petty squabbling and seething personal resentment. The secret scandals that had burst open on that catastrophic night were private once again, and while the dead stayed dead, the living resumed their old, self-serving habits. So Lilith was busy.

But she fought a creeping cynicism, as she once asked Baraqel, sitting within the canopy patio of the angels’ home base, “Do you regret it, you maintaining the lie that Kamret had gloriously survived a civil war, even though my people are no better morally than they were before?”

“No,” he had replied, “because you’re safe.”

At that response, she had sighed. “You keep saying that. But what about you?”

“I’m fine,” he had said.

As Baraqel sat before Lilith’s parents, however, he realized that he wasn’t. What was his role? If he couldn’t cure Lord Rifan, as some Kamreti began to grumble, what use was he to Kamret? “What



kind of man is Lady Lilith’s fiancé anyway? Was Lord Rifan a fool to choose this so-called GodKing to be his daughter’s husband? Won’t he just leave us again, just like the other one?” some said in whispers and poorly-hidden gossip, as his continuing presence bred tactless familiarity.

*ARGH!*, he thought, *enough of this*. He was suddenly reminded of Lilith’s words, weeks ago, when she had faced Arim and Erlian’s resignation, frustrated with how powerless she felt. He felt that now, for his role had reversed, from self-assured Celestial Engineer, Watcher, and leader – to a power-constrained fallen angel with nothing to show his worth. He shook his head. *Need air*.

He was ethereal when he left the manor house, but he didn’t return to his home base. Instead, he flew to highest top of the manor house and perched there, like an invisible bird. There, he surveyed people still crowding the main center of Kamret, even at the end of the day. Half-Kamreti, a few full-Tirosians, man, woman, old, young, and everyone in-between.

What could he do to show these people that he was worthy of Rifan’s trust?

As he let his eyes rove through the crowd, Baraqel slowly soaked up the photonic energy of the late-day sun. Between the biochemical energy of the tree that served as home base and the solar energy of Earth’s star, Baraqel had reliable recharging sources. But they were too slow and not potent enough to restore him to full capacity in the way that being connected to Central had been when he was unfallen. And even though Lilith’s energy transfusions were similar in quality to Central’s (if not in scale), the two or so occasions that she had done so had made her so ill that – even though Lilith, seeing his persistent energy deprivation, would again offer – Baraqel had refused every time.

But that refusal left Baraqel too hamstrung to do his duty for Kamret.

“Nadia!”

Twin cries caught his attention, as he saw a young man and woman darting through the crowd, both crying out a girl’s name. “Nadia! Where are you?”

Baraqel watched, as the man and woman asked one person and then another, whose responses were either a dismissive head shake or obvious avoidance. Finally, just as their desperation reached its peak, they heard a high-pitched voice cry out amongst a sea of legs, “Mama! Papa!” A little girl darted out, obviously lost in the crowds on a busy market day, and the woman received the girl with open arms.

But the man exclaimed, “We told you to keep close, Nadia! Why must you always disobey us?” When the girl began to cry, he grabbed the girl’s arm and shook it, yelling, “Stop crying! It’s all your fault for frightening your mother like this! Now stop being a brat and behave!” Then he let go of the

girl’s arm and, without even a backwards glance at the woman and girl, he began to stride forward, as if his wife and daughter were mere annoyances in his day.

As Baraqel witnessed this little drama, he thought, *What kind of man is this?* For it was clear that the man had been as frightened about his lost daughter as his wife was, and yet, instead of relief and joy at finding his daughter, he showed anger and condemnation, as if his pride prevented him from doing otherwise. *If I had a child, I would never do that*, he thought, as he saw the woman and girl follow the man in sad silence. *If I were a husband and father, I would –*

He stopped, as he realized where his thoughts were going.

Rifan had chosen him to be Lilith’s husband, but not once did Baraqel consider what that truly meant.

Instead of thinking of her as a Beatrice, he thought of Lilith as a wife; he was surprised as his heart began to beat hard and fast. He remembered the first time she shared her energy, her glowing blue eyes matching the fluorescence that flowed from her to him – and then the second time, only so that she could hit him without feeling guilty. He smiled at that. He recalled the touch of her small arms, when she clung to him after her stoning and then when she held him and Kokabiel together, when both of them broke down. He remembered the way her face and gestures looked when she was angry. Frustrated. Sad. Happy. Triumphant. Amused. Then he thought of Lilith as a mother, and his eyes widened in wonder, as he imagined what that would mean for himself, Lilith, and all of Kamret.

Baraqel activated his comm. “Kokabiel,” he declared, “I have a question for you.”

It had been three weeks since Lilith had seen Baraqel, and she was furious.

*What are you doing?*, she demanded. *You won’t come to the manor house, and yet you forbid me from going to your tree? What the hell is going on, Baraqel?*

*I’m sorry*, he would reply. *But just wait. You’ll see.*

By the end of the third week, when Lilith’s patience had run out, she woke up to Baraqel’s voice in her head, *I’m outside*. She started, seeing it was still night time, and saw a golden glow coming from her window. She pulled on her dressing gown, went to the window, and opened it wide.

Fully materialized, Baraqel hovered in front of her.

“What the – do you know what time it is, Baraqel?” she exclaimed, her voice so low that it sounded like a hiss.

“Yes,” he said, matter-of-factly. “That’s why I can be embodied without anyone seeing me.”

Lilith sighed. “But WHY?”

“It’s a surprise.” He held out his arms. “Come with me.”

She stared at him. “NOW?” She looked down, seeing the ground three stories down. “From HERE?”

“I promise I won’t drop you.” He saw her hesitation. “You don’t trust me? Or are you scared?”

She rolled her eyes. “You are infuriating.”

“I know.” Baraqel adjusted himself as Lilith hoisted herself over the window sill and then, her arms wrapped around his neck, eased herself onto his arms. Just as he remembered, she was light and so very small, compared to him. Once secured, he turned around and, with two great wingbeats, took flight. The whole time they were in the air, Lilith clung tightly, her eyes mostly shut with a keen fear of heights. But then Baraqel slowed and descended, and once he set Lilith on the ground, he said, “We’re here.”

Lilith opened her eyes then. “What – what is THIS?”

Before her was a towering rocky edifice, with a massive gated double-door, spiraling small windows, and inlaid leafy branches running parallel with the windows. With her ability, she could see a soft green glow shot through the entire structure, and recognizing the color she exclaimed, “That’s your tree! Yours and Kokabiel’s! Your tree!”

“Yes,” he said.

“But – but WHY?”

“Well, first, your people can see that Kokabiel and I aren’t going anywhere – that this is our permanent home. Second, you won’t have to separate your ethereal self from your body whenever you come here. Now, you can walk in, just as you are.” He ran a nervous hand through his golden hair. “I’m sorry that it took so long. I didn’t consider how being half-powered would slow the process, interweaving the rocks with the tree so that our home base would be permanently embodied.”

“That’s why you were gone so long? That’s why you kept me away? Because you were making THIS?”

“Yes.”

Lilith’s eyes roved around, taking everything in with wonder. Then she abruptly asked, “Wait – does Kokabiel know about this?”

Baraqel made a “tch” sound. “Of course.”

“Well... okay then.”

He shook his head but was smiling. “Let’s go inside.”

Walking forward, the door automatically swung inward, and Lilith saw that the interior had the familiar green glow of the existing tree. The interior was simple, with the first floor being a massive open space with a high ceiling. Following the stone-and-tree staircase, they came upon sleeping quarters, more open spaces, the glass-like dome of the closed patio, and finally an open-air deck at the very top, which Lilith gasped when she saw just how high up they were.

“What do you think?”

“It’s amazing,” she said, “but we are so... very high.”

Baraqel chuckled at that. “Well, there’s one more place I’d like to take you.”

“Oh God, we’re going to fly, aren’t we.”

Fortunately, the trip was short, as they arrived at a plateaued area of a nearby mountain. There, lying side by side on a blanket that Baraqel had previously spread out, he and Lilith looked at the stars, shining clear and bright that late night.

“I helped make that,” he said, as he pointed out one star cluster and another and another.

Noticing his wistful tone, Lilith asked, “Do you miss it – being a Celestial Engineer?”

“Of course,” he said. “But if I were still one, then I wouldn’t be here with you.” He paused. “And I think I’d miss this more.”

Lilith stared at him. “Why did you REALLY transform your tree, Baraqel?”

“Ah,” he said, still watching the starry sky. “Because – I wanted to make a place for you to belong. Not just as Rifan’s daughter or as Kamret’s regent, but a place where you can be you. Without prying eyes and wagging tongues.”

“Why would that place be your tree?” she asked softly.

“Well,” he said, nervous, “it’s because you can be you – with me... if you want.”

She was silent.

“Lilith –” Baraqel began, worried, but stopped when she had moved so that his green eyes stared into her eyes, glowing blue in the starlight.

She smiled. “Yes,” she said, and she reached over to pull him close.