

8 The Immortal and the Foolish

Two young men waited, under the cover of the close-growing trees on a full-moon night. Soon enough, their prey – an older, self-assured man – appeared, traveling alone down a heretofore secret path. The two men glanced at each other with acknowledgment. As soon as their prey passed in front of them, the smaller of the two shot a small dart from his blowgun, the dart embedding in their prey’s exposed forearm. The poison being quick-acting, their prey began to stumble, and they jumped out. After a brief struggle, they dragged him away from the path, farther and deeper into the darkness of the forest. There, they bound their prey’s mouth and hands, but he was still conscious, fully aware of who these two men were – just as the two men wanted. While silent so as not to call attention, their eyes blazed with rage and triumph as the dart blower held their prey still and the other raised up the ax.

“Please don’t do this,” a sonorous voice boomed around them.

The two men started and looked wild-eyed around them, seeing nothing.

“Won’t you reconsider?” Suddenly, an impossibly tall, silver-garbed man appeared before them, glowing faintly in the darkness.

“ARRRGH!” The ax-wielder swung at the stranger and stared, dumbfounded, as the ax passed through the stranger as if he were smoke.

“So that’s a ‘no,’ then,” the stranger said, as massive ash gray wings rose behind him, illuminating the darkness in a blinding light.

The two men gasped in terror and began to flee, leaving their prey and their ax on the forest floor, but they abruptly froze and fell down, as they felt a paralysis hit them. Only their wide, panicked eyes could move. Atop the forest leaf litter, they saw the stranger unbound their prey, and they silently wept at the injustice of it.

Freed, their prey cried out, “Thank you, sir, thank you!” He stood up but wavered, as the poison still affected him.

“Ah,” the stranger said. “Do you know why these two men would want you dead?”

“No!” he exclaimed in outrage. “I have never seen them in my entire life!”

“Is that so?”

Then all three men stared in horrified wonder, as the stranger twisted a hand in the air and a little, illuminated window appeared, floating before them. There, they saw moving images. They saw

the older man leading a boy away from their village down a secret path, with promises of honest, paid work, and – in a place of solitude and privacy – saw the older man do unspeakable things to the boy before paying him and swearing him to secrecy. They saw the boy attempt to kill himself out of shame and guilt, and his older brothers – the dart blower and ax wielder – stopping him before he jumped. They last saw – before the window faded away – the boy, trembling and sobbing, describe the older man to his parents, but they refused to believe him as the older man was a respectable member of their village.

Witnessing his deeds exposed, the older man – unconstrained – recoiled, fell, and then scrambled to stand up. He began to flee but abruptly stopped, as if an invisible hand had grabbed the scruff of his neck and threw him backwards to the ground. He stared up and saw glowing amber eyes looking down.

“Do you still deny all this?”

The older man struggled to break free.

“Do you repent?”

He refused to respond.

“Then I can do nothing for you.”

The boy’s two brothers stared as the stranger touched their prey’s forehead. The older man gasped once – and stopped moving. Then, still shocked at what they had witnessed, the two brothers realized that they were no longer frozen, but they were too afraid to move.

The stranger turned his face to them – his amber eyes glowing so brightly that they may as well have been on fire. “I’ve spared you the sin of murder,” he said, his voice hoarse. “Go. And care for your brother.”

Warily, they stood up, as if expecting the dangerous stranger to attack them. And then they suddenly turned around and ran.

Ah, Kokabiel thought, they didn’t even bother to thank me. He glanced down. They even left their ax.

Unlike Baraqel, who would’ve disintegrated the body cleanly, leaving no trace of the man’s earthly existence, Kokabiel made a deep grave to bury the body, so that its decay could feed the plants, animals, fungi, and bacteria around it.

But Kokabiel would not be one of those creatures to feed, as he refused to absorb the body’s energy, unlike his earlier self.

His earlier self would assess every human settlement, and whenever he saw that it needed intervention, he engaged. Staying ethereal until he isolated the criminals, he would deal with them, fully embodied: capture, questioning, and execution. Then, without hesitation, he would consume the criminals’ biochemical energy as recompense for dealing with the worst of fallen humanity. Soon enough, the mysterious disappearances of those criminals became a warning in the humans’ minds, where Kokabiel was an unnamed eldritch monster, a mythical deterrent used by humans to keep themselves on the path of virtue.

But then, one day, Kokabiel began to fear that they were right – that he was indeed a monster. Like a cannibal or vampire, feeding upon fellow intelligent creatures, Kokabiel had felt the exhilarating high of consuming the criminals’ energy – and it shook him.

As if he had become addicted to it.

As if he had actually looked FORWARD to capturing another human just so he could feed.

Disgusted with himself, he abruptly quit consuming the criminals’ energy and suffered three, harrowing days of withdrawal, ensconced in a tree very far away from any human settlement. He lay curled on his side, shaking, nauseated, and dry-heaving. But by the end of the third day, he slipped into a deep sleep, and when he woke up, he was able to return to his pre-Kamret recharging protocol: absorbing the energy of the largest tree he could find wherever he would make camp.

Thus, even though Kokabiel was exhausted the night that he stopped two men from murdering an old man who had raped their brother, he buried the old man’s body without once being tempted to absorb its energy.

After the burial, Kokabiel destroyed the ax, breaking the wooden handle into splinters and reducing the ax-head into small lumps of metal, and scattered the debris. Afterwards, he trudged further into the forest, where his temporary base camp was, to return to his cot. He had actually retired for the evening when he had sensed the disturbance outside. Grudgingly, he had emerged, scanned the three interlopers, and dealt with them. When he once again returned to his nightly roost, he stripped and collapsed into his cot, feeling the gentle, restorative power of that particular tree.

However, tired as Kokabiel was, the knowledge of the older man’s crimes still left a sour taste in his mouth, and he struggled to get to sleep. Even after a year back on patrol, he never adjusted to being alone, in spite of Baraqel periodically updating him via comm about events in Kamret. He turned towards the other side of the room, seeing the empty spot where Baraqel would have been. Feeling

the heavy weight of isolation, Kokabiel suddenly recalled a memory of questions that maybe would have been better left unanswered.

A month into Kokabiel’s resumption of his patrol, Baraqel had contacted him, asking, “I have a question for you.”

“Shoot.”

Baraqel got to the point. “Did you already know how I’d feel for Lilith?”

“... Yes.”

“Is that why you left so quickly?”

“That’s two questions.”

“Kokabiel.”

Kokabiel had been flying when Baraqel had contacted him. It was nearing the end of another patrol day, and Kokabiel was embodied, high in the sky, feeling the rhythm of the wind on his body. It was still his favorite part of the day, and he didn’t want to ruin it with sad thoughts. Yet he stopped his flight, alighting on a mountain tree-top, and perched like a dark bird of prey. “Yes, Baraqel,” he said. “That’s why I had to leave so quickly.”

“But – Lilith and I wanted you to stay,” his partner said. “We still do.”

“I know,” Kokabiel replied. “But Rifan chose you to be Lilith’s husband. It’ll be complicated as it is – with you and Lilith figuring out what a marriage between an angel and a human entails – without me being there.”

“There’s no protocol for this, Kokabiel, so how could you say that your presence would make things complicated?”

Kokabiel stared incredulously into space. “Do you really not know?” he exclaimed.

Baraqel was silent at first. Then he said, “Yes, I know you love her, too.”

Kokabiel exhaled. He asked, “Can you still say that THAT wouldn’t cause complications?”

His partner gave a frustrated sigh. “But it’s still difficult as it is, Kokabiel – you being away. We angels weren’t meant to be isolated like this.”

“We weren’t meant to be fallen and fall in love with humans either, yet here we are.”

Hearing the bitterness in Kokabiel’s voice, Baraqel said, “Lilith was right. You shouldn’t be alone out there.”

“That can’t be helped. You’re tied to Kamret, but someone still has to patrol.”

“But perhaps – perhaps – with my marriage... but I don’t even know if Lilith feels the same about me the way we feel about her.”

“She does.”

“WHAT? Did she tell you?”

“No.”

“Then –”

“She’s been in my head, Baraqel. And I’ve been in hers. I know her. She loves you.”

Baraqel paused again. “You say she loves me. But she loves you, too.”

“I doubt that. She was terrified of me.”

“Right. And she saw me as sweetness and light back then as well,” Baraqel commented, sarcastic. “If you’ve been in Lilith’s head, then you should know she loves you, too. Lilith sees herself as a Beatrice to both of us. She loves us both – equally.”

“But there can only be one husband for Lilith. So all the more reason for me to be out here.” Kokabiel made a dismissive shrug. “Can we move on? You contacted me saying you had one question, and you’ve asked three.”

“Look who’s being an asshole this time.”

“Tch.” Kokabiel shook his head. “But you interrupted yourself. Something about your marriage. What was it?”

“Ah.” Baraqel exhaled deeply. “While there’s no protocol for a fallen angel being married to a human female, I can speculate what my role would be. First, I’d have to provide a home, right? So I need to reengineer our home base so that it can accommodate Lilith.”

“You’re making it embodied as a human habitat?”

“Yes – if that’s okay with you.”

“Why would it matter if it’ll be okay with me?”

“It’s your home base, too, Kokabiel.”

Kokabiel didn’t reply.

“Kokabiel.” When his partner still didn’t reply, Baraqel said, “Wait – were you planning not to come back? Why –” but then he stopped. “You know what? It’s only been a month. So whatever shit you need to work out in your head as you’re out there, you have plenty of time. But know that there’ll be a home for you when you decide to come back. You got that?”

“Yes, sir,” Kokabiel replied curtly. “Thank you, sir.”

“Hmph. Don’t ‘sir’ me. We’ve been beyond traditional command structure since Lilith’s come into our lives. Which brings me to another role in this nontraditional marriage.”

“What’s that?”

“Being a father.”

Kokabiel paused. “Do you think that’s possible?”

“More than possible. Especially since my classification was – and still is – Celestial Engineer. I was created to make things, if you recall.”

“Right.” Kokabiel frowned, hearing a little bit of the cocksure Baraqel of old in his partner’s voice. “But... angel-human hybrids? What would they even be like?”

“As I said, I can only speculate. But they’ll likely have the potent energy of both me and Lilith, so I’d have to ensure that Lilith would be able to bear our children safely.”

“That’s only if Lilith would even want to have children,” Kokabiel pointed out.

“Ah. I hadn’t thought of that.”

Kokabiel felt a flash of anger. “You have better not force her –”

“HEY,” Baraqel interrupted, “you know I would never force Lilith to do anything she herself wouldn’t want to do. For God’s sake, who do you think I am?”

“Okay, okay.” Kokabiel sighed. “As for Lilith bearing your children safely – well, she’s a Beatrice. I mean, we’ve felt her ethereal self – she’s stronger than both of us.”

“I know.” He paused and continued, his voice sounding nervous, “I just hope – I do right by her.”

“Baraqel,” Kokabiel said, reassured to hear the arrogant tone of the old Baraqel gone. He saw the sun set and heard the distant explosion of bird call in the beginning dusk.

“Yes?”

“You will.”

Remembering that conversation, Kokabiel stared at the spot where Baraqel would have been. He thought of Baraqel’s updates of their rebuilt home base – “It was harder to do than I thought” and “Lilith’s decided to live here.” He thought of them trying to have children – “She wants to be a mother” – and the idea of his partner and their Beatrice having a physical relationship made his stomach lurch again, as if the ground had suddenly dropped away from him. Was it fear? Anger? Jealousy? Kokabiel didn’t know. Nevertheless, he had kept in contact with Baraqel but had maintained silence with Lilith, knowing that hearing her would weaken his resolve to stay on patrol.

Not even a year had passed, and so much had changed in Kamret. In the solitude of his faraway nightly roost, Kokabiel didn't know where he fit anymore.

“It's not fair,” Lilith had said, on the day that he had left them. “You'll be all alone.”

Kokabiel closed his eyes. *You were right*, he thought, as regret washed over him. *Ab, Lilith, I'm lonely.*

That was when he heard it – a faint, lonely tune, a familiar melody of echoing bells, resonating in his mind – and a firm voice chiding, *Then come home, you stubborn idiot.*

Kokabiel's eyes flew open as he sat up, not realizing that he had sent his thoughts until Lilith had sent her reply. However, he also felt, in her sending, an energy transfer that wasn't only hers but Baraqel's as well, blended and amplified into something new. He stared at his chest, seeing the intertwining energy strands of blue and gold expanding to the rest of his body and feeling a recharge much stronger than he had had in centuries. *How did you –*

It's the baby.

Baby? He stared, astonished.

Come home, my dear friend. You're my family, too. She paused. *I'll be waiting.*

Kokabriel sprang out of his cot, pulled on his clothes, and phased out of the tree. Energized, he took flight, speeding towards Kamret, until he could see the very top of the permanent home base. There, at the top-most deck, was Lilith, shining like a beacon in the darkness. He landed before her and, awed by the power emanating from her, fell to his knees. “You're pregnant,” he said.

Lilith, who wasn't even showing yet, nodded. “Yes. Does that make you angry? Will that make you run away again?”

Kokabiel shook his head, realizing that that was what he had been feeling and doing, all that time. He had met Lilith first, yet it was Baraqel whom Rifan had chosen. “I'm... so stupid,” he replied.

“Idiot,” she said. She stepped forward, took hold of his hands, and wrapped his arms around her waist. Kokabiel leaned down, into Lilith's abdomen, and he could hear the rapid rhythm of a tiny heartbeat and feel waves of energy in concert to that rhythm. At that position, Lilith was taller than Kokabiel, and she leaned forward and kissed the top of his head, as if giving a blessing. “Welcome home.”

“Thank you,” he said. His eyes closed as he held her, feeling the thrum of energy taking his exhaustion away, feeling the soft warmth of her body fitting with his. Then he asked, “Where's Baraqel?”

“Asleep.”

“Ah.” He started, feeling a twinge of guilt, and pulled back a little.

But Lilith gave him a quick knock against the top of his head. “Stop that,” she said. “You called out to me, not Baraqel – remember? Of course, I’d wake up to that.” She huffed. “Actually, that’s a nice change, since all this time you would ONLY talk to Baraqel, not me.”

“I’m sorry.” He turned his head to look at her.

She smiled down at him, her blue eyes meeting his amber ones. “Idiot.” But then she yawned.

“You need to get back to sleep, don’t you.”

“Yes,” she said. “Ironic, though. You don’t since I charged you up. But I’m human – it doesn’t work that way for me. I’m just –” Lilith searched for the right words “—a vessel.”

“The energy signature is the baby’s?”

“Yes. And the further along my pregnancy gets, the stronger it’ll become.”

“Will you be okay?”

Lilith nodded. “Baraqel has already planned for it.”

“Of course he did.” Kokabiel frowned. “Wait, why isn’t HE charged up then? Shouldn’t he be awake?”

“Between maintaining my people’s altered memories and trying to bring my father out of his coma, Baraqel still needs the downtime at night, even with using the energy that the baby is generating.”

“Oh. That makes sense.”

Lilith shook her head. “You forgot all that already? That’s what happens when you stay away from home too long.” She yawned again.

Kokabiel unwrapped his arms from Lilith and stood up. He patted her back gently. “Go back to bed, Lilith,” he said. “I’ll see you and Baraqel in the morning.”

“Okay.” Lilith turned to go back inside, but she paused and looked back. “You won’t be lonely up here?”

Kokabiel smiled. “I won’t be lonely.”

But Lilith knew he was lying.

Lilith at first tried to continue her role as Rifan’s regent, sitting in the headman’s chair during the business of the Council of Kamret. But once her pregnancy began showing, Lilith’s people – through whispers and silent judgement – pressured her to step away. Tolerating a half-Tirosian young woman as regent was one thing; accepting the pregnant wife of a strangely powerful foreigner as regent

was another. She resisted at first, but after a week of no one showing up before the Council of Kamret except for herself and Lords Arim and Erlan, who sat in awkward silence, she yielded to her people’s expectation of who should govern them.

On the day she stepped away from her position, it was too early to leave the manor house for home. Kokabiel was still on daily watch, patrolling all of Kamret. Baraqel was still with her parents, checking their physical health while trying to break through her father’s his self-induced coma. Having been worn by despair from past visits with them, Lilith had avoided her parents for months, even though she felt guilty for doing so. “Don’t be, Lilith,” Baraqel would say to her. “You need to take care of yourself, too.” But that day she felt angry and alienated from her own people. She craved the company of Baraqel and Kokabiel and just wanted to go home.

“Baraqel?” Lilith softly called out. Entering the bedchamber, she saw Baraqel sitting still, having leaned forward with his elbows in his knees. From the outside, it looked as if he was trying to will her father to awake, and after a long moment, he sighed and leaned back. “Baraqel?” she said again, but what she noticed was that her parents looked healthy – the healthiest she had ever seen them. They just needed to wake up. She reached out to touch her father’s hand.

Baraqel looked up then, his eyes widening with surprise. “Lilith, wait –”

Nausea hit Lilith as she stumbled from acute vertigo. She cried out, her eyes shut tight as she flung out her arms to catch herself from falling. Unexpectedly, she didn’t fall very far, bumping into something hard and cold, and she opened her eyes.

An icy wall, as high and wide as far as she could see, was in front her. She looked behind her and saw a barren landscape made of black rock, under a sickly red sky. *Where am I?*, she thought. Turning back to the wall, she rubbed at the surface, trying to see through it. She could just make out two shapes through the ice, and she worked more at the ice, her hands becoming numb with cold. But then the two shapes came into focus, and she cried out, “Father! Mother!”

Her mother, incased in ice, was curled on the ground, unmoving. Her father was pounding at the ice, with no effect, and yet he would not stop. He would never stop. Neither of them heard their daughter, on the other side of the ice wall.

“Father!” Lilith screamed. She began pounding at the ice wall. “Mother!” She willed the ice to melt, for her hands and body to become heat, to become fire. Lilith felt a sharp, searing pain, as if her body was burning, yet she wouldn’t stop trying to break through as her screams echoed across the dead landscape.

Suddenly, she felt something pull her away, and she writhed and flailed to break free as she saw the wall recede farther and farther away.

LILITH!

“NO!” she wailed. “NO!”

LILITH! And then, “LILITH!”

Kokabiel was there now, having been called by Baraqel. He restrained Lilith in a “hold” field, as Baraqel struggled to stabilize the runaway energy pouring out of the nephil growing in Lilith’s womb. The level of power was massive: it allowed Lilith to slip through her father’s coma, but it also triggered a gran mal seizure in consequence. After a frightening couple of minutes, Lilith’s seizure passed, and Baraqel succeeded in dialing back and containing his unborn son’s power within Lilith’s womb.

“What the hell happened?” Kokabiel demanded, holding a limp and unconscious Lilith in his arms.

“I’d made pinpoint portals for myself, onto Rifan’s inner space. But I could never get through. But Lilith’s already connected with her parents and – powered by our son – she accidentally got through. I think she tried to pull Rifan out, but she can’t harness that power without hurting herself. Maybe even...” Baraqel trailed off. One hand was still on Lilith’s lower abdomen, while his other one was on her forehead.

“Killing herself,” Kokabiel finished. “Accidentally.”

“Yes.” Baraqel dropped his hands. “I never meant... I never imagined.... Oh God, I never should’ve tried to have a child.”

“Hey,” Kokabiel said, “it’s not just you. Lilith wanted to have a child, too. She wants to be a mother.”

“I know, but –”

“What’s done is done.” Kokabiel could feel Lilith’s calm, even breathing. “She’s stable and, as far as I can tell, back to normal. What now?”

“I’ll shut down those pinpoint portals, to prevent another accident like this. Can you bring Lilith home?”

“Of course.”

Baraqel exhaled deeply. “God, I don’t know what I’d do without you, Kokabiel.”

“Panic and be an idiot, I would imagine. With Lilith hitting you a lot.”

Baraqel gave a shaky laugh. “Yeah.”

Six months after he had returned to Kamret, Kokabiel stood on the home base’s top-most deck, listening to Baraqel have a breakdown, as a shower of meteors streaked across the cool, night sky. *Humans call those falling stars*, he thought. *Well, isn’t that apt.* Still hearing his partner weeping heavily, Kokabiel found himself irritated, thinking, *Stop it, already. Good God, you were the one who told us what to expect.* But he knew he wasn’t being fair, and he put to words his partner’s unspoken raw emotions. “We can try to make a home here, Baraqel, but it’ll never be enough. We can try to create some semblance of Heaven here, but it’ll never be enough. We can try to pretend to be like the humans, but it’ll never be enough.” He raised an imaginary glass, in a toast. “Welcome to the world, little boy.”

His breezy, light tone was enough to snap Baraqel out of his crying jag, angering him. “You’re not helping, Kokabiel.”

“I never said I was.”

Shortly thereafter, Kokabiel left Baraqel alone to compose himself. He went back inside, going downstairs, and entered the room where, earlier that evening, Lilith gave birth to Aleph. *Ab, she’s asleep.* Noticing that the baby was also asleep, Kokabiel carefully lifted him from Lilith’s breast, adjusted her loose blouse to cover her, and tightened Aleph’s swaddle. He sat down beside Lilith’s bed, a chair materializing under him, and regarded the tiny new creature in his hands, perhaps the only one of his kind in all of Creation. Even through thick swaddling, Kokabiel could feel the heat radiating from Aleph’s body; even through Baraqel’s protective binding, he could feel the energy expanding from the boy’s core, barely controlled.

Child, he thought, *you have certainly made your parents’ lives complicated.*

Aleph yawned and blinked awake. Blue eyes – Lilith’s eyes – squinted up at Kokabiel.

Their lives and mine.

Sensing the lightness of her chest and the presence of another, Lilith woke up. Without moving, she opened her eyes, seeing Kokabiel at her bedside, holding Aleph and gazing into her son’s eyes. Kokabiel had been outside, guarding their home, as Baraqel guided Lilith through the birthing process. Through it all – from Aleph’s actual birth to Baraqel stabilizing the baby’s energy field and healing Lilith’s post-birth body – Kokabiel stayed away. Only when Lilith brought the baby to her breast to nurse did Baraqel step away. Alone with Aleph, Lilith had allowed herself to cry a little before succumbing to sleep. Now awake, she gazed at the fallen angel – who had felt it wasn’t appropriate to witness Lilith give birth – gently holding her son, his eyebrows furrowed as if deep in thought. She cleared her throat.

At the sound, Kokabiel looked up, still cradling the baby. “You’re awake,” he said, and he moved to give Aleph back to Lilith, but she gestured that he continue holding the baby. He settled back into the chair.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“Of what?”

“The baby.”

Kokabiel again looked down at Aleph. He replied, “He’s beautiful, Lilith.”

She smiled. “Yes. He is.” She paused, and her smile wavered. “It’s... incredible to think that he’ll grow so fast, when he’s this tiny.”

He shifted his gaze to Lilith. “And yet he will. He’ll look like a four-year old human by year’s end.”

She shook her head at that. “So fast. It’s absurd.” She paused again and then admitted, “This should be the happiest day of my life... yet here I am, trying not to cry because my baby won’t be a baby for very long.”

Kokabiel didn’t know how to respond to that.

What was there to say? That angels, by nature, had never been babies nor children, so of course Aleph, being half-angel, wouldn’t be a child that long? That he would age four times faster than humans, reaching full maturity when his human counterparts were only five years old? That the energy signature within him would grow so exponentially that, unless he learned how to control it, he would harm all mortals around him, including his own mother? That the reason, by year’s end, Aleph would have to leave home was for his mother’s own safety?

That while Lilith’s son was immortal, she was not?

Kokabiel said, “Lilith... just cry.”

She shook her head again. “No. Enough of that. I want to appreciate every minute I have with Aleph while I still can. I don’t want his earliest memories of me be sad ones.” Lilith gave a smile that was more of a grimace. “Where’s Baraqel?” she suddenly asked.

“Out on the upper deck,” Kokabiel replied, “getting –”

“—air,” she finished. “He always does that when he’s stressed.” She gave a soft chuckle. “So the terror of becoming a father has finally hit him.”

Kokabiel stared at her. “Yes,” he said. “Lilith, are you okay?”

Her blue eyes met his amber ones. “No,” she admitted, laughing a little, “not really.” Then she sent.

“Lilith –” he began, but then Aleph started crying.

“Give me my beautiful baby,” she said, smiling. She received Aleph carefully, loosened her blouse, and scooped the baby’s mouth to her breast. Aleph latched on and began suckling greedily.

“Ah,” Kokabiel said, not sure if he should be seeing this.

Lilith’s head bowed down, her long, mahogany brown hair loose, her blue eyes hooded as she smiled softly, cradling her newborn son. Aleph, his face buried into his mother’s breast, had worked his little hands free from his swaddle, and one of them had grabbed onto Lilith’s fingers. She bowed her head even more and kissed his little hand. Then she kissed his small, perfectly round head, which was covered in a light fluff, like a baby bird, and inhaled his warm, newborn smell.

Kokabiel suddenly remembered the night he had returned to Kamret, when he had kneeled before Lilith, hearing Aleph’s heartbeat for the first time within her small body, and she had kissed the crown on his head. He recalled Lilith’s sending, just a moment ago: *I just wish I had more time... to be a better mother than my mother was to me.*

“Lilith,” Baraqel said.

Kokabiel looked up, startled, for he hadn’t noticed that Baraqel had returned. He began to stand up, but Baraqel clapped a hand on his shoulder, saying, “Stay. You need to hear this, too.”

Lilith remained as she was, looking down at the baby as he nursed.

“I can’t give you more time with Aleph, Lilith,” Baraqel said. “It’s too dangerous.”

Oh, Kokabiel thought. *She sent to both of us.*

“But,” he continued, “I can give you more time to be a mother.”

Kokabiel frowned, confused.

Lilith looked up then. “What are you saying, Baraqel?” she asked carefully.

Baraqel sighed. He crouched down so that Kokabiel and Lilith were on either side of him. “You’re right, Lilith. Kokabiel and I are celestial creatures, and you and your people are human, but Aleph is neither – and it’s not right for him to be the only one of his kind.”

Kokabiel was still confused. “What ARE you saying, Baraqel?”

“I’m saying,” his partner replied, “that Lilith’s right. Aleph needs a brother and a sister.”

“Wait – what? WHAT?” Kokabiel exclaimed. “But what about the energy issue? It’s already risky to Lilith with Aleph, but more nephil children could really hurt her –”

“Kokabiel,” Lilith interrupted.

“WHAT?”

“Don’t talk about me as if I’m not right here.”

Kokabiel stared at her. Without a word, he began to stand up.

Baraqel firmly placed one hand on Kokabiel’s knee, forcing Kokabiel to sit back down, and set his other on Lilith’s. Turning to Kokabiel, he said, “I’m scared, too. But between you and me, I trust that we’ll be able to figure out safeguards and fail-safes. And if Lilith believes she can handle more children, then we should trust her. Right?”

Kokabiel looked at his partner. After an uncomfortable silence, he sighed, “Right.” He turned his gaze at Lilith. “I’m sorry. Whatever you choose to do – I’ll be there.”

Baraqel also turned to Lilith. “Me, too.” He lightly squeezed her knee. “And I’m sorry too – for being a damn coward when I said no.”

Lilith shook her head. “You two,” she said, but she was smiling. “Why do I always have to be the brave one?”

Aleph fussed, unlatched, and yawned. He stared up at Lilith, his blue eyes exactly matching his mother’s.

“That’s okay,” she said. “I can be the brave one.”

But as Kokabiel saw the little family of father, son, and mother, he thought, *You shouldn’t have to be, Lilith.*

Out of all of Lilith’s children, Aleph was the most like her. Perhaps it was because he had her blue eyes, brown hair, and light brown skin. But perhaps it was because he was able to stay with her the longest, before he had to leave after his first birthday.

No one had to tell Aleph the reason he would have to leave. Like his siblings after him, he was born with his father’s knowledge preloaded in his head, just like when his father woke up to his first day of existence, with a Celestial Engineer’s knowledge preloaded in his head.

But unlike his father, Aleph’s newborn brain was too undeveloped to understand what that knowledge meant. For the first three months of his life, he slept in the same room as his mother, until he was weaned and could walk on his own. Then he moved into the upper level of the home base, into a large room with walls heavily fortified with lead shielding. There, every morning, his father siphoned and captured his nephil energy, reducing it to safe radioactive levels, which allowed him to leave the room to be with his mother. With his mother, he ate his meals, learned the lore of Kamret, and was able to be her little boy.

But as he grew over the next nine months, even with the daily energy siphoning, his presence with his mother began to decrease day by day, week by week, to minimize her exposure to Aleph’s energy, and when he wasn’t with his mother, he would be with his father.

His father would bring him back to the shielded room, and there, his father taught him how to understand the knowledge that was hardwired in his brain. He learned what was relevant to him, like sending and performing Lethe sleep, and what was not, like flying (which he couldn’t do since he didn’t have wings) and becoming fully ethereal (which he also couldn’t do because his body was permanently materialized). However, even with his father’s thorough instruction, he was unable to control the nephil energy that flowed unabated from his body, and he would see the impatient frustration in his father’s green eyes.

One afternoon, his father’s patience ran out. “You should be able to control this, Aleph,” his father scolded. “You are my son, right?”

“I’m trying, Father,” Aleph replied, his voice small and still very young.

“Try harder!”

At that moment, the person whom Aleph saw as his uncle appeared. From the doorway, Aleph heard him say, “Leave him be, Baraqel.”

His father made a “tch” sound. “I need to check on Lilith, anyways,” he said, his tone brusque, and left.

In the ensuing silence, Aleph looked down at himself, seeing the twining energy of blue and yellow flow out from him. “I really am trying, Uncle,” he said softly.

“I know,” Kokabiel replied. “You’re young. Give it time.”

“Father is very angry with me,” Aleph said.

Kokabiel shook his head. “No – he’s just afraid for you.”

Aleph looked up. “I – I don’t want to hurt anyone.” His first birthday was yesterday, but he looked like a four-year old boy. “Is it time for me to leave, Uncle?”

“Yes,” Kokabiel said. “Let’s say goodbye to your mother first.”

Now it was Aleph who shook his head. “I did this morning.” He paused. “I don’t want to make her cry again.”

His uncle’s amber eyes suddenly looked sad. He nodded. “Okay, then. Let’s go.”

Aleph trained with his uncle, as he learned how to siphon and capture his own unceasing waves of nephil energy and struggled with dialing down its strength. He trained and lived in the same

place: a second home base, far on the opposite side of his parents’ home and far away from the human residents of Kamret. Engineered by his father, Aleph’s home was built out of a mountain and was entirely shielded in lead. Far more massive than Aleph nor Kokabiel needed, both knew Baraqel designed it with Aleph’s future siblings in mind.

Even so, they were both surprised when a pregnancy announcement arrived only one month after Aleph had left, and even more surprised when they learned that Aleph would have triplet sisters.

In the vid screen floating before Aleph and his uncle, his mother’s belly looked huge as she lay, bedridden for her and the babies’ safety.

“Are you excited to be a big brother, Aleph?” she had asked, beaming, as Aleph’s father stood beside her, worry working its way through his pale, handsome face.

Trying not to gawk at the image of his mother’s belly, Aleph still didn’t know what to feel. “Yes, Ma,” he had replied, but he wasn’t sure if what he said was a lie or the truth.

As was his wont when Aleph and his mother spoke to each other, Kokabiel stood aside and was silent. As soon as the vid screen winked away, he saw the young boy trembling, upset, trying not to cry. “Aleph,” he said, “let’s work on your energy control.”

Aleph looked up and nodded. “Yes, Uncle.”

When Aleph’s sisters were born shortly thereafter, they were all identical to each other, all three staring into the world with their father’s green eyes. Six months later, when they looked like two-year old humans and Aleph’s appearance was of an eight year old boy, Isa, Dala, and Tallo moved in with Aleph and Kokabiel, for the three nephilim’s unconstrained energy had already overwhelmed their mother well before the one year mark.

Kokabiel accepted his additional wards without question, feeling duty-bound to Aleph’s parents.

But when another pregnancy announcement arrived scarcely a month later, this time with twin boys, Aleph could feel his uncle’s barely controlled agitation.

That night, after a fitful couple of hours, Aleph woke up, alone and in the dark. Then his eyes adjusted as his body illuminated his bedroom with a cool, blue glow. At first he wondered why he woke up until he heard, faintly, voices coming from the commons room. Carefully, he left his bedroom, following the sound of the voices which, the closer he got, he realized were his uncle and his father, speaking from a vid screen.

“Kokabiel –”

“NO,” his uncle interrupted, “I call BULLSHIT. Aleph – Aleph I understand. But triplets and now TWINS? Dammit, Lilith hasn’t even had the chance to fully recover from her last pregnancy!”

“It’s not as if we had planned all this.”

“Well then, isn’t it a FUCKING miracle – having all of these babies with so little sex, eh?”

His father’s face twisted. He looked as if he was about to explode in anger, but then Aleph’s mother appeared, setting her hand on his father’s arm. “Let me speak to him,” she said.

His father stared at her. He exhaled deeply, nodded, and stepped away, off-screen.

Aleph’s mother looked to the side, as if waiting for his father to leave the room. After a few moments, she faced the vid screen. “Kokabiel,” she said.

“Why do you let him DO THIS to you, Lilith?”

She peered at him. “Let him do what?” she asked carefully.

“Let him make you into a babymaker!” he sputtered, outraged.

She stared at him. “Of all the foolish things you have ever said, Kokabiel.”

“Lilith, I’m serious –”

“SO AM I.” She threw up her hands. “Have you forgotten who you’re talking to? Have you gotten so caught up with whatever the hell you’re doing that you assume that I’ve become STUPID or something?”

“Lilith –”

“SHUT UP,” she cut him off, angrily. “I’M NOT DONE YET.”

Kokabiel shut up.

She exhaled deeply, regaining her temper. “I am many things, things I don’t have a choice to be. A half-breed. A daughter. A regent. Even a Beatrice – I don’t even have a choice in that.” She pointed to herself, at the place where her heart was. “But I CHOSE to be a wife and mother, Kokabiel. Baraqel would have been fine, just being my husband but never a father. He left the decision to me. And I chose to have children.”

“But – why so MANY? So QUICKLY?”

She sighed again before answering, “It’s because I’ll die someday.”

He stared at her confused. “What?”

She shook her head. “You and Baraqel – all so caught up with me being this mysterious Beatrice. But you forget that I am human, and humans are mortal. We are fragile creatures. We live in a world where, through accident, illness, the actions of evil people, or even just simple aging, human beings die –” she snapped her fingers, “– like that. And when I held Aleph for the first time, I realized

that someday I will be gone. I will leave behind a child who will never die and, therefore, will forever miss his mother.” She paused. “How could I live, knowing that he would have to bear the burden of grieving for his mother all alone? But with Isa, Dala, Tallo and – later on, Dalet and Limeh – then Aleph won’t have to shoulder that grief all by himself.” She paused again. “And whenever they miss me – whenever you and Baraqel miss me – you and they can take comfort that a little bit of me lives on in my children.”

Kokabiel frowned. “That’s not the same as you being here, Lilith.”

“I know,” she said, “but that’s all I can do for you all.”

“Lilith –”

“My immortal children and my two foolish angels – can’t you see that I’m trying to leave a bit of me when I’m gone?”

He gave a sharp sigh of frustration. “Dammit, Lilith, can you stop talking as if you’re dying?”

Aleph’s mother gave a wry smile. “But do you understand? It’s not Baraqel’s decision – but mine?” she asked, undeterred.

He sighed again. “Yes.”

“Good.” She looked down at her belly, which had only begun to soften. “If it’s any consolation, this is my last pregnancy.” She saw his surprised expression. “I’m not naïve, Kokabiel. I know that having nephil children harms my health, despite Baraqel’s preventative measures. When the twins leave me, I’ll return to my father’s house.”

“Why?”

She gave a small smile, at the innocence in his question. “Minimizes the risk. Baraqel wasn’t lying when he said we didn’t plan to have so many children so soon – they just happened. I’m a very fertile woman, Kokabiel.”

“Ah.”

She chuckled at Kokabiel’s obvious discomfort. Then serious, she asked, “How are my babies?”

“Your babies – they aren’t babies anymore, Lilith. Especially Aleph. He looks like a nine-year boy. He’ll look like a man soon enough.”

Aleph’s mother shook her head, incredulous. “Too fast. They grow up too fast.” She sighed, wistful. “If only I could be there....” She trailed off.

“Do you regret it?” Kokabiel asked. “Meeting Baraqel and me, getting married, having nephil children, only to have them leave you – would you change your mind, knowing what you know now?”

Aleph’s mother began to respond, but from the vid screen, she paused, looking beyond Kokabiel. Following her line of sight, Kokabiel twisted around, and his amber eyes and her blue eyes both met the blue eyes of the nephil boy standing in the dark, silently peeking around a corner on the far side of the room. Both nephil and angel heard her answer.

“No,” she said. “Never.”