

## 9 A Family at the World’s End

Separated evenly along the perimeter of Baraqel and Kokabiel’s region, Lilith’s children resided in solitary, shielded bunkers.

Their physical appearance belied their true age. At first, they looked much older than their actual age. But as the years passed by, they looked much younger, as their bodies didn’t grow any older, even as they achieved full maturity of their nephil power. However, they were never able to dial down the potent energy continuously flowing out from their bodies to human-safe levels, so their father harnessed it, powering the advanced technologies created to benefit the humans under their care.

Looking like four year olds, the twins Dalet and Limeh were housed together and powered a defensive shield around the region. Looking like a ten-year old, the youngest triplet Tallo powered the extensive network of electromagnetic vehicle paths. Tallo’s identical sisters, Isa and Dala, powered the general energy grid, although they were physically separated from each other.

Appearing like a sixteen-year old, Aleph, the only child who had inherited Lilith’s blue eyes, powered an observatory with advanced optics. It was the only structure that was not essential to the physical well-being of the humans. While his father assigned Aleph to the observatory, “in homage to your mother,” Aleph knew the real reason: although he was the oldest, his younger siblings were more powerful than he was.

Installed in their bunkers, Aleph and his siblings had maintained large physical distances from the humans, following one of the strict rules that their father gave to them when they were old enough to leave their mountain home base and report to their assigned duty stations. They followed their father’s rules without fail, for the rules were simple:

1. Never harm a human.
2. Never let a human see you.
3. Never leave your duty station.
4. Always siphon and capture your excess energy.
5. Always keep your comm open.

For four years, they had obeyed those rules while their father and uncle patrolled the region. With Isa and Dala powering him through the grid, their father could leave Kamret while still maintaining the Lethe command that had altered the Kamreti’s memories all those years go. Meanwhile, the humans

of Kamret and the other village-states, who spoke of the six nephilim’s existence as rumored ghostly monsters, saw the GodKing and his Warrior as magical men who kept the monsters at bay and gave them miraculous gifts of machines and other technologies, transforming their world.

Even though Lilith’s children, obeying Rule 3, could not see the transformation with their physical eyes, they had inherited their mother’s ability to separate their ethereal selves from their physical bodies, an ability that they had practiced when they were younger in their uncle’s home base. Their physical bodies stationed in their bunkers, their ethereal selves could float invisibly and harmlessly among the humans. With quiet amusement, they witnessed the wonders that they had helped make happen. Isolated in their bunkers, they also kept in contact with each other via comms (which their father had implanted behind their right ears before they left their home) and vid screens. If they wanted to share more than material sounds and visuals, they would communicate with sending. In that way, although physically separated, Lilith’s children were never really alone.

Yet Aleph continued to feel set apart from his siblings.

As his comm was filled with the amused observations of what his brothers and sisters had witnessed outside their hidden bunkers, Aleph chose to stay integrated, body and spirit, within his station. Even as he heard news of how the humans quickly adapted to the technology that they still saw as magic, Aleph didn’t want to see a world in which he couldn’t feel the sun on his skin, the grass under his feet, the warmth of his mother’s hug.

He performed his duties and, at night, he emerged from his bunker to peek at the night sky, eating a late night snack. His siblings, having outgrown the need for external food, used the regenerative energy produced from their own bodies as self-sustaining nourishment, but Aleph used his cache of stored energy to power a food replicator. Like a human, he preferred the act of eating. So, nibbling on an apple, he would see the cold twinkle of faraway stars, wondering if Archangels were really up there.

After a while, his siblings observed that the humans’ expectations for what the GodKings could give them had become insatiable, even as their irrational fear of “ghosts” and “monsters” grew, and one day Isa declared, “These humans are still so immature.”

Aleph flinched, for he still saw himself as human – at least part human. Hearing a familiar arrogance in his sister’s voice, he turned down his comm’s volume until the back-and-forth, self-satisfied commentary became a soft hiss that he hardly noticed. He never turned up the volume – and not once did he ever send to his siblings, lest he reveal his troubling alienation to them.

Thus Aleph was taken aback when he heard a man’s piercing scream shatter through his comm’s hiss and his sister’s wordless sending of raw terror.

*Tallo!*

Too far for Aleph to travel physically without a large time delay, his ethereal self flew towards Tallo’s bunker – or what used to be Tallo’s bunker. Before he even saw the crater, Aleph saw the white-hot glow of a massive wave of radiation that could kill any mortal creature at ground zero. At the epicenter of the blast was Tallo – normally calm, aloof Tallo – weeping uncontrollably, as the rest of her siblings’ ethereal selves arrived. Then their father and Kokabiel, still ethereal from their respective patrols, arrived. Touching down before Tallo, their father materialized. Incoherent, Tallo could only send a torrent of thoughts.

She had just returned from her ethereal walk when she stood up in her bunker and saw the wide, rapacious eyes of a strange man before her. In an instant, she saw everything that was in the man’s mind.

He desired to know the magical source of the miraculous machines that could transport people without touching the ground. He traced the source to an unremarkable stand of boulders on the far reaches of his land. He passed through the illusion of boulders and stumbled into a secret place, not knowing that it had been designed to keep a nephil bodily inside but not once designed to withstand a human being from the outside – for the idea that a mere human would be dangerous to a nephil seemed unfathomable to its designer. The man saw the cache of captured excess energy, glittering blue and gold in the dark, and grabbed at it, believing to have discovered magical treasure.

But then he started, frightened by the glowing ghost child’s sudden appearance. With a cry, he dropped the cache and, as the cache detonated, his scream was cut short – while Tallo’s voiceless scream passed into sending as the forever unknown man, and everything around her, vaporized in the thermonuclear explosion.

As Aleph and his other siblings stared, shocked in receiving her thoughts instantly in their mind, Tallo cried, over and over, “I killed him! I killed him! I killed him!”

Angered by his helplessness, Baraqel tightly held his daughter as she sobbed, her hysteria making her voice grow higher and more ragged. Meanwhile, Kokabiel flew above the bubble of radiation to set down a containment field, but tendrils of radiation burst out. *SHIT!* he sent, alarmed.

As if broken from a spell, Aleph shook himself from his daze. “We need to help him!” he called out to his other siblings. Isa, Dala, Dalet, and Limeh joined Aleph in hauling back the tendrils and sealing the cracks that threatened to shatter the containment field. Then they pushed the encased

radiation down, deep into the Earth, letting rock several miles below the surface capture it, away from surface-dwelling mortal creatures. Afterwards, they were exhausted shimmers but were reluctant to return to their bodies while Tallo was still distraught.

Suddenly, Kokabiel looked away. “Baraqel,” he said.

Their father, still calming down Tallo, at first didn’t hear.

“BARAQEL,” he said, louder.

“WHAT,” their father responded, angry.

“The Lethe command.”

Their father froze. He closed his eyes for a second and then opened it. He was about to say something when his eyes widened.

Kokabiel met his stunned stare and then took off without a further word, his ethereal ashen-gray wings beating hard and fast.

Their father began to follow.

Confused, Aleph asked, “Father –”

“STAY HERE!” their father barked, and he shot up, his golden wings shining in the darkening sky, then becoming ethereal.

Aleph stared at the soon empty sky, but then he turned back to his sister Tallo, still frightened and bewildered by her new, raw emotions, her small body exposed in the open. At once he realized that he and the rest of Tallo’s siblings were as substantial as light and air, when Tallo needed a warm embrace and a safe place to recover. “Tallo,” Aleph asked, “can you travel?”

“Y-yes,” she replied, shivering even though the evening air was warm.

“Good. Isa’s bunker is closest, so we’ll go along with you until you get there.”

“But Father –” Dalet and Limah both began, their voices sounding not like powerful nephilim but frightened little boys, unused to emotions overwhelming them.

“I know what Father said!” Aleph interrupted. “But it’s not safe for Tallo to be out like this. What if another human sees her?”

At that thought, Tallo whimpered, and the twins – wide-eyed with fear – nodded in silent assent, as did Isa and Dala.

*Broken*, Aleph thought, as he regarded his younger siblings. *They’re broken now – like me.* “Okay then,” he said aloud. “Let’s go.”

With Tallo bodily integrated, they couldn’t move as fast as if they were all ethereal. But being nephil, Tallo was faster than any human. Comforted by the presence of her siblings, Tallo crossed vast

distances until she arrived at a familiar-looking outcropping of boulders. Tallo pressed through the barrier illusion. The sensation felt like suffocating gel, through which she crossed into the interior of the bunker. As ethereal spirits, the others easily phased through the barrier. Isa quickly integrated with her unconscious, supine body, sprang up, and – without hesitation – embraced her sister.

Aleph looked on and felt a guilt-addled twinge of envy. He exhaled deeply. “I’ll inform Father where Tallo is,” he said to Dala and the twins. “Meanwhile, return to your bunkers. We all need time to recover after all this.”

“Aleph?” Tallo asked.

He met her frightened gaze, her green eyes blood-shot with crying. “Yes?”

“Am I a bad person?”

He stared at her, then shook his head. “No, Tallo. That man’s greed violated your space. If we’re looking for a bad person, it would be that man.”

“But he died,” Tallo said, her voice wavering.

Isa held her tightly. “No, no,” she said, her voice sounding as if she was about to cry as well, “it was an accident.”

Leaving Tallo in Isa’s care, Aleph and the rest of his siblings phased outside of Isa’s bunker. Aleph waited, watching the twins and then Dala leave, before he took off. Returning to his bunker underneath his father’s observatory, he was tempted to make a hard left.

To where his father and Kokabiel had flown.

To Kamret.

But the effort to contain and sequester the explosion’s radiation exhausted Aleph, who – unused to the separation of ethereal self from his body – felt the taut strain of the connection to his physical body, worn thin. Also, he knew that disobeying his father’s command to stay at his and his siblings’ positions, in order to lead Tallo to a safe haven, was one thing; interfering in the urgent actions of his father and Kokabiel was another level of insubordination. Reluctantly, he stayed on course. Returning to his bunker, he integrated, gasping for air as if he had held his breath for several hours. Feeling the exhaustion settle into his bones, he turned over in his bed. Trusting that, whatever had happened in Kamret, his uncle and father would take care of it and they would inform him and his siblings soon enough, Aleph tried to get to sleep.

But just like that night when he eavesdropped on the conversation between his mother and Kokabiel, Aleph woke up after a fitful few hours, staring into a darkness faintly illuminated with his glowing energy.

*The Lethe command*, he thought, remembering Kokabiel’s words and the abrupt departure of both Kokabiel and his father. He recalled the shock and alarm in his father’s face before he left, and Aleph sat up as he realized what his father’s reaction meant: something went wrong with the Lethe command. The Lethe command that had rewritten all of Kamret’s memories, when Kokabiel and Baraqel first arrived at Kamret. That had changed how the people of Kamret saw the two angels and the headman’s family.

That had kept his mother safe.

*Mal*, Aleph sent, his sending a cry of fear, but his sending encountered an ominous silence, rebounding against a psychic block as if he had run against a solid rock wall. Panicking, he tried sending to his father and uncle but encountered the same silence, the same block. Without thinking, his ethereal self flew out from the bunker and shot through the pre-dawn sky, fear driving him to Kamret.

When Aleph arrived at the outskirts of Kamret, where the arboreal home base of his infancy was located, he could feel the invisible wall. At first, nothing appeared amiss as he peered through it. But as he carefully negotiated a way through the wall, using the same energy that his father bequeathed him that also constructed the wall, he saw the image of a sleepy Kamret at dawn totally transform.

On the other side, fields and structures were ablaze. Violence had erupted, with fellow Kamreti turning on each other. The ground had grown slick with blood and slain bodies. And high above them all, Aleph saw his father and uncle.

To human eyes, they would have looked like two blinding figures of light – one silver, the other gold – darting around, crashing, and then tearing away at each other like living fireworks. But to Aleph’s nephil eyes, he only saw his father and uncle, their wings outstretched, aflame with their respective energy. Kokabiel propelled blasts long range, which his father deftly deflected, aiming the redirected energy to the sky, away from the humans below. His father closed the distance, grappling Kokabiel, but Kokabiel broke free, reared back to gain distance again, and then propelled shards of energy, trying to shoot his father out of the sky.

At first, Aleph stared, his mouth agape, confused. But then he realized what he was seeing for the very first time in his short life: his father and uncle were fighting each other. “*NO!*” Aleph screamed, his voice still sounding so young, and his scream carried into sending to both, to the imperfect fallen angels whom he saw as fathers – the one who sired and commanded him, the other who raised and understood him.

Kokabiel reacted first, turning his wild, wide amber eyes to Aleph. Before his father could act, Aleph received a sending so raw that he thought his brain would explode –

The shock of Tallo’s explosion.

Isa and Dala’s broken power connection to Baraqel.

The Lethe command over Kamret, weakened and then gone.

Hatred and hostility restored among the Kamreti.

Kamret’s destruction.

Lord Arim finding a sleeping scapegoat.

Lilith awakened by Lord Arim plunging the knife into her heart.

*NO!*

Lilith’s cry hits both Baraqel and Kokabiel, so far away with her children.

They fly to her side.

Kokabiel kills the assassin, wreaks vengeance on those who hold the same murderous intent.

Baraqel saves Lilith’s life, but the assault so traumatizes her that he despairs that her Beatrice spirit is lost. He gives her Lethe sleep so strong that she falls into the same coma that befell her parents.

Kokabiel returns, sees the betrayal of everything Lilith stood for – of fighting for her parents’ return, of accepting her mortality, of holding onto hope – and only sees an enemy.

A rival.

A monster to destroy.

But then he hears the monster’s son, sees Lilith’s eyes look at him in horror.

*I’m sorry, my boy.*

Kokabiel’s rarely used Lethe sleep hit Aleph.

As he collapsed, Aleph saw his father, shocked and then enraged. His father fired off his own blast. But Kokabiel did not move: a hovering target in the sun-rise sky, ichor dripping from his wounds. The blast hit him full force. Aleph wanted to cry out but was slipping away, and as darkness fell into his eyes, his last memory was Kokabiel on fire.

Falling back to Earth.

When Aleph awoke, he had returned to his body, but everything else in his world had changed.

Kamret had fallen and – as if the hatred and hostility were an uncontrollable disease – all of the humans in his father’s domain had killed each other. His mother lay comatose in her father’s house, and Kokabiel had met a similar fate: his father stripped Kokabiel of consciousness, imprisoning him into the very tree where Kokabiel had slept that night after he realized that he and Baraqel were

fallen. In time, Kokabiel would be part of the tree, his sentience lost, as close to death as an immortal being could be.

His father, in grief and despair at the loss of Lilith and Kokabiel, had at first retreated to the old home base, having abandoned the humans to their self-destruction. Aleph’s siblings, who had never recovered from that night of the explosion, stayed in their bunkers as obedient bystanders. Only after Aleph awoke – several years later to his surprise – did his father choose to live in the observatory, to see the stars and wallow in his guilt and shame. Aleph, first-born of his father’s children, was allowed to leave his bunker and join his father above ground.

In time, Aleph stayed above full time, suspended in a glass case hovering a meter above the ground. There, Aleph could power the observatory within the border of wakefulness and sleep, could ignore the despair that flowed off his father like indigo ink and blood. Aleph had lost track how long he was in that state when he felt an electric shock, a signal that something had crossed through the barrier that had kept his father’s domain quarantined from the rest of the world.

“Setebos,” his father said.

From deep in the memories that he had inherited from his father’s life as a Watcher and before, Aleph recognized that name. The Watcher who had saved a little girl from her despair. The Celestial Engineer who had wept at the end of the War in Heaven. The angel whom his father once disregarded but from whom he had learned how to be humble when no one else could – not even Kokabiel.

When Setebos arrived, seeking answers about the state of the Watchers, Baraqel chose Aleph to speak for him, so it was a weak nephil boy who sent the history of Kamret and its fall. The knowledge drove Setebos to weeping, yet it also drove him towards action. When Setebos asked his father to join him, to confront Samyaza, their long-absent commanding officer, about their fallen state, his father declined. “I’ve done enough harm as it is.” But even as he did so, he gifted his old colleague a canister of Aleph’s nephil energy, to power Setebos and his partner Miranda.

Once Setebos left, Aleph had hoped that the unexpected visit would change his father somehow – to spur him out of the meaningless stasis that was his father’s existence. But his father only shook his head, murmuring, “I don’t know anymore.”

And, for the first time, Aleph despaired that he was ever born. He winced. *No*, he thought, *no, I can’t think like that*. He ranged through his memories – past the recent ones, the inherited ones, the sad ones – and recalled the earliest of his own personal memories. His mother was holding him in one arm, standing on the top-most deck of the home base made from a tree. It was a bright, spring day, and she was pointing at a hawk in the sky.



“Don’t cry, my sweet boy, that you can’t fly. You see that bird over there?”

“Yesh,” little Aleph replied, his voice with a young toddler’s lisp.

“Even though it’s high above, do you know where it’s always looking, where its home will always be?”

“No.”

“Here.” She stamped one foot on the solid deck floor. “On the ground. On the Earth. No matter where it flies off to, it always returns home. So the ground must be pretty important, eh? Pretty special.” She hugged him. “Just like you. You don’t need wings to be special, sweet one. Do you believe your mama?”

He hugged her tightly, smelling her sweet, earthy scent.

She kissed his soft, baby cheeks. “Angel, nephil, human – it doesn’t matter. Always remember this: your mama loves you. Forever and ever and ever. You promise you’ll remember?”

“Yesh, Mama,” little Aleph replied. “I’ll remember.”

*I remember,* Aleph thought. He looked through his enclosed case and saw his father, sitting down as if exhausted even though, what with nephil energy saturating everything, he knew his father would never be underpowered. *Why can’t you?*

Many years passed again. Aleph remained at age sixteen, and he knew that his sisters were still ten years old and his brothers remained four-year olds, as if the fall of Kamret had forever arrested their aging. Then one full moon night, his father tore away from the telescope, looking aghast. He rushed out and, for the first time in ages, took flight.

*What is it?* By that time, Aleph had returned to staying in his bunker during the day, so he was above ground when he witnessed his father flying high in the sky, his flight path making wide arcs in the sky, following the curvature of the barrier shield that had existed ever since Dalet and Limeh were installed in their station all those years ago. Aleph shifted his focus from his father to the shield, which at first appeared as clear and unmoving as crystal – but then he noticed the slight shimmering and subtle wave motion on its surface. Looking through the shield, he could see what was causing the unusual movement: it was raining.

Aleph frowned. *Rain shouldn’t be able to do that. Unless –*

Just like recognizing Setebos as if he had always known him, Aleph was born with the Celestial Engineers’ knowledge of the Earth’s initial set-up and execution. That included what happened if the Earth became so riddled with faults that its initial execution became terminally degraded. The Earth would undergo a wipe and update, what the Watchers called “Reboot,” and the method of it was a

flooding rain that originated not from Earth – not even the material universe. It would come from the Purgatorial Sea of Sacred Space itself.

Aleph witnessed in stunned wonder. It was strange, knowing this fact to be true even though he never learned it, never experienced it. The knowledge of the Reboot was as real as the bones in his body and the blood in his veins. It served a purpose, and the purpose was for the good of Earth and Earth’s creatures. But he never knew how terrified his father would be, upon witnessing the Reboot happen, for his father – as were all the other Watchers who were Celestial Engineers – truly believed they would never have to experience it.

In contrast to his father, Aleph was not afraid of it. *Why?*, he thought. Immortal that he was, he knew that the Reboot could destroy him, but he wasn’t suicidal. He didn’t want to die. Yet he knew his life wasn’t happy. It wasn’t what his mother, father, or uncle had wanted for him – nor for his brothers and sisters – and another day of this current deadened existence made him struggle with his immortality. While his father questioned what was right or wrong, Aleph felt that whatever “right” was, his current existence wasn’t it. If being washed away in the Reboot gave him the clarity of what “right” was, then he – he –

He looked back at his father, whose flight path became more erratic, more frantic, pulling the ambient nephil energy to shore up the unstable shield, so single-minded in his task that he didn’t think to ask Aleph or his siblings for help.

If being washed away gave him peace – then Aleph welcomed it.

The shield wouldn’t hold. The shield would inevitably fail, and the waters would come for them. It was futile to fight against it. But Aleph knew that his father wouldn’t listen to him, as he still saw his children as obedient subordinates, even though his father did love them, in his own aloof fashion.

Aleph wasn’t afraid for himself but for his father, his siblings, his mother, and uncle. What would happen to them in the Reboot? What would happen to them, unprepared as they were at the end of the world? At that thought, he began to tremble: the Reboot itself didn’t frighten him, but being all alone did.

Another moment of clarity. *Is this how the end of the world works? Making you admit harsh truths about yourself?* As Aleph witnessed his father, he realized that he needed an adult’s steady guidance, but not when the only adult before him was regressing into mindless panic. Aleph would have to wake up his mother and release his uncle from imprisonment.

Could he do it?

He remembered the only time he had felt like a leader, when he commanded his siblings to help Kokabiel after Tallo’s bunker exploded and then directed his siblings to their bunkers, with Isa sharing hers with Tallo. *Isa and Tallo are still like that*, Aleph realized, which meant that his father had agreed with Aleph’s decision. He looked at his arms, blue and gold energy signatures intertwining, but the blue from his human mother was and had always been stronger than the gold from his angel father. Yet his mother wasn’t an ordinary human – how could he forget that? A Beatrice, beloved by two angels: he was her first-born child. Didn’t that amount to something?

Aleph glanced up. His father still wasn’t paying attention to him. The purgatorial rain on the other side of the shield increased its intensity and further drove his father to frenzied obsession. He took off running.

*Faster*, he thought. *I need to go faster!*

Suddenly, Aleph felt his body change, becoming lighter and smaller. In a flash of indigo light, he took flight, becoming a brown, blue-eyed sparrowhawk. *How?*, he began to ask, disoriented by his high vantage point, his unfamiliar form. But he had no time to wonder how he had changed his body, an ability that neither he nor anyone else knew he had. The stark, dead land below him was a blur, as his hawk’s body sped with a nephil’s power. Soon, he arrived at the window of his mother’s bedroom. As Aleph transformed back to his true form, human hands reached out to open the window, and he clambered inside. He ran and then paused before his mother’s bedside.

She lay coldly still, her body enveloped in the golden glow of his father’s energy signature that sealed her in Lethe sleep. Channeling the same energy signature that flowed in him, Aleph placed his hands above her head and felt resistance from the seal. But then the dual golden energy signatures melded together, and slowly – agonizingly slowly – he parted the seal, exposing his mother’s face. He cupped his hands around her face, and the dark indigo blue inherited from his mother flooded his hands, supplanting his father’s. Leaning forward, her past words echoed in his mind:

“Angel, nephil, human – it doesn’t matter. Always remember this: your mama loves you. Forever and ever and ever. You promise you’ll remember?”

With eyes closed, he touched his forehead against his mother’s and sent: *I remember, Ma. Do you remember me?*

She didn’t move.

*Ah*, he thought. *Ah, I’m too late* – but then he felt his mother’s small hands cover his hands and heard a voice he hadn’t heard in several years.

“Aleph?”

*Ma!* The seal fell away, and he collapsed beside her then, hugging her tightly. He sent everything that had happened, from the night of Tallo’s explosion to the rain of the world’s end. He felt her tremble, and Aleph pulled back, to see his mother weeping. “Ma—” he began, frightened.

She sat up and quickly wiped away the tears with the palms of her hands. “It’s all so sad, my boy,” she said. She glanced down, at where the assassin’s knife had been, but there wasn’t even a scar. “They’re all dead, and the only humans remaining in Kamret are your grandparents and me.” She shook her head. “Enough regrets.” She looked at her son. “Is it really the end of the world?”

“Yes.”

She exhaled sharply. “To Kokabiel, then.”

“I – I don’t know how to get him out, Ma,” Aleph admitted.

“That’s all right,” she said. She swung herself over to the side of the bed and stood up on wobbly legs. “I do.”

At the foothills of a mountain nearby Kamret stood a tree that had existed since the beginning of the world. Once, it had been the largest tree in a dense forest, with a wide trunk, gnarled roots, and a broad canopy. In the end times, however, it was a dried husk of what it had been. Yet, woven in the tree’s matter, lay the barest existence of the fallen angel Kokabiel. Stripped of what he once had been, he may as well be the half-dead tree, annihilated into silence and stillness.

It had taken some time for Lilith to find the tree, as the landscape had drastically changed during her long slumber. The image of that tree in Lilith’s memory stood in stark contrast to the ruin that they had found, after seeking Kokabiel’s silvery energy signature that lay, on a quantum level, entangled within both of them. They had traveled far, with Aleph transporting her as a massive, gray wolf for her to ride. “I still don’t even know how I can do this, Ma,” he had said, as he bound across the land with great speed.

“Sometimes the ability arises when you most need it,” she had replied, remembering when her ability to send awoke when she screamed on a lonely hill by the sea, the day before Kokabiel arrived on that violent night in Kamret.

Now before the tree, Aleph placed an assessing hand on the trunk. “There’s hardly enough of him left,” he said, worried.

Lilith placed her own hand. “There’s enough,” she said. She leaned in.

“What are you going to do to get Uncle out?”

She rested her head against the rough, sun-bleached trunk. “I’m going to sing.”

Aleph blinked. “What?”

Lilith gave a small smile. Then she sang.

The lullaby she sang to all of her children when they were babies. The lullaby her father sang to her when she was a child. The song his mother taught him, all the way back to their earliest ancestors, when there were no words but the joyful harmony of being together, of being alive. Lilith’s voice rang out across the blighted, dead foothills, and through her sending the music resonated through the tree. For it was the music that had called Kokabiel from far away, all those years ago, to Kamret. To Lilith. To himself.

*Thank you, Lilith.*

Aleph stared as the ruined tree trembled and then shuddered. Suddenly, it exploded in a great cloud of splinters and dust. “Ma!” he cried out, shielding himself with his arms.

But when the cloud settled, what remained was Kokabiel, shining in silver, holding Lilith, unhurt, in his arms. *I saw him stab you*, he sent, his emotions raw, the memory of Lilith’s assassination still in his mind.

*Hush, Kokabiel*, Lilith sent, and then she sent her son’s memories, from that time to the present.

Kokabiel looked up then and saw Aleph. “My boy,” he said, his voice raspy, unused to speaking. He stretched out an arm.

“Uncle,” Aleph said, and he joined Kokabiel and Lilith in a family embrace.

All too soon, the bittersweet reunion ended, and they stepped back from each other. Kokabiel looked up, peering through the barrier shield above them, assessing the situation.

“Is it –” Lilith began, but stopped when she saw Kokabiel’s grim expression.

“Yes, it’s failing,” Kokabiel confirmed. “And the waters will rush in. SHIT. No wonder Baraqel is terrified.”

“Uncle?”

“Aleph, you already know. The Reboot means that the Watchers have failed. Not just me and your father, but all of us Watchers – planet-wide. We already knew the Reboot was a ‘worst case’ option before we came here. It’s the only countermeasure against humanity’s total catastrophic failure, and once the Reboot’s begun, there’s no stopping it. But not once did we think that WE would be the cause of the Reboot.” He shook his head, incredulous. “We’ve fallen so long ago and fucked it all up – what happened here likely happened with the other Watcher regions.” He paused, thinking. “But the Archangels left us alone, even while operating in our fallen state, and I have no clue why. So there’s

no predicting what will happen to Baraqel and me. And as for you and your brothers and sisters – who knows what the Reboot will do to you?”

“But... why aren't you terrified, too, Uncle?”

Kokabiel stared and then burst out laughing. “Aleph, I am frightened out of my mind!”

“Uncle!”

“Look – I'm frightened, but that doesn't mean I'm going to put up a useless fight against the Reboot. I share your mindset, Aleph. The Reboot isn't a tool of malice. It's to clear away the mess we've made, force us to account our actions, and rehabilitate and restore Earth's status. It's not knowing where we fit in all of that which frightens me – likely why your father is terrified – but fighting against it? No.” He shook his head, taking in the dead land around them. “We can't keep on existing like this.”

“Then what should we do?”

Lilith, who stood silent, listening to Kokabiel and Aleph, declared, “We need to make Baraqel understand. Then we need to be together when the end comes.” Her eyes blazed, taking on the role of the last leader of Kamret. “Aleph, get your brothers and sisters. Show them how to transform – if you can do it, then they can as well. Then all of you go to Kamret, get your grandparents, and bring them to the upper deck of the home base outside of Kamret. Kokabiel, your father, and I will meet you there.”

“Ma –” Aleph began.

“Go,” she interrupted. “There's no time.”

Aleph hesitated, reluctant to leave his mother again, but then he nodded and transformed into his sparrowhawk form. Quickly he gained air and took off.

Once Aleph was far enough away, Lilith exhaled deeply, and Kokabiel grabbed her before she collapsed on the ground. He asked, “Why are you hiding this from Aleph? That the ambient nephil energy is still harming you? He knows this already.”

“Because,” she said, “he's still a child, and he needs his mother to be strong, especially at the end of the world. Even if it's only for appearance's sake.”

“Lilith.” But he stopped himself.

“Take me home,” she said, closing her eyes. “I'll wait for you and Baraqel once you get that infuriating angel of ours to face reality.”

“All right.” He held Lilith tightly to himself as his ash-gray wings materialized. Without another word, he leapt up.

Lilith let out a small sound of surprise, and her hands clutched Kokabiel tighter.

He glanced down. “That’s right – you’ve never flown with me,” he replied. He paused. “So much time lost.”

Kokabiel didn’t need to send for Lilith to feel his sadness. “So much time lost,” she echoed.

As they flew, neither spoke nor sent. Kokabiel stripped enough excess nephil energy from Lilith so that, when they arrived at the home base’s upper deck, she could steady herself on her own two feet upon touching down. For a brief moment, both felt a keen ache of déjà vu, of the night when Kokabiel returned from his first sojourn away, when Lilith was pregnant with Aleph. Kokabiel turned, about to leave for Baraqel, when Lilith called out, “It isn’t fair that we couldn’t do what we wanted to do.”

Hearing the pain in her voice, Kokabiel paused. “This isn’t the time to say that.”

“The hell it is. It’s the end of the world. It’s the perfect time to say it,” Lilith retorted. “I wanted more time to be a mother, more time to get my parents back, more time to be with Baraqel – more time with YOU.”

“Lilith –” he said.

“Instead it was separation and isolation and public duties to people who didn’t give a damn about me. And you – YOU – everything you’ve done, every choice you’ve made, have been for the sake of Kamret, the family, the MISSION. But what about you?”

He was silent.

“What did you ever want, Kokabiel?”

He turned to her then. He crossed the short space separating him from Lilith, dropped to his knees, and wrapped his long arms around her small, soft waist. “What I wanted,” he said, his voice ragged, as if a deep secret was being torn from him, “was music,” he looked up at her, “and you.”

At that, Lilith bowed down, and they kissed – a soft, gentle kiss.

“You are my best friend,” she said.

“Ah,” he sighed.

“And I will love you forever and ever.”

Kokabiel gave a short bark of laughter. “Even after the end of the word?”

“Even after.”

They held each other in silence for a few seconds more and then, reluctantly, released each other’s embrace. For the second time, Lilith saw Kokabiel turn away, but this time she let him go.

*Oh my God, Baraqel,* Kokabiel thought. His partner, frantically shoring up the failing barrier shield, looked like a disoriented moth, flying blindly about an open flame. He didn't even notice Kokabiel's presence until Kokabiel flew in front of him, grabbing Baraqel's arms. "What are you trying to do, Baraqel?" Kokabiel barked in his face.

Baraqel blinked, as if woken from a trance. Then he recognized the being in front of him. "How are you here?" he cried out.

"Lilith broke me out," Kokabiel replied, "after Aleph woke Lilith."

"ALEPH?" Baraqel looked down, finally noticing that his son wasn't there. "Why would he disobey me?"

That angered Kokabiel. "Because he feared for his father, who is acting like a MADMAN." His hands tightened around his partner's arms. "I ask you again: what are you trying to do?"

Baraqel, weakened by his non-stop exertions, struggled to break free. "I've no time for this, Kokabiel! I need to reinforce the shield, so we can wait out the waters –"

"Wait out the waters? Of the REBOOT? Dammit, Baraqel, I'm no Celestial Engineer, and even I know that as long as there's one anomaly outside tolerance, the Reboot will keep running until everything's complied with the original parameters. And this," Kokabiel gestured sharply at the shield, crackling with the collective nephil energy of Baraqel's children, "is one hell of an anomaly!"

"But I can't – I can't just let them –" Baraqel stammered. His green eyes, wide with fear, stared into Kokabiel's amber eyes, beseeching for an answer, and he sent what was in his mind.

The dark, oozing, toxic substance from the enemy during the War in Heaven, molded and spread out as far as the eye could see. The inflamed, sick color of the hard, bare plains, stone mountains, and desert valleys. A red sky thick with sulfurous clouds crackling with electricity. The substance's exothermic reactions created a stifling, stinking heat. The enemy's unceasing screams of fear, hate, and despair, echoing across that immortally-damned land. And the guilt, as sharp and keen as a stab wound, that he had caused his partner and his entire family to be condemned to the place that would forever haunt his existence.

Baraqel broke down then. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" he cried out.

Kokabiel held his partner and gently took him back down to the ground. Sitting together, they remembered the horror of Hell being formed all around them, and Kokabiel let Baraqel sob on his shoulder, his arms around him as if he were a father and Baraqel his son.

As he waited for the storm of weeping to pass, Kokabiel thought, *How long have you kept this fear inside you, Baraqel? How long have we deluded ourselves that we actually knew what was best?* Kokabiel gave a



soft, sigh. *God, we're fools – we're all fools.* Once he heard the weeping ease a bit, Kokabiel said, gently, “Hell is the place for those who defy Central’s directives, even when given the opportunity to repent that defiance. It’s also a place where hope is absent, crowded out by hate and despair. So, don’t you see, Baraqel – in denying the Reboot because of your despair, you were priming yourself for Hell by creating an internal one of your own?”

Baraqel groaned, dropping his face into his hands. His face still covered, he asked, “How are you able to have hope, Kokabiel? We don’t know anything – ANYTHING – about what will happen when the Reboot hits us.”

“You’re right – we don’t know anything about what’ll happen to us. And I won’t deny it. I’m as scared as you are. But what I have more than fear is hope – because Lilith has hope that there’ll be something good, even after all this.” Kokabiel paused, recalling Lilith’s embrace, her soft kiss. “Remember, it was you who told me that she loves us, both of us. And it’s true. She loves us, and she loves her family. Do you really believe that’ll mean nothing, when we face the Reboot?”

Baraqel rubbed his face, drying his eyes. He exhaled deeply. “Our Beatrice,” he said.

“Our Beatrice,” Kokabiel affirmed. He stood up and extended a hand to his partner. Hand clasped, he pulled Baraqel to his feet. “She’s waiting for us, at our home base. Your children and Lilith’s parents, too, at this point.”

Still holding his hand, Baraqel said, “You know, you’re more than a partner or fellow Watcher to me. You’re my brother.”

Kokabiel shook his head again, smiling. “Idiot. I knew that already. You think I’d put up with your bullshit all of this time if I didn’t love you like family?” He pulled Baraqel in for an all-too brief, meaningful hug and then released his hand. “Ready?”

“Not really.”

“Yeah, me too,” Kokabiel admitted. Then he added, grinning, “But we shouldn’t keep Lilith waiting, or she’ll be pissed.”

“Hah.” Baraqel gave a shaky smile. “She’s scarier than the Reboot.”

“No lie.”

Lilith saw her children arrive first, flocked together to form the shape of a massive eagle, bearing Zaia and Rifan on their backs. The eagle shape slowly separated, gently setting down Zaia and Rifan, still locked in sleep, on the wooden surface of the upper deck. Then, one by one, her children returned to their original forms, embracing their mother with bittersweet tears. When Baraqel and

Kokabiel finally arrived, they saw the sleepers’ heads resting on Dalet and Limeh’s sitting laps. Huddled on one side of their grandparents were the triplets Isa, Dala, and Tallo, who held each other. Aleph sat on the other side.

Sitting at the foot of her parents, keeping a watchful eye, was Lilith. Seeing her foolish angels, she stretched out her arms, and both Baraqel and Kokabiel came to her, without a word. Then both Watchers extended their respective golden and ash-gray wings, enveloping the last family of Kamret in a celestial embrace.

They were all together, when the world ended.

The waters outside had risen so high that it was over the top of the shield. When it finally failed, it winked out in an instant, and the deluge crashed down upon them, before anyone could cry out.

With Lilith’s head bowed, her tears drowned into the waters of the Reboot, her last thought was, *Oh my loves, be happy – be free.*

Even as the deafening cataclysm fell upon them, they all heard an unexpected answer, from within the Reboot itself:

*GRANTED.*