

A night sky with a meteor streaking across it. The sky is dark blue with many small stars. A bright white streak with a glowing trail enters from the left and moves towards the center. The bottom of the image shows a dark silhouette of a horizon.

If a *Star*
Should Fall

L.E. Hale

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

IF A STAR SHOULD FALL

By L.E. Hale

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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IF A STAR SHOULD FALL

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Photo Description

Two men stand bare in a small patch of sunlight in an otherwise dark room. These two have been to hell and back, but now they can be together at last. They embrace passionately with no care for anything or anyone else but each other.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I can't believe he's safe in my arms at last! After all that we have been through to reach this point, knowing he is here with me is all that matters. Together, we will make it through whatever life may throw at us.

While my favourite genres are fantasy (especially dragon shape-shifters), urban fantasy/paranormal (think of Ilona Andrews M/M-style), and sci-fi, I would love any HEA story that tells of the journey these men travelled to find each other, and also reflects the strength of love and need that these two men show. Please—no BDSM, cheating or humiliation.

Thank you so much,

SueM

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: sweet/sex off page, angels/demons, religion, reunited, slow burn, soulmates, cleric/priest, action, interspecies

Word Count: 45,233

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Lila Leigh and Elizabeth for their beta-work. Your comments and suggestions were very much appreciated. To the LOR Author Group and my NaNoWriMo cabin mates, thanks for the encouragement and companionship. It's not much fun writing alone. Thank you, Sue for a great prompt.

IF A STAR SHOULD FALL

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Prologue

He felt it before he saw the pinprick of light streaking across the dark sky. A shooting star, as the humans would say. Zaviel knew it for what it really was, and dread curled in the pit of his stomach.

The star flashed once when it passed over his head, then slowly dimmed as it vanished into the distance.

He left Lucifer still speaking on his jagged throne, and no doubt, he would feel his brother's wrath at his insult before long, but Zav paid him no mind. The others took one look at his face and let him go without contest.

Zav kept his gaze on the horizon, but the star was long gone with no trace left to show that it had been there at all. That ominous feeling inside him grew until he had to move to try and lessen the pressure in his chest. He flew past bare trees and over dry riverbeds, through the dry fields of grass and to the line of standing stones that marked the edge of their territory. Beyond that was only darkness.

Zav stood there helplessly for a long time until a beat and flap signalled the arrival of one of his brothers. Aquiel landed next to him with a frown.

“What is it? Is it one of them?”

The other demon scanned the sky, but Zav was unable to answer as the twinge in his chest stole his breath and left him gasping as he sank down to his knees. Aquiel was quickly by his side. Hands held him up, and he realized that others had arrived when Aquiel spoke worriedly to someone he couldn't see.

“Help me with him. Let's get him back.”

“No,” Zav whispered in protest, but didn't have the strength to pull away from their grasp. “Zephon.”

The hands stopped trying to pull him up, then Aquiel was in front of him, though his attention wasn't on Zav but on the sky above them.

“The star,” he said, and Zav knew he understood. “That was Zephon, then? The angel you've been sneaking out to meet with? Damn, Zav.”

He shook his head then resumed coaxing Zav up. Dyn appeared at Zav's elbow and took hold of his arm when he almost fell on his face.

“Let’s go back. Lucifer will know what to do.”

Zav allowed them to support his weight, but it was a long way home, and he wasn’t sure he’d make it. Dyn took the worry off his shoulders when he lifted Zav in his arms and took off with Aquiel flying close by.

“It’ll be okay, Zav. We’ll help you find him,” Dyn said.

Zav closed his eyes and let the wind dry the wetness on his face. He hadn’t cried for himself when he was banished, but Zephon was worth every drop.

His elder brother was waiting for them when they returned and had ranted and raved about the utter hypocrisy of the angels until Zav stepped in and cut him off, lest he go on in his tirade for a long time.

A quiet “please” had stopped Lucifer in midstride. He looked at Zav with understanding.

“I will help,” he said. And he did.

Lucifer had left soon after with Aquiel at his side and did not return for four days, during which time Zav tortured himself with all possible scenarios about the reason for their lateness, none of them good. Finally, on the morning of the fifth day, they returned with news.

“And look, those do-gooders cast down one of their own for daring to love one of us!” Lucifer said.

The ground shook underneath his feet as Lucifer paced angrily in front of his ebony throne. Then he stopped and walked up to Zav with a grimace.

“He’s to be reborn among the humans with no memories of his time in Heaven or of you.”

Zav’s anger flared, but his brother held him fast and grabbed his face firmly in his hand. Zav had no choice but to look up at him. Lucifer smiled.

“Don’t despair, brother. There is still hope. The Council will grant you an audience—they will hear your petition in a fortnight.” He grinned.

Chapter One

The Zunghar watched warily from their doorways as Zav made his way down the unpaved alley of *ger* quarters. He hadn't been able to sense Zephon in any way since his arrival, which was just as he expected, but here in Mongolia lived someone who could.

Nephilim were all but wiped out by the Great Flood many millennia ago, but not all. Arkhangai was home to one; a shaman he hoped would help him in his quest.

"Sain baina uu? Minii nir Khenbish."

He turned to see who had greeted him and saw an elderly man walk toward him with a curious smile.

"Sain. Zav," he replied.

"We do not see many strangers in these parts. What brings you?"

Zav bowed his head slightly. "I'm in search of someone, a man whose sight goes beyond what no eye can see. I was told I might find him here."

The man's gaze turned wary, and Zav could see the others look at him in suspicion before the elder's expression cleared.

"Come, come. Let us talk and have a drink first, then we will see if I can help," he told Zav, gesturing for him to follow along.

Khenbish led him farther into the small community before stopping at a large *ger* guarded by two dogs on a long chain. They growled when Zav stepped into view, but subsided quickly with a whine when he stared them down.

Zav stepped over the threshold and looked around. The round dwelling was supported by two wooden posts on either side of the round hole in the ceiling, which served as a window of sorts. Between them was a squat stove and small table where a woman was laying out cups.

She straightened up when they came in and greeted Zav quietly. Khenbish led him to a bed pushed against the wall and nodded for him to sit.

"My wife, Odval. This is Zav," he introduced.

Odval passed him a cup of tea before leaving them to their conversation. Zav took a small sip of his drink and waited patiently for Khenbish to sit beside him.

“Pretty soon, it will be time to move the sheep and *khainags* onto new pastures,” Khenbish told him. “We will pack up everything and make our way across Tariat to our winter grazing land in the south.”

Zav nodded absently, wondering where this was going. “Is it a long journey?” he asked.

The older man looked delighted at his interest and launched into a play-by-play of his tribe’s nomadic ways and yearly migration for the sake of their herd.

“We hope to return to Khangai before the snowstorms start. Khangai is our ancestral home. And where is home for you?”

Zav gave a small, sardonic laugh. “A long way away. I came to view Lake Baikal, but I heard that the Zunghar has a lake even more beautiful, and I just had to come and see it for myself.”

Khenbish looked at him curiously. He studied Zav for a long moment before nodding, seeming to understand what he meant. He refilled his cup and launched into another story.

“Giants walked this land a long time ago,” he said.

Zav perked up at the mention of the giants that he was sure could be found at this mysterious lake. Khenbish saw his expression and smiled indulgently before continuing.

“One of them picked up a rock that was in its way and threw it aside, but the depression it left behind filled with water and created a lake. This giant was so amazed at the white lake that had formed that it decided to make its home by the shore.”

“This sounds like the one I’m looking for. May I ask where this lake is?” Zav inquired excitedly.

Khenbish shook his head. “Long ago, my ancestors called it their home, but that lake is bad luck now, and we have been forced to abandon it. The giant is trapped there and devours everything that comes across it, and many who’ve gone there have never come back. It is taboo to even say its name.”

“Perhaps I may be permitted even just a small glance? I came all this way to see it with my own eyes,” Zav told him.

“You may try, but why you would want to is beyond me. Besides, none may see it if she doesn’t want them to.”

“She?”

“This giant was said to have a daughter who had grown tired of her father’s wickedness. To prevent any more deaths, she has concealed the lake from view, and only by her permission is its location revealed.”

Zav rubbed a hand on his face, feeling inexplicably tired as his hopes for an uncomplicated mission were dashed. He didn’t want to keep pushing Khenbish for more information, lest his host become suspicious and refuse to give up any more information.

Khenbish got up to stoke the fire and offered him more tea—which he declined—then returned to his seat with a pensive look.

“We haven’t come across anyone who even knew of the lake’s existence, yet here you are.”

Zav tensed. The other man studied him with narrowed eyes for a long time.

“Now that I think about it, I sense something different about you,” the old man finally said. “We Mongols are superstitious people, and your arrival is particularly augural.”

“Oh?”

“Hmmm, yes!”

Khenbish leaned close and lowered his voice. “I am not one to take stock in dreams, but I’ve been dreaming about the same thing for the past few months,” he said. “In the dream, I am looking up at the night sky when a shooting star appears, and just as I am about to make a wish, my eyes are almost blinded by a very bright bolt of lightning.”

Zav’s eyebrows climbed high on his forehead. He wondered whether Khenbish had a gift of foresight for what he described sounded suspiciously like Zephon’s journey to exile and himself coming down from the heavens right on his lover’s heels.

The man wasn’t finished with his story, yet. He leaned back slightly and looked at Zav with wide eyes.

“Imagine my amazement when several nights ago, my dream came true! There I was, sitting with the others outside right after dark, when all of what I dreamed came to pass. Then, here you are, asking about a cursed lake not two days after.”

“But surely this is all a coincidence?” Zav asked with false skepticism. He wanted to know whether he could use Khenbish’s superstitions to help provide him with the information he needed.

Khenbish shook his head firmly. “I do not believe in coincidences. Everything that happens always has a purpose, and I believe that it is a sign,” he told Zav. “Tengri has answered our prayers and has come to help us reclaim our ancestral home. He will defeat the giant, and we will finally, finally be able to return to the lake’s banks.”

“I mean no offense, friend, when I point out that your tribe is nomadic.”

His host sighed long and deep as he turned his gaze away. “We weren’t always nomads. Once, the lake sustained us all enough that we had no need to leave its shores. Ah, but we eventually had to. The longing in our hearts to return is like a man pining for his lover whom he may never see again.”

Zav started, and he glanced at Khenbish briefly before looking away.

“I know the feeling,” he replied.

Khenbish smiled wistfully before getting up and collecting their cups.

“Perhaps you might get your wish to see this lake, once it has returned to its former glory,” Khenbish told him.

Zav knew it wasn’t up to this Tengri to do that, but he nodded anyway. “And you might just get your wish to return home,” he said.

“We can only hope, Zav. We can only hope. Now, you’ve come a long way, and it’s getting dark, friend. You are welcome to stay for a while,” Khenbish invited.

Zav considered this. He could sense that Khenbish knew more than he let on, and perhaps if he could gain the man’s trust, the Zunghar might be able to tell him more.

“I will gladly accept your offer,” Zav told him.

He’d been with the Zunghar for two weeks, and Zav was feeling anxious about waiting. Khenbish and the others had been gracious enough, and they readily told Zav stories and anecdotes about their tribe’s customs and history and made an effort to make him feel welcome.

Some of the elders looked at Zav strangely, and the whole tribe was unusually deferential to him. More than once he had heard them call him Tengri

behind his back, and almost none of them—save for Khenbish—met his eyes for longer than a few seconds. It seemed that some associated him with their thunder god, whom the tribe hoped would help them reclaim their ancestral land.

There was an air of expectation over the camp, as well as fear. Zav later learned that the birds occasionally circling overhead were the giant's spies. At night, the eerie howling of a wolf echoed all around them and made everyone jumpy. They peered at the shadows in fear.

"Er Kishi," Odval told Zav one night. "Tengri's wayward son—a demon who lures people into the darkness."

The whispers behind his back continued. There were now claims that Tengri's presence in their camp had attracted the attention of not only their giant adversary, but also of something more demonic. The Zunghar who didn't believe him to be Tengri looked at him with suspicion. They believed that Zav's presence was a dark omen, and the atmosphere among the tribe was tense.

Today had been busy as the tribe got ready to pack up and leave for their winter territory, and Zav was tired. He'd helped corral some of the herd and take down a few *ger* alongside the other men, and he honestly didn't know how these humans did it with their mortal bodies. Zav had a brief longing for his full abilities as his shoulders pulled with an unfamiliar ache.

It was late in the evening now, and most everyone were in their homes. The few who loitered outside to sit in front of the central fire-pit greeted him as he passed them. Zav took the opportunity to walk around and loosen up his sore muscles.

The quiet lowing of the *khainags* greeted him when he walked close to their pens, and although they had stopped running from him every time he came near, they remained aloof and kept their distance. The guard dogs growled at him softly, and he growled back in frustration, satisfied when they whined and tucked their tails between trembling legs as they turned away to give him a wide berth.

The wolf was out in the dark somewhere, its howls sounding close by, but Zav paid it no mind.

He sat on a low rock and looked up. An airplane roared above him, its lights twinkling among the stars and disrupting the quiet, almost otherworldly serenity of the Mongolian *steppe*.

He gazed up at the night sky and tried to imagine Zephon as he would be now, reborn as a human with no remembrance of his angelic being or the love he once shared with a demon such as Zav. Would he still appear as he did before, with his sable hair and azure eyes? Or would he be unrecognizable even to Zav, so that they would be two strangers passing by, unaware of each other even if they were to stand face to face? It was inconceivable to him, and he shied away from such a thought. He would always know Zephon.

“Such melancholy,” someone said behind him, and he looked to see a woman he didn’t recognize.

She sat on one of the many rocks that dotted the ground, and she peered up at him from behind a fall of red hair. A small, tawny hound lay at her feet.

Zav had never seen her before, but then again, the tribe was rather large, and he would wager that he’d only met a fraction of its members. Still, unease prickled up his spine at her dark gaze.

“Who are you?” he asked abruptly.

The woman laughed and reclined back on her hands, unconcerned at his rudeness. “Call me Khatun. That is what everyone else calls me, anyway.”

Khatun smiled as the wolf dog whined and nudged her with his nose. “And this is Chinua.”

They both watched Zav from their perch. He returned their gaze for a moment before relaxing.

“I’m Zav.”

“I know who you are,” she said dismissively. “This isn’t such a large community that things stay secret for long, and you’re a foreigner who’s been staying with the chief.”

“Oh.”

Zav walked closer and sat on the next rock, and they were both silent for a while as they looked out into the darkness. Eventually, Khatun leaned close to poke his arm.

“Why so sad? Surely, the beauty of Tariat would put a smile on anyone’s face.”

He sighed. Khenbish and his wife had been accommodating enough, but they largely left him alone, and the other villagers were polite but hardly eager

for conversation beyond the requisite greetings. Khatun nodded encouragingly as she waited to see if he would indulge her curiosity.

“I am searching for someone,” he finally said.

Khatun snorted in exasperation when Zav didn’t say anything else.

“You men are all the same, so hard to get information out of. Do you take me for a mind reader?” she asked with a small, almost mocking smirk.

Zav narrowed his eyes at her cheek. He was almost tempted to call down lightning to strike her, but he held back. Doing so would only tax his already curbed powers, and he knew that harming someone from the tribe would only deny him the information he needed, though how anyone could even prove it was his doing and not some random event, he didn’t know.

“I am searching for a loved one. In order to find him, I need the help of someone who might have the necessary... skills, to track his whereabouts. I was told one such individual lived around here.”

“Really?” she asked dubiously. “And you came all the way here to Mongolia to find this person? Seems like a long way from wherever you’re from.”

Zav realized that Khatun might be more willing to reveal information that no one had been eager to give him. She certainly seemed more engaging than the others, and she sounded genuinely interested.

She glanced behind her quickly, then considered him seriously.

“The *steppe* is very big and the tribes scattered; it’ll be near impossible to find someone when you don’t know where to look.”

“Yes, I know,” he said morosely. Zav purposefully let his despondency show, hoping to evoke sympathy in an attempt to curry her favor.

Chinua raised his head and crawled toward him, oddly bold as no beast he’d met had ever been. He put his head on Zav’s knee and whined. Zav petted him gently, aware of Khatun’s watchful eye on him.

“I might know some things,” she finally said. “Khenbish told you about the giant and the lake, hmm?”

“How did you know?”

Khatun ignored him and continued on, “This giant cast a hill aside, and from the basin it left behind, welled a lake whose surface is said to be mirror

clear. He was so enamored with its beauty that he sat by the shore and watched it reflect the sky and the birds and so on. Eventually, he noticed other things on its surface, too—people and places and events that the lake showed him.”

“The lake had become an oracle of divination,” Zav realized.

“Yes. Now, this lake had bewitched the giant. Some say it was the punishment of Etügen Eke for wounding the earth needlessly, but he is unable to tear his gaze away even now. He sits there and grabs the birds and the beasts, lures them in so he can devour them. People, too, when they wander close enough,” she explained. “The Zunghar once lived by the lake under the protection of this shaman-giant, but he turned on them, driving the Zunghar away.”

Zav shifted on his seat as he took in her story. It was just like Khenbish had told him, and although a little more detailed, there was nothing in it that was new to him. He swallowed his frustration, but she must have felt his impatience because she regarded him carefully.

“The tribespeople seem to think you are Tengri, but I know better, and you seem desperate enough to find this lake for reasons I can’t fathom. Anyway, what will you give me?” she asked.

“What?”

“What will you give me in exchange for my help?”

Zav was surprised for a second, then he laughed which seemed to startle her. He could do bargains. No one could barter like a devil, after all.

“Tell me what you want then,” he told her.

Khatun thought for a moment, and the shrewd look she gave Zav made him wary. He felt a sudden misgiving for proffering such a vague offer. He worried about what she might ask in return, and the unease only grew stronger when she gave him a sly smile.

“A favor. You’ll know when the time is right.”

Zav frowned. Her request didn’t sound so unreasonable, and certainly he would do whatever it took to find Zephon.

“Very well. I owe you a favor to be paid when the time is right,” he acquiesced.

Khatun looked pleased. She clicked her fingers and Chinua returned to her side. The wolf dog howled at the moon, a long ululation that raised the hairs on Zav’s arms, then sat himself by Khatun’s feet.

“I will come back for you after the full moon,” she told Zav. “I will lead you to this lake.”

Zav stared at the *ger*'s rounded ceiling as he lay awake. It had been several days since his conversation with Khatun, and he couldn't make sense of the whole encounter at all.

His host had sought him out not long after that. Zav stood to greet a worried Khenbish and was absolutely disconcerted to find Khatun gone when he turned back.

“Where did she go?” he asked in confusion.

Khenbish looked over his shoulder. “Who?”

“Khatun.”

The older man shook his head as he put a hand on Zav's shoulder to lead him back to the gers.

“There was no one with you as I approached. Askaa and the others have been watching you all this time,” he said, pointing toward a group of men seated around the fire several yards away. “They were starting to worry because it seemed like you were talking to yourself. Bad omen.”

“But... surely, they must have seen her, too. She was right next to me with her dog.”

“There is no such woman in our community. No one by that name. Come, Zav, come, it's not good for anyone to be by themselves in the dark like this. This is the spirits' hour now.”

Khenbish quickened his steps, his hand firm on Zav's elbow. He looked around restlessly and breathed a sigh of relief when they stepped into the glow of the fire, then said something to the others that Zav couldn't understand. They, too, looked ill at ease as they peered into the darkness.

A wolf howled in the distance, and the tribe's own hounds yelped and barked as they strained their chains to get away from where they thought the wolf was.

Zav huffed in frustration and pushed the blankets aside. He hadn't gotten anywhere since coming here, and meanwhile Zephon was out there somewhere. Time was of the essence. He stood up slowly, careful not to make any sounds

that might wake up the couple. They were more watchful of him since that night while everyone else gave him a wide berth.

The floorboards creaked under his weight as he crept toward the door. Odval turned over in her sleep, but she and her husband didn't wake. Zav kept one hand on the door to act as counterbalance in order to muffle the slight squeak it made, then slowly pulled it open.

There was an eerie silence outside. He scented the sharp, pungent zing of ozone as his skin prickled in excitement, and Zav ran a hand down his arm as the gathering storm drew closer. There was a faint rumbling in the horizon, and he gave in to the urge.

Zav ran past the other *gers* and out into the open just as a flash of lightning lit the dark sky above him. The pressure bore down on him, and he spread his arms out to welcome its embrace. Lightning and thunder called out to him, and he answered with a call of his own.

His veins sang as he stretched out a hand toward a curious tendril of electricity that wound its way all along the storm cloud, seeking. Runes lit up all along his arms as that small tendril found its mark and greeted him with a bolt that would have killed a human.

He reveled in the shock, eyes closed as he savored the energy that ran through him. It traveled down his body and to his feet before dissipating into the ground, leaving behind a blackened circle where it charred the grass he stood on.

“Help!”

“Fire!”

The sudden yelling and rush of people coming out of their *gers* shook him out his trance. Zav turned to see a *ger* engulfed in flames, most likely struck by errant lightning. The wind picked up and sparks danced in its grasp, threatening to spread its deadly blaze to the other dwellings.

Everyone hurried to fill anything that would hold water as a bucket brigade formed, and Zav took a step to see what he could do. A hand grabbed him and pulled him away.

He was amazed to see Khatun, her face limned by the firelight.

“You,” Zav growled. He yanked his arm out from her grasp, but her grip was surprisingly strong as she held on with no effort at all. She led him away from the panicked crowd to where the shadows were at their darkest.

“The time is now. Come with me, Zav. I will show you where to find Ramut and his lake.”

She looked up at him earnestly. Zav saw his reflection in her eyes, and he startled when his true self gazed back at him.

“What are you?”

For surely, no human could see the soul of one as boundless as he.

“We are kin, you and I,” she said.

Still Zav hesitated, and she tightened her hold on his arm.

“I am who you want me to be, a guide to that place you are seeking. Come, if we leave now, we will be by the Nuur tomorrow.”

Zav took a step and another. Finally, a chance to find what he sought!

A wail rent the already chaotic air, and Zav’s steps faltered. He glanced behind him, drawn by the panic and utter heartbreak in that voice, and pulled away from Khatun.

“Zav! There’s no time, we have to go!” she called to him.

Zav ignored her and ran back to the *gers*.

By now, the fire had spread to two other houses and quickly engulfed a third. A woman was screaming as she was held back by the others in her frantic attempts to run back inside.

“Taban! Taban is still inside,” she cried out.

The line of makeshift firefighters had no chance in suppressing the runaway blaze. The whole community was in danger.

Zav had a moment of hesitation when he saw Khatun beckoning at him from the corner of his eye.

“My beloved!” the woman wept.

He turned his back on Khatun and rushed past the stunned onlookers, vaguely aware of Khenbish shouting his name. Hands grabbed at him, but he brushed them off as he rushed inside the burning *ger*.

The flames licked at him, and he felt their heat on him for a moment before they parted and allowed him passage unharmed. He found Taban slumped on the floor, unable to save himself because of his withered limbs.

Zav lifted the man up in his arms and felt a heaviness settle on his upper shoulders as his powers rushed through him, weakened though they were. A thunderous roll echoed just above the roar of the inferno, and he smiled.

The Zunghar stepped back in shock when he emerged from smoke and fire, untouched but for the sparks of lightning that crackled almost merrily around him. They all fell to their knees, all but Taban's wife who ran up to him with tears on her sooty face.

"My love, my love," she cried. Her hands sought out Taban's unconscious form even as she gave Zav a grateful, hopeful look.

"Tengri tüüniig avarsan! Tengri tüüniig avarsan!"

It started to rain just as the chanting began. Tengri saved him! Tengri saved him! Around them the Zunghar got to their feet and crowded Zav and the couple, thanking him and straining to touch him. They gazed at him in adoration as if he were the sky god incarnate. Zav handed Taban off to another man, then struggled to get away. He saw Khenbish push his way through the mass and hold out a hand. He grabbed it gratefully and stumbled free.

Khenbish, too, regarded him almost reverently, but Zav was quick to keep him upright when he would prostrate himself.

"No, Khenbish," he said gently.

Zav patted him on the back then pushed him toward the crowd as they gathered around Taban and the remains of their ruined houses. He made his way to Khatun's side where she stood, unseen, by the herd's enclosure.

She was quiet while she watched the merriment, then turned to him thoughtfully.

"What was in it for you?" she asked.

Zav glanced at Taban's joyous wife, and shrugged. He kept his gaze on her as he answered. "She loves him. Isn't that enough?"

He kept his gaze on her even as Khatun led him further into the night. The rain fell heavily around them and washed away the last of the ash.

The sun was already climbing the sky when they reached the edges of the volcanic fields. From there, Zav could see a river snake its way across the landscape, and beyond that was a glimpse of a larger body of water.

They stopped to rest in the shade of a rocky outcrop.

Zav was exhausted from his earlier efforts, so he sat down heavily at Khatun's feet. He was tired of her beating around the bush, too.

"Perhaps now is the time to tell me everything?" he asked sarcastically.

She sighed. "Very well, but I will be calling in that favor you owe me when I'm done."

Khatun stepped out into the sun, her hair a blaze of scarlet. She stretched her arms up into the sky and her shadow followed suit. Only when Zav took a closer look, did he notice her shadow limbs were strangely more elongated than her physical self, and that from her arms were silhouetted by what looked like feathers. He glanced at her then stared down at her shadow once more to make sure he'd seen correctly, then he leaned back.

"I see."

He didn't say anything more.

"My father is one of the few surviving Nephilim in this world—his father Bezaliel saved him from the flood by hiding him underground. The cave is well warded from any scrying and will give us safe passage."

"You speak as if his scrying is a bad thing, but I am here to make use of his ability," Zav observed.

She cocked her head. "Oh, don't worry, he'll help you. But at a price."

"Of course, I expected nothing less. I will pay whatever price he asks." He chuckled in amusement.

Angels, despite their so-called higher morality, engaged in their covenants with as much gusto as the devils and their bargains. Humans, too, bartered and exchanged commodities with each other, so it stood to reason that their mixed offspring would request payment for their services.

Khatun loomed over him with a sardonic smile. She tilted her head up to the sky and spread her arms, as if in offering.

"I am the price," she told him. "In his obsession to be all-knowing, my maker has become corrupted—too wicked and greedy. He's grown careless in his murders of both beast and man."

Zav frowned, unsure where this was going. He waved at her to continue.

She bit her lip and glanced away for a second, then turned back to him with an indecipherable look. “Your beloved is out there somewhere, yes, but you have a chance to be with him again. But what if you lost him for good? What would you do?” she asked.

Her gaze was distant, though her eyes remained on Zav.

“There is nothing I wouldn’t do if Zephon was lost to me. I would burn this world down to its very bones,” Zav said, his voice hard.

“I am not strong enough to burn the world, but you can help me kindle a small fire,” she replied.

Zav frowned in confusion for a minute before it occurred to him what she was saying.

“You loved a man once and lost him. At his hands?”

Her silence was answer enough. It spurred something unfamiliar in him, whether sympathy or kinship he didn’t know. Still, he understood.

“Help me find Zephon, and I will be the agent of your revenge,” he promised.

Her posture relaxed and an eager, almost cruel, glint shone in her eyes.

“He’s emptied the lake of fish and the air of birds, though some have bargained with him to spare their lives. In exchange, they became his spies and helped lure unsuspecting creatures to him,” she explained.

“But since I have hidden the lake from any who might stumble upon it, Ramut has grown hungry because he has no power to break the spell. He will need my blood to do so.”

Khatun moved back into the shade and pointed at the circling birds a ways off with a frown.

“We have to keep going. Those are his birds on the lookout for us. There’s a cave nearby where we can take shelter.”

“Can’t he see where we are now?” Zav asked curiously.

Khatun grabbed his arm and hauled him up.

“I can hide us from his gaze for a while, but it’s tiring. If we move underground, we’ll have a better chance since the lake only shows him what’s above and never below. It was Bezaliel’s doing.”

They walked quickly around to the other side of the outcrop before descending down a rather sharp slope away from the avian spies.

Zav slid and tripped as their descent disturbed fist-sized rocks that tumbled around them and got under their feet. He nearly stumbled but caught himself.

They hurried to cross the open ground, but Khatun took a misstep, careening into him and sending them both down the last few yards in a tumble of limbs and more dislodged rocks.

“*Yuckshite!*” she cursed.

Zav rolled onto his front, the uneven stones digging into his hands as he pushed himself up with a wince. He looked at his arms, almost mesmerized at the scrapes and cuts he’d acquired.

Khatun, too, stared at his scratches with mild disbelief.

“You bleed,” she said, reaching out to touch his abrasions with hesitant fingers.

“It would appear so.”

The slight sting of pain was unfamiliar, and he instinctively reached inside him for a tendril of power he knew was already taxed. He was startled when Khatun grabbed his arm and squeezed.

“No, save your strength. You’ll need it. Come on, I see the cave ahead.”

Zav levered himself to his feet with a pained grunt and followed her more carefully toward a small, dark hole carved into the side of another low hill. They stood just inside the opening and turned to watch a pair of black kites crest the outcrop they left behind, and Khatun pulled him farther into the darkness of their shelter.

“This cave goes on for a few miles. There’s a short drop just past the hill where it goes under the Suman River, and we’ll come out two miles from the lake.”

They made their way further into the gloom, keeping one hand on the dirt wall to guide them.

Eventually, they came across a section where the roof lowered enough that they couldn’t stand straight anymore, and their feet sank into the soft ground with every step they took. Water dripped from the ceiling and collected in puddles, which ran down a shallow ditch and disappeared behind a calcite wall.

Zav thought they'd hit a dead-end, but Khatun jumped down from the path they were on and into the ditch and waved for him to follow. He noticed an opening at the bottom just big enough for a person to crawl through, though it would be a tight squeeze for him.

"Don't worry, you'll fit," she told him, probably seeing his concern.

She went first and slid through easily enough, and Zav heard her muffled voice from the other side a minute later.

"Okay, Zav. It's your turn."

Zav got on his hands and knees, surprised when he sank a little. The silt gave under his weight as he wriggled his way through the gap. He was forced to get completely onto his front to fit where the opening narrowed, and he was completely soaked once he made it out.

The cavern they were in glowed from thousands of bioluminescent worms that clung to the rocky ceiling and walls. They twinkled in the dark, and Zav was reminded of stars.

"Let's stop there."

Khatun pointed in front of them after they reached the end of the glowworm cave.

Beyond lay a large chamber whose roof had long since caved in. Sunlight shone down on lush vegetation that had taken root on exposed earth. Trees stretched out their trunks toward the light while grass and other low-lying plants provided a thick carpet beneath.

Birdsong filled the air.

"They're all right," she said after Zav expressed his concern about the birds' presence. He didn't know whether they were friend or foe.

The call of monkeys echoed around them as they peered cautiously down at Zav. A brave youngster swung down for a closer inspection, but quickly scampered back to the tree's safety after a short stare down with him.

Khatun led him up to a terraced garden lined with ferns and stopped underneath a large, rough-barked tree.

They sat on the ground, and Zav glanced around in amazement, even more so when a familiar-looking wolf crept out from the underbrush.

Chinua crept toward Zav with a friendly wag of his bushy tail before laying between them with a sigh. Khatun rubbed his ears, but kept her attention on Zav.

“This is where Bezaliel hid Ramut?” he asked as he looked around.

“Yes. He called it his very own Eden, and he hid it from prying eyes—both mortal and divine. We won’t stay here for long, but we can rest for a while and formulate a plan before moving on.”

Zav leaned against the tree and tipped his head up. The canopy wasn’t especially thick and he could see through the leaves to where the sun shone just out of sight, over the lip of the open dome. They would need to keep moving again before long, but he allowed his eyes to close as he listened to the fauna go about their day around him.

A warm body pressed up against his leg and he instinctively held out a hand for Chinua to lick. He scratched his neck gently and slumped farther on the ground with a tired sigh.

It was nearing midday when they finally emerged from their sanctuary.

The Nuur stretched out as far as Zav could see and reflected clear, blue skies on its mirror-clear surface, so that the lake and sky bled into each other where they met on the horizon.

Their plan was for Zav to present himself to Ramut with Khatun as his offering, and hope that the Nephilim’s greed would be enough to persuade him to indulge Zav’s request.

Zav hefted Khatun over his shoulder, her bound hands digging against his back uncomfortably, and carefully made his way down the rocky slope. He was quick to notice how eerily silent everything was. It made sense that it would be, but the hairs on the back of his neck still stood on end.

Zav set Khatun down and wrapped the end of the rope more securely in his hand.

He stopped at the edge of the lake and looked out into the distance.

“Are you sure he’ll come?” he asked quietly.

A harsh caw answered him as a crow flew overhead. It circled them briefly before flying off with another call.

Khatun let out a startled shout when a ripple appeared in the water and destroyed the calm surface. She stepped away from the breakers that reached for her and tripped on her feet, falling against Zav's leg with a grunt.

There was a rumble, and the water churned and bubbled as Ramut emerged. He had a wicked grin on his weathered face.

"Oyunbileg."

Khatun narrowed her eyes at the nickname. "Don't call me that."

"Kherev ta ööriin etsgiin setgeliig evdsen," he said accusingly.

"You don't have a heart to break," she spat at him in disgust, but Zav gave the rope a warning tug. Khatun gave him a nasty glare though she quieted down grudgingly.

Ramut just laughed and turned his gaze to Zav. He was nearly fifteen feet tall and towered over both of them arrogantly.

"Ah, the demon has finally graced me with his presence, and he has even... reunited me with my estranged daughter." He smiled. "What brings you to my grand abode?"

Zav smiled back at him charmingly. "I have come to seek your wisdom. I was told that you are rather good at finding lost things."

"Rather good!" Ramut thundered, offended. "To call my undisputed skills 'rather good' is an insult."

Zav affected a more humble stance as he sought to placate the irate Nephilim. "Forgive me. It wasn't my intention to give insult. What I know of you is only hearsay, you see, and I am a creature who is naturally doubtful of many things."

Ramut visibly calmed down. He stroked his short beard thoughtfully then nodded in understanding. "Very well, if it's a demonstration that will show you that I am the best, so be it. But first, there's the matter of payment."

He gave a pointed look at Khatun, who'd remained quiet until then. She reared back at what he implied and fought to get up, but Zav once again gave her binding a sharp jerk, and she fell on her side helplessly.

"I should have known that you would betray me, demon," she hissed and glared at him angrily.

Zav kept his attention on Ramut. "I do believe that it's the way of things around here that payment is offered after services rendered."

The Nephilim studied him for a long moment, then shook his head.

“I will not show you a thing without compensation first.”

Zav laughed. He looked up at Ramut with mock pity.

“Ah, the stories of your impotence are true then? Rumor has it that the greatest diviner to ever walk the earth has become so weak that it’s a hardship to see even the littlest of things,” he said innocently, biting back a smile.

If it was his intention to rile Ramut up by implying that his reluctance stemmed from his inability to scry anymore, then he succeeded. The giant clenched his fists and gnashed his teeth, stomping on the ground indignantly. He took a step toward them, but Zav gave him a warning glance. The runes on his arms lit up faintly then disappeared.

“Watch it, demon. Starved or not, I will not tolerate any slander,” Ramut growled.

Zav raised his hands placatingly. He caught Khatun giving him an imperceptible nod from the corner of his eye. The rope was rough and stiff in his hand as he pulled on it hard and heard her give a pained cry. He kept his gaze on Ramut, whose eyes gleamed with hunger when Khatun’s blood dripped on the ground.

The ground absorbed it just as thirstily. There was a faint whisper of magic as it spilled, but it was gone in the next breath. Ramut sighed in disappointment. They were yards away from the lake.

“I believe her blood is what will break the wicked curse on this place?” Zav asked the giant.

Ramut nodded and licked his lips, eyes glazed. “A drop won’t be enough, though. I need all of it.”

“And you will have it all, but only after you help me.”

He surreptitiously nudged Khatun with his foot, and the scent of blood welled up again from where she’d deliberately rubbed the restraints against her cut. Ramut swallowed hard.

“Swear it, demon. You hold your oaths sacred just as the angels do. Swear that I will have her in my hands,” he finally said, and Zav bit back a curse.

The last thing he wanted was to be bound by another vow, but he had no choice.

“Very well.”

Ramut growled and shook his head mutinously. “Swear!”

“I swear,” he growled back.

There were no outward signs of a binding contract having just taken place, but Zav could feel it grab on to him deep in his bones like a cold, skeletal hand wrapping iron fingers around him.

Ramut gave a satisfied nod as he felt it too. He turned his back on them and waded back into the lake.

Zav put a hand on the top of Khatun’s head, and she gave him a reassuring smile in return. The scrapes on her arms were already healing.

The water was up to Ramut’s waist by now, and he peered into the water with deliberate focus. He seemed not to need Zav to tell him what to look for, though if that was proof of his abilities, Zav knew not. Minutes passed with no change, and the stillness remained heavy in the air.

Khatun had grown restless at his feet, and he, too, noticed the growing storm clouds in the horizon. They needed Ramut to tell him what he knew soon.

A breeze danced its way through Zav’s hair. He watched the lake’s surface ripple in the light wind that was steadily picking up. Ramut was in a trance now, his eyes wide and unseeing.

The clouds were drifting slowly toward them, having just passed over the last mountain ridge from the south when Ramut gave a visible shudder. He raised his head to regard Zav, though his eyes remained glazed.

“There is a valley, where a man in his grief commanded the earth to mourn his dead lover. The mountains responded by crying out ‘Pyrene!’ and thus it was named so,” he told Zav, still deep in his trance.

Ramut continued, “I see this man in a black robe, and he is surrounded by others like him. They walk over an old bridge, and a castle can be seen behind them. There is also one like me, the son of Penemue. I—”

He stopped and swayed, then caught himself. “The lake speaks to me no more,” he said. “But you will know him by his name. They call him Jonah.”

For a moment, the Nephilim looked stooped and gaunt, and something stirred in Zav’s chest as Ramut’s eyes cleared and he gazed at Khatun with affection. But the giant shook his head, and whatever paternal love had been in his eyes disappeared just as the sun did above them.

“That was hardly what I came here for,” Zav complained. He was tired of riddles and vague intimations when all he wanted were straight answers.

“Decipher it however you like, demon. The lake can’t tell me anymore. It is as starved as I am.”

He lumbered out of the water slowly, looking drained, and he made a grab for Khatun, who had risen to her feet by then. She dodged him, though the rope pulled her back shortly.

Zav released his hold on it, and she reared back from another swipe. She barely missed it, and Ramut’s hand came away with a hunk of her hair.

“Stop!” Zav shouted. “You have given me no clear answers, only more riddles for me to figure out. My oath is null.”

Ramut anger was clear when he rounded on him. “I have given all I could in my miserable state, you traitorous wretch.”

He stopped his advance abruptly, and his expression became sly. “I will be more able to give you a clearer answer after my curse has been made void,” he said.

“Zav!” Khatun yelled.

She pointed at the lake behind Ramut where water started to churn. Waves appeared in the distance and broke violently against the shore, though it didn’t recede like it normally would. Instead, it crawled farther onto land like an amorphous tentacle in search of prey. Ramut grinned as it reached for Khatun, but she remained out of its grasp.

Her father snarled and raised a hand, and the lake responded by making a large wave that crested over his head and crashed into Khatun and Zav like a heavy fist.

It knocked them both off their feet. The water stung Zav’s eyes, and he struggled to wipe his face clear. Khatun was coughing nearby.

“Give her to me!” Ramut roared. He didn’t advance toward them though, instead letting the lake do his bidding as another wave swamped over them, and another.

Khatun’s strangled gasp was cut short, and Zav looked up just in time to see the water sluicing off her, reform into something resembling a hand. It grabbed her firmly in its grasp and pulled her closer to her waiting father.

Zav tried to push up off the ground but found himself unable to. Something restrained his leg, and he instinctively kicked against it. It gripped him even tighter, and he looked behind him to see a similar aqueous hand keeping him in place.

It dragged him away from Khatun's outstretched hands and into the water. Zav dug his fingers into the sand. He sent a bolt of lightning deep down and felt the sand shift. Crystals bloomed outward from where the lightning struck, reshaping and hardening into a shaft of fused quartz. He gripped it in his hands to anchor himself, gritting his teeth against the water's counterpull.

It refused to let him go, and by now Khatun was nearly in Ramut's reach. Desperately, Zav redirected his energy and channeled the humming current, buzzing and snapping inside him, down into his own legs. There was a pop, and Ramut shrieked in agony as the electricity shocked the restraining hand and continued on its way into the lake itself. It crawled off into a million tiny branches, skating on the water's surface relentlessly until the water's hold loosened and splashed back on the ground as liquid.

Ramut was on his side and gripping his legs in pain, cursing Zav and Khatun and even his angelic father. Zav heaved himself up and clumsily half ran, half stumbled to Khatun where she lay dazed on her back.

Her eyes were wide as she mumbled incoherently up at him, and her limbs convulsed involuntarily.

"Sorry, sorry," he gasped.

His fingers were numb as he struggled to free her from the already fraying rope, and it untangled easily enough for which he was grateful. Zav rubbed her arms and legs briskly, trying to get feeling back into them.

"W-warn me next tiiiime," she slurred, but she was able to sit up after a while.

Ramut had also recovered and was slowly crawling toward them with a grimace of pain as his burnt legs scraped against the rough ground.

"Traitors!" he spit. "I will bite your heads off and quench my thirst with your blood."

The water started to draw back from the shore, exposing a great deal of lake bed. Zav knew what was coming.

He hauled Khatun up and pushed her toward the slope they'd come from.

“Go, run!”

“What? Why?”

Zav shoved her impatiently. “You don’t want to be here when that water comes back, trust me,” he said.

She looked over his shoulder, and her eyes widened. Still, Khatun stood her ground.

“What will we do?”

Her father had stopped crawling by then and seemed content to let the lake do his dirty work, and Zav felt disgust well up in him when he spared the giant a brief glance.

He gave the Nephilim a cruel smile though his words were for Khatun alone.

“Remember that I am your demon of vengeance.”

Khatun glanced at her father for a moment, a look of pity crossing her face, but her eyes hardened, and she nodded in understanding.

“Very well,” was all she said, and she clumsily loped off to higher ground.

The earth quaked beneath Zav’s feet, and he looked out into the distance to see a towering wall of water coming inexorably closer.

“You are not the first supernatural being to fall before me,” Ramut growled. “I devoured Bezaliel and Etügen Eke in one swallow, and I shall do the same to you.”

“Silence!” Zav thundered. The heavens answered him with thunder of its own, and storm clouds gathered above them ominously. Lightning split the air.

The tsunami was gigantic. It reared in front of him angrily as millions of hungry mouths and grasping hands materialized on its surface.

Zav had had enough. He closed his eyes and unleashed the tight ball of energy that had been gathering in him. The clouds opened up and it started to rain as lightning followed the raindrops down to the earth where it met Ramut and the lake in a mighty strike.

It struck the prostrate giant over and over until his skin bubbled and blistered, and still Zav didn’t relent until the wave lost its power and crashed into him with a force no stronger than a splash.

He opened his eyes to see Ramut on the sand, enclosed in glass where the lightning had melted rock and sand together. His eyes were staring at Zav in shock, but they dulled quickly after that until Zav knew he was gone.

Zav looked around him in a daze and fell heavily to his knees. The last thing he heard was Khatun calling out to him.

Chapter Two

The Pyrenees is a vast mountain range that forms a natural border between France and Spain. Khatun admired its beautiful snowcapped mountains and glacial lakes, marveled at the towering waterfalls, and watched the herds of Blonde d'Aquitaine that they passed as they flew high above the clouds.

Zav indulged her, but he was exhausted. They'd circled the mountains twice already while they searched for the place Ramut's vision pointed to, but there were no signs of Zephon or the other Nephilim he mentioned.

They touched down in a wooded area, and Zav slumped tiredly against a tree. He was still drained from his confrontation with Khatun's father, and flying for longer periods of time took its toll. Khatun had no such problems.

She landed on the grass beside him and melted back to her human self.

"Stay here. I will scout ahead," she told him.

Zav was grateful. He watched her leap into the air and fly off in her bird form, then lay down and closed his eyes. They'd done this before with Khatun leaving him behind to rest while she explored the area first.

The sun was starting to set when Khatun returned and woke him up. She knelt above him with a hopeful smile.

"I think I may have found him. There's a valley not far from here where a bridge stands close to a castle. Men walk around in black robes like in Ramut's vision."

She stood and brought him with her, then pointed to the west where the sun was disappearing over the mountaintops.

"They call the town Lagrasse."

Zav looked to where she pointed, and he knew that she had it right. It was as if a heavy weight lifted off him, and his heart lightened as he stared in the distance.

He straightened up and rolled his shoulders, feeling the skin on his back tighten and release as his wings unfurled. They opened slowly and Zav stretched them out, then let them settle against his back with a groan.

They took off in the gathering twilight.

Lagrasse lay in a valley at the foot of the Pyrenees, just as Ramut had stated, and Zav spied the squat turrets of what looked to be a small castle in the distance before the town came into view.

The houses were all lit up by the time they arrived just outside town. Khatun pulled him deeper into the wooded area they'd landed in just as a group of men ambled by loudly.

Zav watched them disappear into the night and looked back to where they came from. The tugging that had started in his chest when they reached the town grew stronger the more he looked at the barely visible belfry he could see over the top of the arched bridge. He rubbed his chest slowly to ease the ache that had lodged there when he lost Zephon.

"He's here somewhere. I can feel it," he told Khatun.

She rested a hand on his shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. "We'll need a plan then. Not only to explain our presence here, but to figure out how you'll be introduced to him."

That gave him pause. He'd been relying on instinct up until now, flying by the seat of his pants with no solid strategy except what felt right to him. Even just earning Zephon's acquaintance would require careful planning. He was glad to have told Khatun everything since she'd proven herself to be very helpful indeed.

There was a rustle of leaves behind them, and they turned to see a man emerge from the bushes. He held out the lantern he was holding, but didn't look alarmed or surprised at their presence.

"You're not supposed to be here," he told them.

Khatun raised a hand peaceably. "We are travelers, looking to stay in town for a while."

The man hummed knowingly, and Zav was struck by a sudden familiarity though he was a stranger. He lowered the lantern, and the light cast grim shadows on his face and put his unnatural eyes into focus.

They blazed with a fire that no mortal was blessed to see, but Zav had no trouble seeing it. The flames were muted, unlike any other angel he knew, and the devils themselves had long since had their fires quenched.

"You've come a long way, my friend," he told Zav.

"You are *iyr*, a fallen one, but not one of Lucifer's. Grigori," Zav realized.

The stranger gave a mock bow. "I am Penemue, neither angel nor devil. I have been cast out for the crime of begetting giants."

Penemue straightened up and gave Khatun a look of censure.

"Kin-slayer. It doesn't matter that it was not by your hands, but by your actions are you judged."

He held up a hand to forestall her protests, then beckoned them to follow him.

"Much as I do not want you here, a favor has been asked of me. One I can't possibly refuse. Come, let us go home, and you may tell me what you will."

He didn't wait to see if they would follow, merely stepped out of the woods and down the cobbled streets with hurried steps as if he didn't want anyone to see his dubious guests.

Penemue led them to a small house on a hill that overlooked the rest of the town. He quickly ushered them inside and closed the door, then leaned against it with a nervous look on his face.

"I've been asked to give you sanctuary, but that is all the aid I can give you. Just try not to attract too much attention."

Zav and Khatun glanced at each other before nodding in agreement. Their host sighed in relief and asked them to make themselves comfortable.

"Who asked you to help us?" Zav asked as he sat himself on the couch.

Penemue didn't answer at first. He left them briefly to get food and drinks, which he served with almost deliberate care. He then sat in a chair opposite them and waited until they started eating before answering.

"I'm not at liberty to say, though I will tell you that you have allies on both sides."

Zav was surprised. He had the demons on his side, of course. Lucifer and his brothers pulled out all the stops to help him get here, and he knew his elder brother had paid a pretty steep price to get the information they needed from the angels. Their assistance was a given, but to hear that some of their high-and-mighty siblings were on his side was rather shocking. He said so to Penemue, who leaned back with a smile.

"It intrigues them that a demon will claim to feel love for his enemy. Most angels see that as a good thing. They think there's hope for you yet," he said with a sneer, which Zav returned with one of his own.

He continued with a worried frown, however, “Though there are some who feel it is an insult that you will tempt one of their own to sin. These are the ones you need to look out for,” he warned.

Khatun had been silent since coming to the house, but she put her plate down and raised an eyebrow.

“And which group do you fall in?” she asked suspiciously.

Penemue didn’t take offense. He smiled again, a small, nostalgic smile.

“I had a great love once, and she bore me many children. All but one survived the purging, and he is all I have left of her. I am on your side.”

“I need all the help I can get. Tell me, we are looking for a man named Jonah. Is that someone familiar to you?” Zav asked.

Penemue cocked his head to the side and said the name quietly to himself, like he was testing it on his tongue.

“Mmmm, yes, I think I know who this man is. There’s a monk up at the abbey with that name.”

Zav gave a start at that. The castle they’d seen was an abbey, and it seemed like Zephon still served his Lord even when reborn as a human. The irony didn’t escape him, and he laughed bitterly.

“A man of God, is he?” he asked, rubbing a tired hand on his face.

“It would seem so, yes.”

They sat quietly for long minutes, each absorbed in their own thoughts, until the clock chimed eleven, and their host got up from his chair. He gathered their empty plates and disappeared into the kitchen, then returned shortly.

“Let me show you to your rooms. I will likely be out by the time you get up tomorrow, but go and look around town. The monks like to visit once in a while.”

He led them up the stairs and into two small rooms on either side of an even smaller bathroom. They watched Khatun disappear into her room and close the door, then Penemue put a hand on his shoulder and leaned close.

“Don’t attract any unwanted attention,” he warned again. “We have survived all these years without being harassed by estranged family members if you know what I mean. We’d like to keep it that way.”

He gave Zav a piercing stare until Zav nodded in understanding, and then he let go with a smile.

“Help yourselves to anything in the kitchen. Good night.”

Zav watched him enter another room before closing the door to his. The moon was full and glowed brightly through the narrow window. It shone on the bed pushed up against the opposite wall, and Zav sat his tired body down with a groan.

The abbey lay at the bottom of the hill on the southern part of town. Zav leaned against the window and watched it for a while, feeling that connection with Zephon pulse weakly through the distance that separated them. He hummed contentedly even though the connection was tenuous, unlike what they’d shared before. Zephon was there. He’d found him, and he let that knowledge guide his head onto his pillow and lull him to sleep.

The café was tucked away on a narrow street a few blocks from the abbey. It was late morning, and the tourists outnumbered the locals. Zav blended in well where he sat by the window, watching a small group of black-robed monks gather on the opposite sidewalk.

None of them were him.

Khatun had asked him before, how he would recognize Zephon, and Zav had no real explanation. He just knew that he would, though looking at the group made him doubt himself a little. What if he didn’t recognize him at all?

He stamped down the panic that rose in his chest, and continued his watch.

Zav stayed in his corner for an hour more before he decided to walk around and acclimate himself to the town. He’d stop by Penemue’s bookstore in a while and meet up with Khatun, see if the Grigori had news to share with him.

He stepped outside and was immediately assaulted by a flock of tourists, who’d come out from next door, pushing him hard against one of the monks on this side of the street.

“*Excusez-moi*,” he murmured.

The man turned to give him a smile, and all the air was sucked out of Zav until he was sure his chest had caved in around his heart. He stood there for a beat too long before reality came back to him, and Jonah was walking away from him.

“Wait!” Zav called out.

He reached Jonah just as he set a foot on the crosswalk, and Zav wrapped a firm hand around his wrist to pull him back. They stumbled away from the edge of the road just as a car screeched past and nearly hit the other pedestrians as it swerved carelessly.

Yells and curses echoed around them, but Zav was unaware of everything but the frantic beating of Jonah’s pulse against his hand. He was pale, and Zav could feel him trembling from shock, so he turned him around and rubbed his arms soothingly.

“Shh, it’s okay. You’re okay, I promise,” he whispered.

Jonah looked up at him with wide eyes, almost as if he couldn’t believe that it was Zav who was standing in front of him, but there was no recognition in those blue eyes.

He nodded and wet his lips, calming down as Zav coaxed him to take deep breaths.

“I—you saved me,” he said. “Thank you.”

A small crowd had gathered around them by then, but they parted to let the other monks pass.

“*Frère Jonah, êtes-vous d’accord?*” one of them asked while the others inspected him for any injuries.

“*Oui, Jacques. Cet homme m’a sauvé,*” Jonah reassured him, then gestured to Zav gratefully.

They turned their attention to Zav and thanked him profusely. He took their gratitude in stride, though it took every ounce of his control not to sneer at their claims of his being there was God’s work through Zav’s hand that saved Jonah.

The crowd dispersed eventually, and the monks wandered off with more praises for him and God, but Jonah lingered behind with a kind smile.

“Not a religious man?” he asked.

Zav was unsure what to say, but Jonah didn’t seem to require an answer. He merely nodded in understanding.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Zav asked him a little anxiously.

“Yes, I really am, and I can’t thank you enough.”

They stood on the sidewalk while everyone else moved on around them, but Zav felt like his world had stopped, and he drank in Jonah's face like a man starved. His hair was still as dark as night, and his azure eyes rivaled the cloudless sky above them. His cheekbones were deeper than he remembered, but his lips were as full as they were the last time they kissed, and Zav had to stop himself from leaning in for a taste.

He didn't realize he had been staring for a lot longer than what was considered polite, until Jonah cleared his throat and repeated the question Zav didn't catch before.

"I'm Jonah. What name do I call you?"

"Zaviel, but no one calls me that. Call me Zav, instead," he blurted out, suddenly shy.

Jonah gave a start and pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Zaviel?" he whispered to himself.

Zav held his breath and willed him to remember, but whatever it was that passed through Jonah was gone quickly, and he shook himself with a smile.

"I thought I knew that name from somewhere, but I'm mistaken. Still, it's a lovely name, though Zav fits you better, I think," he told Zav almost wistfully.

Zav laughed and nodded. "Yes, I've been told that before."

One of Jonah's brother-monks called out to him, and Jonah waved back in acknowledgment.

"I have to go. It was nice meeting you," he told Zav, though he looked as reluctant to leave as Zav was to see him go.

"When can I see you again?" he asked before Jonah could step away.

The other man looked confused and a little wary, so Zav hurried to explain.

"It's just that, I've come a long way, and it would be nice to see a friendly face now and then. Will make it less lonely."

"Oh. Well, it's not often we come to town, but perhaps we can go for coffee next week? It'll be after the morning services at St. Mary's," he offered. "You're welcome to attend, of course, but I have a feeling you won't."

Zav chuckled and shook his head. No way in hell, as the humans would say. Still, he was happy that Jonah seemed just as eager to meet with him again.

“Why don’t I meet you at the Promenade Café after the service?” Jonah offered instead.

“That would be wonderful, thank you. I’ll be waiting.”

Jonah gave him a smile then made his way carefully across the street to where the others were waiting for him. It took every ounce of Zav’s willpower not to snatch him away, and it hurt to let him go just when he’d finally found him.

He watched Jonah turn back for one last glimpse of him, and Zav raised a hand, which the other man returned. Then he disappeared around the corner and Zav was alone once again.

“What do the rogues care whether I go see Jonah or not? I’ve been given permission!” he complained.

“And do you think that will stop them from interfering? These are rogues, Zav, they go behind Michael’s back when they think they have the right of it. They find affront in the fact that a devil like you has been given approval to go after an angel,” Pen explained tiredly.

They’d been going around this subject for the past few days, and Zav’s patience was running thin.

“I can take them all!”

“It’s not you I’m worried about,” Penemue snapped. “I’m thinking of the well-being of others who will be caught in the crossfire if you fight them.”

A noise interrupted them. It came from below their feet like a small earthquake that made the tiny house vibrate.

Pen pushed him aside with a nasty glare and made his way to the cupboard under the stairs. He unlocked it while muttering to himself, the words too low for Zav to hear, but the noise stopped, and the house became still again.

Zav watched him crawl inside, where a square hole had been dug in the floor, and he could see a narrow set of steps descending into darkness. He followed curiously, ignoring Pen hissing that he should go back upstairs.

“Go away! You’ll upset him even more.”

“Who?”

A wailing echoed in the tunnel. The solid bedrock muffled it, but Zav's hearing was good enough that he was able to understand the words.

"Faaaatthhheeeeer!" the voice howled.

Pen cursed and hurried along in the dark, leaving Zav to catch up with him.

They eventually came to another locked door and behind that was where the noises were coming from. Pen opened that one, too, and then stepped inside with a nervous glance behind him.

Zav walked in with wide eyes. The room was a mirror image of the one upstairs, though the ceiling was much higher and the furniture bigger. Off to one side was a kitchen and beside that was a bathroom, the layout exactly like the house above their heads, though all in a much larger scale... as if a giant lived there.

Pen disappeared inside another room which Zav assumed was a bedroom, and he could hear him talking softly to someone.

He was curious, but respected his host's privacy enough to leave him be. Instead, he took a seat on the oversized couch and waited.

It wasn't long before a noise from his right got his attention, and Zav watched as large eyes looked at him guilelessly from behind an unruly curtain of hair. Pen stepped out from behind his son and gave Zav a long, calculating look.

"So now you know," he said.

Zav did, and he understood what his knowledge meant to Pen and his Nephilim son.

"Your secret is safe with me."

"And that woman?"

He meant Khatun, and though Zav couldn't speak for her, he knew her enough to know that she would be discreet.

"I will speak with her."

In the end, Zav promised him discretion and curtailed his visits for fear that he would lead the rogues right onto his host's doorstep—and thereby putting Nymi's existence in danger—until Pen was no longer constantly looking over everyone's shoulder for fear of an attack.

They all settled together more comfortably as Pen fully opened his home to them. Khatun and Zav did what they could to pitch in around the house, and he could tell that Pen was grateful for the company.

The days crawled by slowly—the nights were even worse—while Zav impatiently waited for the day of his next meeting with Jonah. He'd secretly gone to the abbey several times that week to watch over Jonah while the other man went about his day, sometimes staying long into the night to watch him sleep.

The others were happy for him, though Penemue once again cautioned him to be careful, telling him that angels were regular visitors of the abbey and that there's no way of knowing whether they'd be friend or foe.

Finally, it was Sunday, the day he was to meet with Jonah again, and Zav could hardly wait. He crept out of bed a little after sunrise and made his way through the town silently, alert to the presence of others.

Church bells shattered the early morning quiet, and he hurried along the streets toward St. Mary's. A small crowd gathered on the front lawn, chatting with an elderly priest.

Zav leapt up a tree just as Jonah and his fellow monks arrived. They were greeted eagerly by everyone, and Zav waited until they'd all gone inside before sneaking in. He jumped up toward one of the large stained glass windows, suppressing an amused snort when he realized which one it was. He shook his head at the irony of the host of angels behind him, looking down at the congregation benevolently.

The congregation started the service with hymns, and Zav settled down to watch Jonah with an unobstructed view from his seat. Halfway through the mass, Zav noticed the other man looked restless and uneasy; so much so that one of his brothers leaned to the side to quietly ask what was wrong. Jonah gave a quick shake of his head and turned his attention back to the prayer book in his hand.

“Once a demon, always a demon, eh?”

Zav looked up sharply to see an angel watching him from his own perch on a neighboring window. He growled when the other joined him and wondered if he could get away with kicking him off the ledge. The humans wouldn't notice anything at all.

He took a deep breath and reminded himself of Pen and his son, Nymphidius.

“I am Caspiel.” The angel introduced himself with a sweeping gesture. “So, you’ve found him. Isn’t it interesting that he’s found his home here, of all places? I think it’s rather ironic.”

Caspriel laughed delightedly and hummed along as the congregation below sang *Ave Maria*.

“I do believe Michael and the Council have said that there will be no outside interference.” Zav gritted his teeth.

“I’m not interfering, am I? Merely an observer.” Caspiel glanced at him innocently.

Zav ignored him. Caspiel took the hint and also fell silent, and they watched the gathering in a temporary truce.

The mass was almost finished when the angel roused himself from his seat and nudged him almost companionably.

“Well, it looks like I need to be off. Say hello to Zephon for me.”

He stood up and unfurled his wings, then turned back to Zav with a smirk.

“I heard he had a near miss last week. Shame.”

The hairs on the back of Zav’s neck stood up, and he was on his feet in a flash. He grabbed the other’s wing just as Caspiel was about to fly off, and hauled him close.

“What does that mean? Did you have anything to do with that?” he hissed menacingly.

Caspriel fought against his grip unsuccessfully.

“You’re making a scene,” he told Zav.

Zav glanced down to see Jonah looking in their direction, though he was sure that the man saw nothing.

“He can feel our presence, always has,” Caspiel explained.

He yanked his wing out of Zav’s grasp, and Zav let him, though he got up in the angel’s face and poked him hard on the chest.

“That had better not be your doing. You hurt one hair on Jonah’s body, and I will make you regret your very existence.”

Caspiel shoved him back and leaped into the air.

“Then you might want to keep a closer eye on him. Humans are such fragile things, after all.”

He was gone with a strong flick of his wings, leaving Zav with only a handful of dirty-white feathers.

“What’s wrong?”

“Hmmm?”

Jonah lifted the cup to his mouth and took a small sip before repeating his question.

“What’s wrong? Is everything okay? You look distracted.”

It was just after lunch, and the two of them were sitting in the café, watching from their window seats as the summer influx of tourists gathered on the sidewalks. Jonah had met him with a smile, and though Zav had returned it heartily and was genuinely happy to see him, he was disconcerted after his earlier encounter.

Angels loved their flowery speeches, and most humans were apt to overthink what they said and thus interpret them wrongly. But Zav knew that despite their verbose nature, they said what they meant, and vice versa.

Caspiel had hinted that Jonah’s near accident with the car was no accident at all, and something about that angel felt wrong to him. Something about the feathers in his pocket niggled at the back of his mind, but he couldn’t figure out what it was.

Jonah’s sigh broke through his thoughts, and Zav felt guilty for not giving him his full attention.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “I invited you for coffee, and I go and ignore you.”

“Are you all right?”

“Ah, yes. Just some family problems to sort out. How have you been?”

Zav leaned back in his seat and let Jonah’s voice wash over him. He drank in the sight of his beloved, hardly believing that he’d finally found him.

“Very well, thank you. And yourself?”

“Can’t complain. I hope you don’t find offense in me asking, but what made you join the Order?” Zav asked. He pointed at a small group of monks standing outside, all gray-haired and wrinkled, and looked back at Jonah, who looked out of place in his brothers’ austere company.

Jonah seemed confused for a second, but then the corners of his eyes crinkled as he let out a small laugh. He shook his head then turned a wistful gaze out the window.

“I made some bad life choices when I was younger that nearly cost me my life and my family,” Jonah told him.

“Is that what made you join the Order?”

Jonah’s bottom lip jutted out a little as he thought about it, and Zav couldn’t help his wide smile when he saw that bit of Zephon shine through in Jonah’s mannerisms.

“Life was tough for a while, and it felt like I was losing control, you know? A priest helped me get back on track, and I guess that’s what made me decide to be one, too.”

He looked at Zav curiously. “What about you? What brings you here?”

Jonah watched him intently from behind his cup. Zav leaned his arms on the table and wondered what to tell him, then decided that the truth would do. Or at least, as close to the truth as he could safely say.

“I’ve been around the world looking for somewhere I can call home,” he said. “And it seems that I’ve found it.”

The other man gave him a wide smile.

“Lagrasse is a beautiful place.”

“Yes, beautiful,” Zav agreed, though he kept his gaze on Jonah when he said it.

Jonah must have sensed what he meant because he looked away and cleared his throat. He glanced at his watch and grimaced apologetically.

“I have to get back to the abbey soon. It’s almost time for afternoon prayers,” he told Zav as he flagged their waitress over.

“Let me pay for this. I invited you, after all,” Zav said, snatching the check.

Jonah snatched it back and pulled out a few bills, waving Zav away when he tried to grab it again.

“No, no, let me do this for you. It’s the least I can do for you, for saving me last week.”

Zav was about to protest again when an idea formed in his head. He let Jonah keep the check and set out money for the waitress to take, then tapped him on the arm.

“Well, you have to let me pay the next time, or I’ll feel bad about this,” he said.

Jonah seemed startled at that, as if he didn’t think there would be a next time, and he looked like he was thinking seriously about whether he should agree or not. Zav held his breath, then let out it in a relieved rush when Jonah nodded.

“Okay, next time, but I can’t make it next week. Do you have a phone? I can call you to let you know when I’ll be free.”

Zav froze. He’d never needed one.

“Ummm, I don’t have one.”

He panicked when he thought that Jonah had no way to communicate with him. Zav could sneak himself in to see the other man and follow him around if he wanted, but the need for caution would mean that it wasn’t an ideal thing to do.

“Where are you staying? I’ll call you there.”

“A friend’s house, but I don’t know his number,” he said sheepishly. He didn’t even know if Penemue had a phone, either.

Jonah scratched his head while he considered their problem, then snapped his fingers.

“Give me your friend’s name. Lagrasse is a small town, and it won’t be hard to find them.”

Zav hesitated, wondering if it would be safe to tell him. Jonah must have seen his uncertainty because he said, “Everyone knows everybody.”

“My... friend is a bit of a recluse. He doesn’t like any attention drawn to him, but I suppose he’ll forgive me for telling you.”

Zav told Jonah about Penemue and made him promise to be discreet when he called. Pen would just have to understand, and perhaps they could go see if they could get Zav up to speed with human technology.

“Oh, the bookseller? I know him,” Jonah reassured him. “I’ll call his store then.”

Zav had forgotten that Penemue owned a bookstore, but he was relieved he wouldn’t have to tell anyone where they lived. Though, he supposed that would be a moot point if Jonah’s claim of everyone knowing everybody else was true.

“That would be ideal, yes. Thank you.”

He led Jonah outside, and they walked toward the abbey together, dodging pedestrians. Occasionally, someone would call out to Jonah, and they’d stop as he talked with them for a while before sending them off with a blessing, then they’d continue on their way.

Zav was amused to see how comfortable everyone was with Jonah, as if they unconsciously gravitated toward him because of his inner self. He was so focused on Jonah’s happy face that he immediately realized something was wrong when the other man’s smile fell off his face.

Jonah abruptly stopped walking and looked around uncomfortably, and Zav was instantly on guard.

“What? What’s wrong?” he asked, putting a protective arm around Jonah’s shoulder.

He, too, looked around but could see nothing amiss. Jonah unconsciously moved closer to him.

“I just felt strange, like someone’s watching me. I’m probably just imagining things.”

He moved away from Zav and brushed off his concern with a wave. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve always had an overactive imagination. I gotta go, or I’ll be late.”

Zav was reluctant to let him go, especially since he had an idea what had caused Jonah’s discomfort. He scanned the crowds quickly, but the feeling was already gone, and Jonah was looking at him expectantly.

“Be careful,” he told Jonah.

“I will.”

He kept his gaze on Jonah’s retreating back until he couldn’t see him anymore, then turned around and walked back the way he came. He was halfway to Pen’s house when that feeling of unease washed over him, and he

stopped to scan his surroundings. No one looked suspicious, but he knew that he was being watched.

That feeling stayed with him for a while as he meandered down the wrong streets, deliberately calm and acting oblivious, though all his senses were on high alert. He doubled back several times, then ducked inside a busy shop before letting himself out the back door and putting on a supernatural burst of speed down the alley. He didn't stop until he was sure he'd lost whoever it was that was following him.

He paused a block away from Pen's house and melted into the shadows. The angels wouldn't be able to sense him immediately, but Zav couldn't keep the trick going for long. He just needed enough time to extend his own senses to make sure no one was following and that the house wasn't being watched.

Zav sent out tiny feelers—small electrical discharges—and let them scan the area. He worked quickly and carefully, so as not to alert anyone who could be watching out for it.

There was no one.

He dashed across the street and hurried inside the house. Zav locked the door and put his back against it with a sigh, then turned to meet Pen's alarmed gaze.

To say that Pen was not happy was an understatement.

"Look, I was careful, all right? I wouldn't do anything to put you or Nymi in danger," Zav said placatingly.

"Perhaps not intentionally," Pen muttered, then raised a hand to stall any of Zav's protests.

"We all do what we must for those we love. Still, I don't feel safe leaving Khatun to watch him all by herself now."

Zav took in a deep breath then let it out in a long, slow exhale. He hadn't wanted to get anyone else involved, but at this point he didn't think there was any choice. Not if those rogues were sniffing around.

"I may know someone who might be able to help out with that."

Pen looked at him sharply before letting his head fall back with a groan.

"Do I want to know?"

“My brothers would jump at the chance to put one over on those rogues.” Zav grinned. “And who better to stand guard than them? Neither you nor I are at our best.”

He could see the other think it over. Zav knew just which brother would be perfect for this sort of thing.

“Wouldn’t that just antagonize them, though?”

“They wouldn’t want to risk a fight with him, not if they want to keep the Council in the dark. The last thing they’d need is for Michael to get wind of what they’re doing.”

“Okay, you make a good point. You and I would be fair game—me for being *iyr* and you on principle alone. But they’d think twice before attacking a devil without cause, especially one with full control over his powers,” Pen agreed.

Zav was pleased that he didn’t fight the idea. The idea of having one of his brothers to watch his back was a comforting one.

Pen excused himself after giving the go-ahead and went to see his son, leaving Zav with his thoughts.

The rogues would be too troublesome to deal with before long, even with Dyn’s help. Though it rankled him to think about asking for the angels’ assistance, perhaps Michael could do something about those Black Guards of his before they made even more nuisance of themselves.

Zav followed Pen downstairs to sit with Nymi for a while, having found that he liked the childlike Nephilim and didn’t mind keeping him company while the others made dinner. He allowed himself to be coaxed into a round of storytelling as a way to pass the time until they all dispersed for the night.

Pen stopped him before he could close his bedroom door.

“When should I expect another guest?”

Zav didn’t know. His brother would feel his need for assistance and would come when he was able.

“I can’t say, but it will be soon, I’m sure.”

They bid each other good night, and Zav retreated inside with a sigh.

He was awakened sometime later and sat up with a frown.

The sky was still dark, and the house was utterly silent save for the occasional creaks of the house settling. There was nothing to indicate what had woken him up.

He looked out the window toward the abbey, and his disquiet grew. He was already halfway there before he realized that he was flying above the town in the dead of night. Zav scanned his surroundings and veiled himself from any angelic eyes that might be on the watch, and quickly continued.

There were no lights on in the abbey, but Zav didn't need any to see his way. Jonah's window was open to let in the cool mountain breeze. He let himself in quietly and knelt beside the narrow bed.

Jonah kicked the covers off himself restlessly, though he remained deep in his sleep. Zav watched his eyes flicker rapidly behind closed lids and realized that Jonah was dreaming when the other man reached out to grab at something that wasn't there. He turned on his back, and Zav could see tears sliding down his face in the moonlight.

"Oh, sweetheart. It's okay, you're safe," he crooned to him softly, smoothing away sweat-dampened hair from his forehead.

The tears continued to come, so Zav wiped them off and bent close to whisper soothingly in his ear until Jonah had stopped crying. His breathing eased, and his limbs relaxed.

Zav kissed his cheek and drew in a sharp breath when he leaned back to see Jonah watching him with sleep-dazed eyes.

They stared at each other, Zav unsure how he'd explain his presence there, but Jonah blinked first and smiled at him.

He reached for Zav.

"I knew you'd find me."

Zav stared, wondering if he heard right.

"Zeph?" he whispered back uncertainly.

Jonah hugged his pillow tight and hummed contentedly before closing his eyes and going back to sleep. Zav was dumbfounded.

He settled himself comfortably at the foot of the bed and watched over Jonah until the sky began to lighten. The abbey's inhabitants were starting to stir in their rooms, so Zav got ready to leave. He gave Jonah's lips a tender kiss before jumping out and landing in the tree just outside.

Zav looked back to see Jonah sit up and rub a thumb over his lips. He then got up and stood barefoot and bare chested in front of the window as he stretched.

“You tempt my resolve, sweet,” Zav muttered.

He left without looking back.

Zav spent the morning ill-tempered and pining as he wandered around the house restlessly. It had taken everything he had to leave Jonah behind, but he knew that staying wasn't a feasible option right now.

“Come spend time with Nymi,” Khatun coaxed. “I need to go to the market, and he's just as grumpy as you are. Maybe your misery will find company with his.”

Zav scowled but got up from the sofa and started to make his way downstairs when he remembered something.

“I need you to stop by Pen's store with a message.”

“What is it?”

“Tell him that he'll be getting a call from Jonah sometime in the future. He doesn't have a phone around here, does he?” he asked.

Khatun glanced around and shook her head. “I haven't seen one. Would you even know how to use one?”

He narrowed his eyes at her cheek, but let her go on her way with a warning to be careful. She had just as much reason to worry about being outside like the rest of them since the blood of angels ran through her veins, diluted though it was.

“I'll be quick.”

“Don't forget my message,” he reminded her, then locked the door after she left.

He made his way downstairs to where Nymi was sulking under the covers. Zav came over to sit next to him and put a gentle hand over the top of his head. The Nephilim was close to ten feet tall, but he was gentle and guileless as a child despite nearing his millennial birthday.

“What's wrong?”

Nymi pouted and turned away, pulling the covers over his head.

“Hmm-mmm, is there a Nymi under there somewhere?” he asked.

Zav poked him repeatedly and grinned when the other tried to squirm away but couldn't.

“Do I need to tickle you?”

“Noooo!” Nymi yelled.

He poked his head out of the blanket and glared at Zav with huge green eyes. “*Abba* says I'm not supposed to make a lot of noise.”

“Okay, I won't tickle you, but you have to tell me why your bottom lip is nearly to the floor.”

Zav laughed when Nymi clapped a hand over his lip worriedly.

“I'm kidding,” he soothed.

Nymi picked at the blanket nervously, refusing to look at him.

“*Abba* says that we might need to leave because there are lots of bad people looking for us. He said they want to take me away!” he cried out, his eyes filling with tears.

Zav scooted closer and did his best to wrap his arms around wide shoulders as he comforted the distraught Nephilim.

“Your *abba* will never let them do that, and neither will Khatun or I. And my brother is coming to help keep the bad people away, too.”

“Really?”

“Yes. But I think he's right. It's not safe here anymore.”

“I like here lots,” Nymi whispered brokenly as his tears spilled.

Zav looked around the dim bedroom and took in the walls covered with chalk drawings of trees and mountains and the sun... a lot of suns.

“You like to draw the sun, huh?”

“Yeah, that's my favorite. I haven't seen it in forever and ever, I think. Is it nice and warm?”

Zav was taken aback until he realized that Nymi would not have been allowed outside in a long time, if at all, since the giant would cause quite a stir if the humans were to see him. He studied Nymi's pale face and thin legs, and an idea formed in his mind.

“You know, Khatun lived underground too, but her cave has a river,” he started.

Nymi perked up and wiped his face dry.

“A river?”

“And a forest with lots of birds and monkeys, lots of monkeys. If you lie down on the grass, you can feel the sun’s warmth on your face, and at night, you can look up at the stars.”

The Nephilim’s eyes were wide as he listened to Zav closely, slack-jawed.

“But nothing grows under the ground.”

“Well, it’s a special cave because there’s a hole in the roof that lets the sunshine in. And you know what else?”

“What?” Nymi asked excitedly.

Zav chuckled at his eager expression.

“There isn’t anyone for miles, so you can go outside and run around or maybe swim in the lake.”

Khatun had told him that the lake’s curse had been broken after Ramut’s death. Just before they left, a flock of waterbirds appeared overhead and, seeming drawn to the lake, landed on the water confidently.

Nymi thought about it for a while before nodding. He crossed his arms in front of himself and gave Zav a big smile.

“I guess it would be okay to leave then. Will we live with Khatun?”

Zav was about to answer when a commotion upstairs drew their attention, and Nymi shrank against him when they heard Pen’s shout. He pulled away to stand, but the Nephilim refused to release his hold on him.

“No, don’t go, Zav. What if it’s the bad people?”

“I need to see what’s going on and help your father if he’s in trouble. Just stay here and keep quiet.”

He gently pried Nymi’s hands off him and put a finger against his lip to warn him to be quiet.

The voices grew louder as he made his way back upstairs carefully. He could hear Pen, with Khatun calmly asking him to stop shouting in the

background. Then a deeper, aggravated voice joined in, and Zav let out a relieved sigh. He stepped out of the cupboard and welcomed his brother with hug.

“Zav! I hear congratulations are in order?”

“Don’t celebrate yet, brother, or you will turn my luck around for the worse,” he warned.

Pen made a frustrated sound behind him, so he turned to see what the matter was.

“You never said it would be him,” he hissed at Zav.

“What? I’m not good enough to watch over you and your spawn?” Deynaris shot back irritably.

They went off on each other again, their voices steadily climbing. Zav sent Khatun to make sure Nymi was okay before he interrupted their argument.

“I had no idea you knew each other.”

Pen turned to him and pointed an accusing finger at Dyn.

“He can’t stay. I don’t trust him around my son.”

Zav’s brother growled. He took a threatening step toward the other, but Zav blocked his way.

“Dyn,” he warned.

“What’s the matter, darling? Afraid I’ll stab you in the back the way you did me? After all, isn’t that what devils do? We’re all disloyal, dishonest, unfaithful cheats,” Dyn snarled.

Zav’s eyes widened at the implication, and he looked to Pen for confirmation. He saw Pen take a step back and put a hand on his cheek like he’d been slapped, and it wasn’t hard to put two and two together. Still...

“Dyn, I’m asking you. Please.”

He gave the other devil a pleading look. Whatever issues these two had with each other could take a backseat to their current problems, namely the Black Guards sniffing around town.

Dyn narrowed his eyes at him then sighed.

“For you, brother.”

A weight lifted off Zav's shoulders. Deynaris would even the playing field a little since he wasn't constrained by the terms of Zav's contract nor was he an *iyr* hiding among the humans with hardly a spark of power left in his being.

"Thank you," he said, then turned to see what Pen would say.

The other man had his arms crossed in front of him and refused to look at Dyn, but he pinned Zav with hard look.

"I'm trusting you with Nyimi's safety. Don't make me regret it."

Zav acknowledged him with a nod. They watched Pen leave before Dyn nudged him.

"Tell me what I've missed."

He caught Dyn up on all that had happened since his departure from Hell, ending with his speculation that Caspiel and his band of miscreants were trying to stop him from carrying out his task.

"They haven't acted out openly, but it's only a matter of time. Jonah seems to sense them."

Zav had thought about it since that time at St. Mary's when he and Caspiel had their little altercation. Jonah had felt something amiss, then and afterward, when they'd left the café, he felt the supernatural eyes on him even before Zav himself had.

"Do you need me to deal with them, brother?" Dyn asked with an unholy gleam in his eyes.

Zav shook his head, though the offer was tempting. He watched Dyn's expression change when he figured out just why he was here.

"Zaviel!" he snarled.

"You promised to help."

"To help you!"

Zav took a deep breath, willing himself to remain calm.

"You will be helping me by keeping an eye on the others, so I won't have to worry about them getting attacked. And by not worrying, I'll be free to pursue Jonah more easily," he explained slowly.

He waited for Dyn to process that.

Dyn took a minute to think it over. He leaned back in his chair and studied Zav for a beat longer than was comfortable, before letting out a sound of disbelief.

“I didn’t believe it, but the others were right. You’ve changed,” he said, a note of wonder in his voice.

“Hardly,” Zav scoffed.

“Since when do you care if others get caught in the cross fire? Why all this trouble protecting an *iy*r and his spawn, not to mention that woman?”

The old Zaviel wouldn’t have cared at all, but he found himself more amiable toward humans since arriving in this world. He couldn’t explain his newfound benevolence, so he just shrugged and tried to brush it off with a nonchalant, “They grow on you.”

Dyn let it go.

“Well, I’m here now in any case. Go show those angels why it’s not a good idea to mess with you.”

“Thank you. I feel much better knowing you have my back.”

Zav got up, but a hand around his wrist stopped him. His brother gave his hand an encouraging squeeze before letting go.

“Always.”

Chapter Three

Dyn had taken to his guard duties surprisingly well, warming up quickly to Khatun and Nymi, though he and Pen took great pains to avoid one another.

Jonah's call didn't come for nearly two weeks, and Zav was ready to tear his hair out by then. He'd resumed his nightly visits since Dyn's arrival, but Jonah hadn't woken up like he did that one night, so Zav chalked it up to the other man dreaming. Jonah seemed to do so every night.

It was Saturday just before lunch when Pen waved at him from across the crowded bookstore and handed him the phone with a knowing smile.

It was Jonah on the other line, inviting Zav to join him in town for lunch.

A wine festival in the neighboring commune of Talairan doubled the tourists wandering around Lagrasse, and many merchants were taking advantage of that by setting up outdoor stalls. The monks, too, had a setup on the sidewalk, selling homemade goat cheese and milk.

Zav stepped around an elderly couple and sidled up to the long table manned by half a dozen friars. They all looked up to give him a big smile. Some remembered who he was, and given the enthusiastic greetings he received, the ones who didn't quickly realized that he was the one who'd saved Jonah.

"How have you been, Zav?" Jonah asked.

"I've been well. And you?"

They exchanged pleasantries, then Jonah offered him a slice of cheese, which he claimed to be the best in the region.

"My break is in ten minutes. Do you want to wait for me, and we'll look around together?"

Zav agreed. One of the other fellows, *Frère* Peter, set up a small stool for him, which he accepted with an amused grin.

He sat and watched Jonah interact with the customers and with his fellow monks, occasionally sampling the cheese and milk they offered to him.

"Come on. I have half an hour before I need to get back."

Zav looked up to see Jonah smiling down at him.

They made their way through the crowd, stopping now and then to visit with the other market stalls. Most of them were more than happy to ply Jonah with free produce until their arms were both laden with goods.

Jonah set his basket by a bench and invited Zav to sit with him.

“I’ve been tired a lot lately,” he said with a yawn.

Zav noted the bags under his eyes and grew concerned.

“Have you not been sleeping well?” he asked, wondering if his visits had anything to do with that.

“Hmmm? Oh, I guess not. Do you believe in prophetic dreams?”

Jonah picked an orange from the basket and started to peel it, though his gaze was far away and he didn’t wait for Zav to answer.

“I’ve always had dreams like that, since I was a kid. Just little premonitions of what’s going to happen during the day. Those kind of things.”

Prophecies were an everyday thing with angels and devils, and some humans claimed to be able to foresee things as well. It was possible that something of Zephon’s powers were bleeding into Jonah, but he didn’t remember his lover ever having the gift of foresight.

“Is it interfering with your sleep?” Zav asked.

“Sometimes, when it’s as frightening as the ones I’ve been having lately.”

Jonah handed him a slice of orange then ate one as well. He looked at Zav like he was trying to decide whether to tell him or not, and Zav turned sideways in his seat to give him an encouraging smile.

“I dream that there’s a fire, and I’m trapped,” Jonah confessed. “I mean, it wouldn’t be a big deal if it was just once, but I have had the same dream every night for the past week.”

Zav was alarmed. There wasn’t a night when he watched Jonah sleep that the other man didn’t dream, and now that he knew they were nightmares—or omens, as they were starting to sound like—he didn’t like it one bit. He would need to be more vigilant in watching over him.

Jonah chuckled as he passed him another slice.

“This might sound strange, but I feel glad I’ve told you. Does that sound weird to you?”

“No, not at all. I like that you’re comfortable around me,” Zav told him.

“That’s unusual, you know. I’m usually a shy one, but there’s something about you.”

Zav held his gaze as he put a hand on top of Jonah’s where it lay between them. A spark passed between them, something that Zav hoped mirrored his own attraction, but a rowdy group of passersby walked past, and the moment was gone. Jonah pulled his hand away with an embarrassed cough.

“I have to get back to the table.”

He refused to look at Zav as he stood and picked up his basket. Jonah didn’t wait for him, and Zav let him put a bit of distance between them before gathering his own baskets and getting up to follow.

They walked a different path where some of the stores were getting their fronts refaced. Jonah paused under a scaffolding to let him catch up.

“Lagrasse is a beautiful town, isn’t it?” he asked, pointing at the rustic, ivy-covered walls and potted plants that flanked nearly every doorstep.

“Yes,” Zav agreed.

Jonah hefted his basket into his other hand as they walked side by side.

“I came here to run from my demons and found sanctuary in the abbey. I’ve worked hard to live by my vows honestly,” he told Zav with slight censure in his tone.

Zav understood what he meant, but there were no words he could honestly say to that, so he remained quiet.

As they passed the butcher shop, where the last scaffolding stood, Zav had only a second of warning to snatch Jonah’s arm before the whole thing came down on top of them.

Shouts rang around them as people scrambled to help lift the metal supports and heavy wooden planks off of them.

Zav looked down to see Jonah’s wide eyes looking back at him as he lay safely cocooned underneath Zav’s own body.

“Zav! God! Are you all right?” Jonah asked shakily.

He grunted a nod just as the planks were pulled off and hands reached out to help them both up. Jonah’s face had drained of color, and his hands shook when he ran them carefully down Zav’s scraped-up arms.

The butcher was frantic as he stepped up to them, tearfully apologizing and swearing that the scaffolding was bolted to the ground and should have been safe.

Zav assured everyone that he was fine as he brushed dirt off his clothes. He glanced around, though he felt that whoever it was that had caused the accident was long gone.

Jonah, on the other hand, was inconsolable as he asked Zav repeatedly if he was really fine. He looked like he was about to pass out, his eyes the only color on his pale face.

He latched onto Zav's arm and shook it, saying over and over how he should have known.

"Jonah, listen," he said, grabbing his face gently and turning him to face Zav. "It's not your fault. How could you have known?"

Jonah's eyes filled up.

"Because I dreamed it."

To say that Zav was upset was an understatement. He flew home in a rage the next evening, having shadowed Jonah everywhere since their accident in town. He was reluctant to leave the slumbering man, but staying obscured for long periods of time drained him.

The others were equally concerned, though they could do nothing but stay vigilant. Dyn flew out to patrol the area and returned with news that he could sense neither rogues nor danger. The news didn't reassure Zav as much as he hoped it would, but he thanked his brother all the same and disappeared upstairs.

The abbey was a squat shadow in the distance, lit only by the occasional lamplight and the waxing moon in the sky. Zav sat on the wide windowsill and watched the building until his eyes grew heavy.

He felt something was wrong even before he heard the sirens. Zav leaped out of the window and raced toward the abbey where he could see thick smoke rising into the air. Fire roared out of the windows with fury.

There was chaos all around as fire trucks and ambulances rolled into the driveway. A crowd of townspeople were rushing around with the fire hoses, and others were helping the dazed monks out, but Zav paid them no mind.

The south wing was quickly being engulfed, and he dashed along the outer wall up to where Jonah's room was. The acrid stench of smoke burned his lungs as he frantically looked around, the flames licking along the walls mercilessly.

"Jonah!"

The wardrobe was partially on fire, and he singed his hands slightly when he pulled it off the trapped man underneath. Jonah's breathing was labored, but he was conscious, if dazed, as Zav pulled him into his arms.

"Zav?" he asked.

"I'm here," Zav soothed him.

The wooden beams caught fire, and they crackled and popped as they came crashing down on them. Zav grunted as they hit his wing and scorched his feathers, but he shielded the two of them with the appendage as the rest of the ceiling started to crumble.

Jonah looked at him with wide eyes, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. He raised a trembling hand to Zav's smoking wing.

"Am I dreaming?"

"No, love. I wish it was just a dream."

Zav stood up and let out a burst of energy that fanned the flames away from them, giving them a clear path toward the charred window.

"Close your eyes and hang on tight," he told Jonah.

He waited until the other man had followed his instructions then jumped out. Zav could hear the crowd's gasps as they were spotted; he was too pumped with adrenaline to bother cloaking himself. He spread his wings fully and shot through the sky toward home.

There was a warning sound behind him, and he turned his head enough to see two Black Guards fast on his heels, their golden spears trained on him. He swerved to the right just in time to dodge a bolt, and Jonah's grip on him tightened.

"What's going on?" he asked fearfully after they narrowly missed crashing into a building.

Zav gritted his teeth and dipped low to avoid another shot, then retracted his wings quickly. They dropped from the sky and landed between two houses. He withdrew deeper into the shadows and put a finger against his lips.

Jonah held his breath as the two angels flew past their hiding place. They stayed there until Zav was sure they'd lost their pursuers, and only then did he carefully retrace his steps down the cobbled streets. He used the cover of darkness to sneak past the townspeople who'd been roused from their beds because of the fire, as he hurried toward Pen's house.

The lights were all on inside, and the door opened just as they got to it. Pen stepped aside to let them pass then quickly shut the door behind Zav. He walked to the window to peek around the closed curtains, then pointed Zav toward the couch.

"What's going on? Zav?" Jonah asked again after he was gently set down on the sofa.

He was shivering in his thin pajamas, and Pen covered him with a blanket before disappearing into the kitchen. Zav crouched beside him and took his hand in his, warming it with his own. Pen came back with a cup of hot cocoa, which he pressed into Jonah's clammy hands. He gave Zav a sympathetic look then left.

"What would you say if I told you that you were an angel in your past life?" Zav began.

Jonah looked at him blankly.

Zav sighed and launched into his tale. He didn't leave anything out and told him everything until there was nothing left to say. Jonah looked at him like he was crazy. Zav would admit that it sounded so impossible for a human to believe.

"You—I'm dreaming, aren't I?" Jonah asked.

"You're wide awake," Zav replied.

He reached out a hand, but Jonah jerked away, nearly spilling his drink as he pressed into the cushions to get away from him.

"I really saw... what?" he asked.

He shook his head, unable to process what he'd been told, and Zav just looked on helplessly. Jonah squared his shoulders.

"Show me. Give me proof," he demanded. "I saw your wings... you can fly. We flew! Oh God, we flew, and those other angels were after us? Why?"

Zav made to take his hand again, to calm him as his breathing hitched, but Jonah shied away. He held out the mug to ward him off, and Zav took the hint and kept his distance. Instead, he stood up and took a few steps back.

He rolled his shoulders and turned away from Jonah, letting him see the wings etched on his skin. They covered the length of his back and the back of his arms until they ended just above his elbows. Zav let one wing unfurl, peeling away soundlessly, before doing the same with the other one. He extended them both until the tips touched the ceiling then drew them back close to his body.

Jonah's gasp behind him was equal parts awe and fear.

"God," he breathed, making Zav wince.

He turned to face the thunderstruck man.

"Your wings are black," Jonah observed absentmindedly.

His hand crept out almost unconsciously, and Zav let him feel the feathers between his fingers.

Jonah sucked in a sharp breath as his gaze shot up to Zav in realization.

"Those angels were after us... after you. You're the devil!" he shrieked.

He clambered up over the sofa's arm and nearly fell as he rushed to get away from Zav.

"Zephon," Zav pleaded.

"Don't call me that!"

"Jonah, please listen!"

Jonah rushed toward the front door, but Zav was there in a flash, blocking his way.

"You can't leave, not now."

"It's not safe," another voice said.

Zav looked over Jonah's shoulder to see Pen standing there with an unreadable look on his face. His wings were unfolded and resting against his back. Zav knew not to assume that Pen would have black wings like he had, and he'd expected the ashen-gray of a Fallen's wings. He was floored to see how wrong he was when Pen's remained pure white.

"It's not safe for you out there," he repeated.

Pen held out a hand, and something about him must have triggered something in Jonah that said the other man was safe because he calmed down and laid his hand in Pen's.

Zav hovered around them as Pen led the shaken man back into the living room, pulling his wings back in as he sat beside Jonah.

“Tell me again. Explain to me what’s going on,” Jonah pleaded.

He grasped Pen’s hand tightly, as if seeking an anchor in a storm-tossed sea, and though it pained Zav not to be the one to comfort him, he knew that Jonah’s burgeoning trust in him had been shattered.

Zav eased himself down into the armchair opposite them and held out his hands in appeal, willing Jonah to believe.

“It is as I’ve told you. You are Zephon, my beloved angel, who saw something worthy of love in a devil like me.”

Jonah still looked unwilling to accept this. He shook his head and refused to look at Zav.

“But you are... this goes against everything I’ve always known, what I’ve been taught. How am I to believe that there could be love between an angel and a devil? It sounds absurd!”

A clapping disturbed them, and Zav looked up to see his brother leaning against the doorway with a mocking grin as he applauded Jonah.

“Bravo! I asked myself the very same thing. I thought, ‘how could such a thing happen, Dyn?’ And you know what answer I came up with?” he asked, though he didn’t wait for any of them to respond. “It couldn’t possibly. And I speak from experience.”

“Dyn,” Pen warned.

“We devils always have that cloud of suspicion hanging over our heads. Evil, deceitful, traitorous, vile things who couldn’t possibly know love or tenderness, yearning or sorrow. Or heartbreak,” he continued, his voice ominously low.

Pen let out a frustrated noise and pointed at Dyn accusingly.

“Stop making this about you.”

Dyn ignored him. “Imagine my surprise when my beloved brother claimed to love his enemy, and said enemy professed the same.”

A fallen pin could have been heard in the room after that.

“Do you know why you’re here, Jonah?” Dyn asked gently, his diatribe finished. “You are here because you dared to love a devil and, in doing so, were banished for refusing to deny that love.”

A tear ran down Jonah's cheek, and he brushed it away roughly.

"I don't know what to believe anymore."

Zav looked away miserably. "I'm sorry."

The silence was thick around them as they each became lost in their own thoughts. Eventually, Jonah shifted and retrieved his hand from Pen's. He took a deep breath and relaxed against the couch.

"What about those angels from earlier? You said before that you have permission to be here and look for me. So why were they after us?" he asked Zav.

It was Pen who answered.

"While Zav has the support of the majority of angels, Michael and his Council included, there are those who think your love is an affront to their ideals. These are the Black Guards—rogues."

"And they've already shown they will do anything to keep us apart, even putting innocent humans at risk," Zav said. "To them, you are better off dead than with someone like me."

Jonah winced, then it was as if a light bulb went off, and his expression grew troubled. "Those accidents weren't accidents, were they?"

"No."

"I knew something was wrong when strange things started happening, even before the car that tried to hit me or the scaffolding."

Zav was alarmed.

"What other things?"

Jonah shrugged. "Like a bookcase falling on me when it should've been bolted to the wall, or me slipping down the stairs, feeling like I was pushed... little things that you wouldn't think too strange. I thought I was just clumsy, but it was more than that, right?"

It took every ounce of Zav's power not to rush outside and find Caspiel and his little band of troublemakers.

"How long has this been happening?" Pen asked.

Jonah stuck out his bottom lip as he thought about it. "Since perhaps last month," he said.

“I got here around that time,” Zav pointed out. “But there was nothing before that?”

“I’ve always been accident-prone ever since I was kid, but nothing serious enough to cause injury. Nowadays, I’m not able to walk away without a scrape or a sprained wrist.”

Dyn caught his brother’s eye and shook his head tightly, gesturing for him to stay seated when all he wanted was to get into a fight.

“All the more reason for you to stay here, at least until this thing with the Black Guards is resolved,” Dyn told Jonah.

Jonah’s eyes widened, and he clutched at Pen’s arm. He gave Zav an alarmed look. “Didn’t I tell you about the fire?” he asked. “I told you I had dreams of being trapped in it, and it came true!”

Zav nodded as Pen and his brother looked at Jonah curiously.

“You dreamed it would happen?” Pen asked him.

“Uh, yes.”

“Did you dream about the other accidents, too?”

“Yes.”

Zav got up to kneel beside the couch and hesitantly reached for Jonah’s arm. The other man allowed him to hold his hand with just a small, reflexive twitch as if he wanted to pull away, and Zav gave him a grateful smile.

“I won’t lie and apologize for finding you, but I’m sorry that you’ve been hurt because of me. I’ll do everything I can to keep you safe,” he said, letting his love shine through.

Jonah met his eyes for a moment, then pulled his hand away. He bit his lip and winced as Zav sat back on his heels with a hurt look.

“I’m sorry,” Jonah apologized. “But it’s a lot for me to take in right now, and I can’t wrap my head around all of this.”

Zav nodded and pushed himself up. He turned to go back to his chair, but Jonah stopped him with a light touch to his arm. He glanced down to see Jonah give him a pleading look.

“Give me time,” he requested.

“You can have all the time you need,” Zav told him.

Pen cleared his throat and gave Jonah an encouraging smile. He patted his knee then used it to help himself up.

“Come on, I think a good night’s rest will do us all good. You can have Khatun’s room,” he said.

“She’s spending the night downstairs?” Zav asked, wondering how they would introduce the Nephilim-born giant to Jonah.

If they even would.

“Yes,” was all Pen said.

He helped Jonah up the stairs and showed him to his room with Zav trailing after them, looking a bit lost. They got Jonah settled in, then Pen left with a quiet “good night.”

Zav did the same and bid Jonah sweet dreams, not missing the irony of it. Jonah’s voice stopped him before he could get to the door.

“I know I don’t have any right to ask this, but will you stay? At least until I fall asleep,” he asked. “It’ll make the dark a little less frightening if there’s someone in here with me.”

Zav considered him, finding it strangely endearing to see Jonah with the blankets pulled up so that only his eyes were showing. He took a deep breath and closed the door before settling himself in the straight-backed chair in the corner.

“I’ll stay for as long as you want me to.”

“Zav,” Jonah whispered. His voice cracked, and Zav could see his eyes glisten with unshed tears.

“It’s all right, love. Go to sleep. I’m here to keep you safe.”

Jonah sniffled, but nodded gamely. “Okay. Good night... and thank you.”

Zav was roused from a light doze when Jonah sat up abruptly with a shout. He was on his feet and by his side before he even realized that he’d gotten out of the chair.

Jonah’s eyes were wide and his mouth open in silent terror as he struggled to release himself from the grip of his nightmare. Zav shook him and called his name until he snapped himself out of whatever fright he was trapped in.

He clutched at the front of Zav's shirt and let loose a sob. Zav embraced him tightly and combed his fingers through Jonah's hair as he rocked the other man in his arms.

"Don't leave. Don't leave," Jonah said in a panic when he shifted.

"I'm just moving to get comfortable, sweetheart."

He sat with his back against the wall and settled Jonah protectively in the crook of his arm. Jonah's cries eventually petered out, and he tilted the other man's face toward him, so he could wipe his tears away.

"Is it another one of those dreams?" he asked hesitantly.

Jonah buried his face in Zav's shoulder and shuddered. It was confirmation enough for Zav, who tightened his arm around him. He waited to see if Jonah would tell him.

"It won't be fire and brimstone, but it'll be close," he finally said.

Zav didn't know what to say. He already knew that a confrontation loomed in the horizon, so what Jonah said didn't surprise him. He would make sure that the rogues felt every bit of his wrath when they finally met.

Jonah pulled away, so he could prop himself up on one hand.

"We're about to start a war, you know."

"If that's what it takes to keep you safe," Zav told him.

The other man huffed a halfhearted laugh and shook his head. "You always were a reckless one," he said fondly, then frowned. "I don't know how I know that, but I do."

Zav was reluctant to get his hopes up. "Maybe some part of you remembers."

Jonah put a hand to his chest. "I don't feel any different. Tell me something... anything. Maybe it will help jog my memory."

"I'm not supposed to influence you in any way. You're not meant to know about any of this."

"Well, it's a little late for that, isn't it? Those angels out there kind of made it impossible to keep any of this from me," Jonah scoffed.

Zav couldn't help the smile on his face despite the seriousness of their situation. "You always were the stubborn one."

Jonah ducked his head. “I don’t know if it’s because my subconscious remembers, but I’m comfortable around you. Even when we’d just met. A part of me—maybe my human part—thinks I should be running away from you.”

Zav understood what he meant. It would be hard for Jonah to let go of his human preconceptions about beings like him, especially since he was a man of God.

“But being here with you, like this, there’s a part of me that says I’m safe when I’m with you.”

“I’ll always protect you.”

“You already have... several times,” Jonah reminded him.

Zav rested their foreheads together. “Don’t force yourself to remember, it will come to you when the time is right. Trust yourself. I’m with you no matter what.”

Jonah nodded and closed his eyes, though Zav could see teardrops gathering on the corner of his eyes.

“I’ve always felt that there was something different about me, like something was missing. I wasn’t quite whole. I guess this explains it, huh?”

Dawn wasn’t far off, and though the commotion outside had subsided hours ago, Zav could still see the lights of fire trucks in the distance. Someone ought to have noticed Jonah was missing by now. He wondered if their witnesses even remembered Zav’s careless flight from the burning abbey, or if they chalked it up to a hallucination in their distress.

He’d see if Pen could find out for him later. Right now, he planned to get Jonah back to sleep. The other man looked exhausted and was slumped uncomfortably on his side as he dozed off.

“Come on, lie down properly. I’ll watch over you as you sleep,” he coaxed.

Jonah allowed him to maneuver him around, knuckling his eyes tiredly. He let out a huge yawn then took Zav’s hand in his when he sat down beside him.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Zav assured him.

“I know,” Jonah said. “Your touch brings me comfort, though.”

Zav squeezed his fingers lightly then brought his other hand up to rest on Jonah’s head. He gently ran his fingers through Jonah’s hair until his breathing evened out and he fell into a peaceful sleep.

He closed his eyes and thought of his brother. Moments later, the door opened silently, and Dyn came in.

“You’ll need to make preparations to leave soon,” Zav told him quietly.

“What is it? What did you find out?”

Zav glanced down at Jonah. He leaned down to press a kiss on his forehead then straightened up to look at Dyn.

“Jonah has seen something. Whatever it is will happen soon.”

Dyn looked uncharacteristically worried. “The others will be ready to go whenever they need to, but why can’t you both go with us? From what Khatun tells me, this place is safe from prying, angelic eyes.”

Zav had considered this before—to just take Jonah and make a run for it—but he didn’t want them to live like that, constantly looking over their shoulders and always worrying about Jonah’s safety.

“No,” he said, then sent his true motives through their bond.

“Zav!” Dyn protested.

“Shh, you’ll wake him. We’ll talk more later when he’s awake, and Pen can sit with him.”

Dyn gave Zav a warning glare, then left. Zav just sighed and continued petting Jonah, watching him sleep as the sky began to lighten.

“That’s insane! Tell him, Pen. That’s the craziest plan I have ever heard of in my entire existence!”

Zav watched calmly from his perch by the fireplace while his upset brother wore a hole in the carpet. Dyn paused in his pacing and glared at their host.

“Tell him,” Dyn hissed.

Pen turned to give Zav a disapproving look. “It is a foolish plan. How do you expect to take on the rogues yourself when you know that you’re outmatched?”

Zav thought his plan was a good one. Dyn would take everyone else to Khatun’s cave, and Zav would confront the Black Guards, who he was sure would chase after them.

“Let Dyn stay and help. I’ll get everyone out,” Pen said.

Zav glared at them both. “I may be... handicapped by the limitations of the contract, but I am not as incompetent as you both think I am. There are other ways to fight besides using brute strength or magical prowess.

“I just need to distract them enough to give you time to get to the Nuur. I will meet you there when it’s safe,” he added.

Dyn ranted and raved but in the end was forced to agree to his plan. Zav made him promise. That didn’t mean that his brother was happy about it, threatening to tell Jonah in hopes that the other man would step in and get Zav to change his mind. Zav hissed threateningly at him and sent a shock of electricity through the air that made Dyn’s eyes glow in warning. His own arms lit up with runes as a thin film of heat haze shimmered along his arms.

“Stop it, you two!” Pen said, stepping in between them and pushing Dyn away. He glowered at Dyn. “You’re not burning my house down.”

Zav stepped away, chastened, and returned to his seat. His brother rounded on him with a snarl before he turned away to leave.

Which left Zav under Pen’s scrutiny as the *iyr* leaned back and watched him.

“I don’t like it,” Pen finally said.

“You don’t have to.”

Pen sighed. “You’re right, I don’t, but I have started to think of you as a friend so please take my opinion into consideration.”

Zav was surprised. They had all fallen into an easy camaraderie for the past month, and he thought of Khatun and Pen as more than acquaintances. He could almost say that he considered them friends, and to think that Pen felt the same was a good feeling.

“What would you have me do, then?”

“Leave Dyn behind. I’m more than capable of getting the others out of the line of fire.”

“But—”

Pen gave him a sharp look. “You’re operating on the assumption that I am helpless. I am still an angel, and though I have let my powers go unused for a long time, that doesn’t mean they have diminished.”

Zav considered this. He did assume that one of the reasons for Pen's reluctance to attract the unwanted attention of his brothers, besides keeping Nymi secret, was that his powers were severely curtailed.

"And Nymi isn't helpless, either." Pen grinned.

"Oh?"

Pen shook his head, a mysterious smile on his face. He changed the subject.

"Dyn went out earlier. The abbey suffered severe damage, and the monks all know that Jonah is missing, but they don't know whether he's dead or not. Some witnesses claim that they saw an angel fly him out of the fire."

Zav smothered a laugh, highly amused by the irony of being mistaken for one of them.

"Is there hysteria? Vigils? Prayers?"

"Everyone is going around claiming to see angels... in the mirror, in their coffee, in the clouds."

Zav had a thought. "All of this attention can't be good for the rogues. Everyone will be vigilant and on the lookout for more sightings."

"That could work to our advantage, assuming that they'll be more cautious about going around. They won't want to attract Michael's attention."

They were interrupted by Jonah. He'd woken up hours ago but remained cooped up in his room, claiming that he needed to think things over. Zav had reluctantly left him alone.

"Let me get you something to eat," Pen said kindly.

Jonah thanked him and waited until he left, before turning to Zav.

"I couldn't help but overhear... the others must be wondering where I am. Do you think I should let them know I'm okay?"

"That might not be a good idea. We'll need you to lay low, especially since the rogues know that you escaped. They'll be even more determined now."

Jonah stuck his lip out but nodded in agreement. "So, what do we do now?"

"We'll let the excitement die down a little, then we make our move. Our friend has a safe place for us to go to in Mongolia."

Pen came back with a sandwich, which he handed to Jonah. Then he walked to the window and peered out.

“Khatun isn’t back from the market yet. It shouldn’t take her this long,” he told Zav worriedly.

Zav frowned. Everyone had been very careful whenever they needed to be outside, aware of prying, angelic eyes and making an effort to shake off potential tails.

“Should someone go out and look around?” Pen asked.

“Send Dyn,” Zav suggested. “He’s the one most likely to get past undetected.”

Pen nodded and made to leave, but before he could step outside the living room, the front door opened, and a wide-eyed Khatun rushed in. Zav was on his feet in an instant, and he and Pen watched, alarmed, as she locked the door behind her with shaking fingers. Khatun put her back to the door as Pen hurried to her side.

“What happened?”

“I was leaving the market when I bumped into someone, and when I looked up, it was one of them. He said he knew what I am,” she explained breathlessly. “I tried to lose him in the crowds, but I’m not sure that I wasn’t followed.”

Jonah, too, had risen from his seat and was wringing his hands. He looked at them worriedly.

“Zav?”

Zav reached out for his outstretched hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. He looked at Pen and gestured toward the cupboard.

“Get Dyn.”

The atmosphere in the house was tense while they waited for Dyn to return from his surveillance. Khatun had immediately gone downstairs to be with Nymi, ashen faced and shook-up, and that left Zav and Pen with a concerned Jonah. He watched Khatun leave, then turned to Zav.

“Will your brother be okay?” he asked.

“He’ll be fine. Dyn is exceptional at remaining undetected when he wants to.”

Pen was restless. He sat on the couch with Jonah, then got up and drifted toward the window in agitation. Zav watched him twitch the curtains aside and peep out before replacing them with a huff.

“He’s fine, Pen.”

“How would you know?” Pen snapped at him. “How are we to know if he’s safe or not?”

Zav raised an eyebrow. He could feel Jonah eyeing them curiously, and he turned to look at him, though his words were for Pen.

“Because he’s my brother, and we have a connection, as we all do with our other brothers. Surely it hasn’t been that long that you’ve forgotten?” he asked, alluding to the fact that angels and devils can sense their own kind. Their connection could be likened to a spider and its web... when one string is disturbed, the spider feels the reverberations no matter where it is on the web.

His connection with Dyn remained undisturbed.

Pen flushed, and he backed off with a guilty frown. “I—I have forgotten. It’s been a long time since...”

Zav understood his concern, having some idea that Pen and his brother had a history together.

“I wouldn’t still be here if he were in need of help,” he assured Pen. “In fact, I’d say he’s enjoying skulking about, snooping around under their noses.”

Pen cracked a smile and relaxed. “Yes, well, Deynaris has always been cocky like that.”

They sat quietly for a while until Zav noticed that Jonah must have gone back upstairs.

“How are things going between you and Jonah?” Pen asked.

“He feels conflicted. A part of him knows he can trust me, but another part still has trouble believing.”

Pen leaned in and patted his knee. “His whole world’s been turned upside down. Give him time.”

A noise from the kitchen put them on edge, and Zav stood up to put himself in front of Pen. A crash sounded, then cursing in a familiar voice, and they both let out annoyed sighs. Dyn poked his head around the doorway and grinned.

“Did you lock the door?” Pen asked.

“Did I lock the door, he asks,” Dyn scoffed. “Of course I locked the door, though I don’t know why you’re fooling yourself into thinking that locked doors will stop them if they want in.”

Pen narrowed his eyes and snapped back at him, “It makes me feel better, all right?”

Zav cleared his throat and moved to put himself between them to head off the argument he could feel building. He nodded for his brother to take a seat.

“How did it go? What did you learn?”

“Everyone’s on the lookout for Jonah, and people are still claiming they saw him in the arms of an angel.” He laughed, amused. Then he grew serious and leaned forward in his chair. He clasped his hands together and brought them to his lips, looking over them to Zav.

“But that’s not all. I went everywhere around town and even did a quick leap to the neighboring towns, but nothing... no angels,” he told them. “I found no trace of them, save for an old whiff of angelic stink where Khatun said she met one.”

Pen and Zav shared a glance, but it was Pen who asked, “What does that mean? Are they all gone?”

Dyn shrugged. “Either they’re laying low just like we are, or there’s something else going on.”

“Just because they’re not around, it doesn’t mean we should let our guard down,” Zav said. “I wouldn’t put it past them to pop out when we’re not paying attention.”

The others nodded. They agreed that Khatun should stay inside from now on, and that Dyn and Zav would get what they needed from the market or anywhere else. Zav brought up the bookstore, and whether or not it would be safe for Pen to keep it open.

“I have one part-time employee I can ask to come in full time for now, but it’ll look suspicious if I don’t come in once in a while.”

Zav reluctantly agreed. He knew that Pen was a member of the town’s book club, and that he was well liked by its group of elderly women who made it a point to have a cup of tea with him now and then. Dyn looked displeased, but Zav shot him a look. The brothers agreed to take turns watching both the house and the store when Pen was there.

Zav stood and thanked his brother, before excusing himself to check on Jonah. He left them quietly bickering among themselves and took the stairs two at a time, a smile on his face as he knocked on the door that was now Jonah’s

bedroom. There was no answer, but Jonah could be asleep, so he carefully opened the door a crack and then more fully, so he could step inside.

The bed was neatly made, and the chair put back under the small writing desk in the corner. Zav looked around, but the room was small, and he hardly thought Jonah would be hiding under the low bed or inside the small wardrobe on the opposite wall. It didn't stop him from looking anyway, even running to the locked window to look down on the empty street.

“Jonah?”

He didn't worry, though. Not yet. He checked the bathroom, then the other rooms, before making his way back downstairs. The kitchen was empty, as was the other bathroom and the tiny dining room/sitting room. He backtracked his way into the living room where Dyn and Pen were still arguing about something he couldn't hear.

“Have you seen Jonah?”

Pen broke off midsentence and glanced at him, confused. “Isn't he upstairs?”

Zav shook his head, panic slowly settling in as Dyn confirmed that he hadn't seen the other man either.

“You checked upstairs?”

“Yes!”

Dyn got up and made a circuit around the first floor to recheck the rooms while Pen went upstairs to do the same. Zav trailed after him. They met all met back in the hallway, and Zav got his shirt caught in the open cupboard door. He yanked at it in agitation and heard it rip, but didn't care.

“You don't think he left, do you?” Dyn asked.

“We would have known if he used the front or back doors. Could he have gone out the window?”

Zav grabbed his hair and pulled in frustration. He turned away to walk to the front door and see if he could catch up to Jonah, who must have slipped out while he and Pen were distracted. A hand grabbed him before he could take a step, and he snarled, but Dyn jerked him back and shushed him.

“Listen,” he said.

They stood there in the hallway, straining to hear, but they didn't have to. The rumbling beneath their feet was coming through the floorboards loud and clear. Zav whirled to look at the open door of the cupboard and before he knew it, he was halfway down the stairs with Pen and Dyn close on his heels.

Chapter Four

The tunnel had never seemed so long as now, when Zav was nearly out of his mind with worry. Pen was just as tense as he was, nearly tripping over Zav's heels as the three of them all rushed through the dim passageway.

They heard Jonah exclaim something muffled by the solid rock walls, and Nymi's voice followed, just as unclear. Zav almost lost his balance when he rounded the bend a little too fast, but he caught himself in time.

Light spilled out of the partially open door.

"Jonah!" he yelled, pushing the door hard enough for it to bang against the wall. Pen and Dyn spilled in behind him.

Jonah looked up from where he sat on the floor, his hand in Nymi's much larger one.

"*Abba!* This is Jonah, my new friend," Nymi said. He beamed at his father proudly from over the top of Jonah's head.

The three of them gaped at the scene—Jonah and Nymi on the floor with Khatun watching them from the armchair.

Zav let out a relieved sigh as he made his way toward Jonah with wobbly legs. He collapsed beside him and pulled Jonah into a tight hug.

"You scared me," he said shakily. "I thought you'd gone upstairs, but you weren't there. You weren't anywhere I could find."

Jonah squeezed him and ran a calming hand down his back.

"I'm all right, Zav. I'm sorry I worried you," Jonah apologized.

"He followed me here," Khatun explained.

Zav stood up and held out a hand for Jonah to take, then led him to sit with him on the couch. He was a little puzzled—and just a bit hurt—that Jonah seemed to be taking the Nephilim's existence better than he had Zav's. He couldn't think of a way to ask why without coming off sounding like a fool.

Luckily, he didn't have to. Jonah fidgeted beside him, seeming to want to tell them something but hesitating. He picked at his shirt, then drummed his fingers in a rapid staccato against his leg. Zav reached to still his restless hand and squeezed it comfortingly.

“What’s wrong?” he whispered.

Jonah looked around, but everyone else was absorbed in the story Nymi was telling them, so he leaned close to Zav and whispered back, “I’ve seen him before, in my dream. That’s why I wasn’t afraid of Nymi.”

“You dreamed of him?”

“Yes.”

Jonah bit his lip and looked like he wanted to say something else, but an outburst from Dyn interrupted him, and they both looked up to see his brother and Pen arguing yet again with Nymi looking on with big, green eyes. Zav sighed in irritation, but Jonah tightened the hold around his and asked in a quiet voice.

“They sure like to argue, don’t they?”

Zav fought a chuckle.

“It must give them a thrill. What do humans call it? Foreplay?”

Jonah blushed, but he nodded and glanced at them from the corner of his eye. Then he turned to Zav and whispered in his ear.

“Do you think we can go upstairs, just the two of us? I have something to tell you,” he said as he bit his lip and gave Zav a small, nervous smile.

Zav immediately stood, bringing Jonah with him. He caught Khatun’s eye and pointed at him and Jonah then indicated that they were going upstairs. She nodded and gave them a thumbs-up before turning her attention back to the argument in front of her. Zav held Jonah’s hand all the way upstairs and would have led him to the living room, but Jonah steered him toward the stairs to the second floor instead.

He let Jonah lead him into his room, and they sat side by side on the bed, with their backs leaning against the wall.

“So…” he said, trying to give Jonah an opening.

“Okay, so you know I have these dreams, and that I said I dreamed of Nymi?” Jonah blurted.

Zav nodded and Jonah took a deep breath. He shifted, so he was sitting on his hip and he could face Zav, though he kept his gaze somewhere above Zav’s shoulder where the wallpaper was starting to peel, and a small crack could be seen in the plaster underneath.

“This morning, when I fell back asleep after you’d left, I had a dream about him. We were swimming in a lake... everyone was, actually,” he confided. “We were all swimming, and this giant jumps in and creates a huge wave, and we’re laughing so hard.”

He gazed at Zav with a tender look. “We were all so happy.”

Zav smiled back at him gently.

“It’s something to look forward to because it’ll be tough from now on,” Jonah told him.

“That dream you had before... last night... will you tell me?”

He frowned when Jonah looked away, his shoulders tense and hunched around his ears.

“Share your burden with me,” Zav encouraged. “Let me lessen your strain.”

Jonah nodded stiffly then nestled himself tightly against Zav’s side, and he wrapped a comforting arm around his shoulders.

“Promise me you won’t do anything foolish. Whatever it is that you’re planning to do... promise me,” he asked Zav ominously.

Zav’s chest tightened in dread. He swallowed hard and nodded, nuzzling the top of Jonah’s head.

“I promise,” he said. Right after he said it, he knew it was a promise he wouldn’t be able to keep, but Jonah relaxed.

“I dreamed I was running down a tunnel with Khatun and Pen, and there was fighting going on above us. We got to Nymi, but a rogue followed us downstairs. There was fire and chaos all around.

“And I couldn’t get to you,” he said, voice breaking.

Zav wrapped him in his arms and rocked him gently, but Jonah took a deep, calming breath and got himself under control.

“Do you know when?” Zav asked, unsure whether he wanted to know or not.

Jonah shook his head. “I never do.”

The silence that followed was heavy, and Zav wanted to comfort him some more, but didn’t know how. A thought came to him, and he cleared his throat, nudging Jonah lightly with his shoulder, making Jonah look up at him curiously.

“Have you ever dreamed of me? At least once?”

He was surprised to see Jonah blush and duck his head.

“What?” he asked with a smile.

Jonah shook his head.

“Never?”

Zav was charmed when Jonah’s cheeks darkened even more. He hid his face behind Zav’s arm, making him chuckle in amusement.

“I just thought, with all the doom and gloom you dream of, that it’s time you had a sweet one,” he teased.

Jonah made a small sound, then lifted his head enough to peer up at him. He mumbled something that Zav couldn’t hear.

“Hmmm?”

“I said, maybe I have, but it’s hard to be sure in the dark,” Jonah told him impishly, though the blush remained on his cheeks.

It surprised Zav that Jonah would be bold enough to tease him back since he seemed shy and quiet, but it also heartened him. It was another hint of Zephon shining through. The angel was cheeky and audacious, but Jonah seemed to be the opposite, as Zav had seen so far.

“Do I have to worry about someone else, then?” He narrowed his eyes. He knew otherwise, but it was fun to tease Jonah.

It felt good to have even just a bit of the easy intimacy they used to have in this difficult time.

Jonah pulled away and sat up a little, so he could give Zav an incredulous look.

“Really?”

He poked Zav’s arm. “I’m not sure I can handle you. Why would I want another?”

That pulled a surprised laugh out of Zav. He hooked an arm around Jonah’s neck and moved close to whisper in his ear.

“Sweetheart, you can handle me anytime you want. I promise I won’t fight back,” he purred.

Jonah pushed him away roughly.

“Don’t say things like that,” he complained, hands coming up to rub his reddened cheeks. He shoved Zav gently when he laughed at him. “I think you just like to see me embarrass myself.”

“No, darling,” Zav told him gently. He caught Jonah’s hand in his and brought it up to kiss the back of his hand. “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

Jonah gave him a fond look before he grew serious and withdrew his hand.

“I’m just waiting for lightning to strike me dead,” he said.

Zav sat up. “Jonah—”

“Wait, hear me out, okay?” Jonah interrupted. “I’ve always known I was interested in men, but I came from a conservative, religious family, so there was never any doubt that I would hide myself.”

He gave Zav a sad smile. “Joining the Order was both a way to escape my family and also to please them. I needed all the help I can get to ‘purge my sinful desires,’” he said, making quotation marks with his fingers in the air.

Zav couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Zephon had managed to be reborn in a life where he’d need the approval of others to be able to love freely.

He hesitated, unsure what to say that wouldn’t make Jonah feel slighted. Jonah saved him from having to say anything.

“But it’s not, is it?” he asked.

Zav was confused. “Not what?”

“I thought I’d done a good job of repressing myself so far. Then I met you.”

“Is that a good thing?” Zav asked hesitantly. He wasn’t sure what he’d do if Jonah said it wasn’t.

“You made me realize that love is a wonderful thing. How could it be a sin we need to apologize for?”

“Exactly.”

“It blows my mind to know that you’ve gone through all this trouble to find me,” he said, starting to tear up. “How is it that you think I’m worth it, when I don’t remember how we used to be?”

Zav cupped his face in both hands and pressed their foreheads together.

“You’re worth everything because I love you. That lightning strike you mentioned? That’s me coming down on those who would try to keep us apart,” he promised.

Jonah stared at him for a long time, then he nodded earnestly.

“Wow, okay,” he said. “Can I ask you for something, though?”

“Anything.”

A shy smile touched his lips. “Do you think I could have a look at your wings again? I was too busy freaking out to appreciate it.”

Zav laughed indulgently. He scooted off the bed and stood up, turning his back to Jonah. He glanced over his shoulder and gave Jonah a wink before pulling his shirt over his head, baring the tattoos on his back.

The gasp behind him sounded more impressed than frightened. He jumped when he felt a light touch on his back, fingers trailing up to his shoulder and down his arms.

“Beautiful,” Jonah murmured.

Zav looked over his shoulder and met Jonah’s eyes, drinking in the wonder in that gaze, before turning away to let him continue his exploration. A shiver ran through him when Jonah traced the individual feathers with the pad of one finger.

“Absolutely fascinating,” Jonah said, then rested his palm on the bend of one wing right over his shoulder.

Zav soaked in the warmth of the hand before reaching up to lay his own on top of Jonah’s.

“How do they come out?”

He flexed his back, feeling the tattoo of his wings ripple and peel off, starting at the larger feathers of his primaries all the way up to the smaller tertiaries and coverts. Jonah stepped back to allow him more space as his wings unfurled.

Zav couldn’t spread them fully in the small room, but he let them stretch out and flap a little just to hear Jonah make another amazed sound.

“It blows my mind!” he exclaimed. “I don’t suppose I can persuade you to take me out for a ride? Or is it take me out flying?”

Zav turned around all the way and looked at him with regret. “When all of this is over, I’ll fly you wherever you want,” he promised.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Jonah reached out a hand to pet his right wing, and Zav let the other one curl around the human, pulling him closer into the shelter of his arms and wings.

“It’s not what I expected for someone like you to have. I thought it’d be... you know,” Jonah told him with an embarrassed shrug.

“Leathery and featherless?”

“Yeah. So, no horns and pointy tails?” he asked almost seriously.

Zav laughed and shook his head. “Sorry to disappoint, love.”

“Not disappointed. More like relieved, actually.”

“It’s our defining feature; angels have white wings, and we have black. The neutral ones, or *iyr* as we call them—of which Penemue is one—have more of an ashen-gray color.” He tilted his head to the side and frowned. “Though come to think of it, Pen’s wings have stayed white.”

“What about the rogues?”

“Their wings would start to transition into gray, too, if they haven’t already. Harming humans means they’re not exactly immaculate anymore, though they’re claiming to do it for your spiritual well-being. That would be enough cause to keep them out of the devils’ circle,” he explained.

Jonah listened intently, hands buried in the feathers.

“What would it take for them to join the club, so to speak?” he asked.

“Us devils just don’t care. Humans could do whatever they want, what does it matter to us? Angels just need to stop being the meddlesome busybodies they are and leave the humans to go about their business, and not worry so much about helping them be perfectly good,” Zav scoffed. “Humans aren’t built to be perfect.”

Zav could see Jonah getting a little uncomfortable with their conversation, so he changed the subject.

He cleared his throat. “So, is there any chance you’d tell me what dreams you’ve had of me?”

Sure enough, Jonah's blush was back, but he looked up to meet Zav's eyes. Zav gazed down at him fondly. He brushed gentle fingers along the curve of Jonah's cheekbone and heard him take a long, deep breath.

Jonah's lips parted slightly, and Zav trailed his thumb down his cheek. He traced Jonah's bottom lip, watching him carefully for any signs that he might be going too far. But Jonah merely returned his gaze, then brought his lips together to brush against Zav's thumb.

The feel of Jonah's lips against his finger made him want to press his own lips on them. He decided to take a chance. Zav leaned down, then stopped a breath away, suddenly unsure whether his advance would be welcome.

"Yes," Jonah whispered, making him wonder if he'd spoken his thoughts out loud.

There was a challenge in Jonah's eyes that gave way to uncertainty when Zav didn't immediately take action. Zav closed the remaining distance between them, desperate to banish that look from his eyes, and kissed him.

It was just a short, close-mouthed kiss that was over too soon, but it nearly set him on fire. He felt the warmth of it spread throughout his body, lodging deep in his chest where his heart was beating a little faster than before. He could feel Jonah's beating just as fast under his other hand.

He watched Jonah's eyes open and gaze at him with a nearly painful wonder, and he couldn't help himself. Zav gave him another kiss, and another, little pecks that lingered until Jonah was opening his mouth underneath his, and he was giving back just as much as he was taking.

They stood locked together, bathed in the colors of the late afternoon sun. Dyn and the others were downstairs, and the rogues were somewhere out there, but here in this small room, with Jonah in his arms, Zav had never been more content.

He could feel Jonah's hands digging into the spot where his wings emerged from his back, sending shivers down his spine. Zav cupped his jaw with both hands and tilted Jonah's face higher, so he could kiss him more deeply.

Jonah pulled away first. He took a deep breath and gave Zav a smile as he lifted his fingers up to his lips. Zav withdrew his wings, feeling them flatten against his back before merging into his skin.

He ran his fingers through Jonah's hair and down the back of his head, leaving them to rest on his nape.

“Something to inspire sweet dreams tonight, sweetheart,” he said with a cheeky smile.

Jonah huffed out a laugh and brought his hands up to Zav’s chest, pushing at him lightly.

“You’re too sure of yourself.”

“Why, wasn’t it good for you? Didn’t it rock your world, baby?” Zav asked with mock concern.

The other man stepped back and retrieved Zav’s shirt. Jonah handed it to him and waited until he’d put it over his head before answering.

“Yeah, it was good. But it’ll seriously take more than that to rock my world,” he replied.

Zav cursed as his head got stuck in the wrong hole. By the time he managed to get the shirt on properly, Jonah was already out in the hallway, leaving him with the echo of his amused chuckles for company.

The kiss seemed to relax Jonah, making him more at ease in the others’ company. He would joke around with Dyn and visit Nymi whenever he wasn’t with Zav.

Zav continued to watch over him at night and was happy to see Jonah sleep uninterrupted more often than not, though nightmares still sometimes woke him up. Though Jonah refused to tell him what they were about when he himself asked.

Two weeks after the fire, Zav left him under Dyn’s watchful eye and slipped out to make the rounds around town. The hype about the angels was slowly dying down though Jonah’s disappearance was still a mystery, and some of the townspeople came up with a few explanations as to what happened to him, including alien abduction.

Jonah had found that extremely amusing.

Dyn and Zav still hadn’t found any traces of the rogues, though they didn’t let their guard down.

It was early morning, and the sky was overcast with rain on the horizon. Zav made his way across the rooftops stealthily. He could see a curtain of rain rapidly approaching from the east, and the wind picked up steadily around him.

The few people who were outside were hurrying to finish their errands before the coming storm.

He jumped down into an alleyway just as the first drops of rain started to fall, then made his way out onto the sidewalk casually. No one looked his way since everyone else was scurrying to get out of the downpour.

Zav had just passed Pen's closed bookstore when the door of the store next to it opened, and an older gentleman stepped out, his arms laden with boxes and shopping bags. Zav lunged in time to catch one of the boxes before it could fall in a puddle.

"Oh, oh my!" the man cried out in alarm as the rest of his load shifted precariously.

Zav steadied them with a hand, then thought better of it and took the boxes from him, instead.

"Let me help you," he said.

"Thank you. Here, if you could hold on to those for a few minutes, I'll be extremely grateful."

Zav nodded and trailed after him. They walked in companionable silence for several blocks before stopping at a narrow house opposite the abbey. He followed the older man inside and carefully wiped his feet on the mat.

"Put it over here," the man said, pointing at the hallway table. "Why don't you take off your shoes and your coat, and I'll make us something hot to drink."

"Please don't trouble yourself. I should be on my way," Zav protested.

"Nonsense! It's raining cats and dogs out there. At least warm yourself up with hot cocoa. Come, come, have a seat. And call me Rafe."

Rafe led him into the small sitting room and waved him toward a threadbare couch.

"I'll just be a minute," he told Zav then left, presumably to make a drink.

Zav reluctantly sat down and looked around. The house was rundown, its wallpapers yellowed and peeling. The floor had a layer of dust, and Zav watched as a spider scuttled across the large web in the corner. There were no trinkets or photos, no personal mementos.

Rafe came back with two mugs, one of which he handed to Zav, then sat down in the other chair with a pleased sigh. He saw Zav looking around curiously, and laughed.

“Sorry about the mess. I’m not too keen on housework, and it’s hard on my old bones, really.”

Zav took a sip and shook his head. “No worries.”

“So, forgive me for being nosy, but how is Pen?” Rafe asked.

Zav was surprised and instantly wary, but Rafe continued on, not seeming to realize that his guest had tensed up.

“Pen is a dear old friend of mine, and I’ve seen you coming and going from that bookstore of his. I haven’t had a chance to pop in to say hi,” he said.

He hunched over as he blew on his drink to cool it, took a sip, then straightened up to give Zav an apologetic smile.

“I’m being too snoopy, aren’t I? It’s my absolute weakness.”

Zav smiled back. “There are worse things,” he told Rafe. “He’s doing well; he’ll be going on a trip very soon.”

“Oh good, he hasn’t had a vacation in a long time. Tell him that I said hi, and that I’ve got something for him that will come in handy before long.”

“I will.”

Rafe nodded, pleased, then leaned back in his chair.

“I might go on one, too. After the repairs at the abbey are done, of course. The Abbott suddenly can’t do without my help, though how I could assist their restoration is beyond me,” he said, spreading wrinkled fingers apart in bewilderment.

Zav put his empty mug on the wobbly coffee table.

“Perhaps they need more than physical assistance. It is often said that with age comes wisdom.”

Rafe laughed heartily at that, eyes shining from underneath bushy eyebrows as he grinned at Zav.

“I like you,” he chortled. “Well, the abbey certainly needs all the help it can get. That was one nasty fire, and the worst thing is that one of the monks is still unaccounted for.”

Zav shifted nervously in his seat. “They don’t have any idea what happened to him?” he asked.

Rafe waved an impatient hand, nearly spilling his drink. “Bah, they say angels did it. Angels! Now, everyone’s going around finding them in their soup.”

Zav pinched his lips together in an effort to contain the laughter bubbling inside. Rafe watched him, shaking his head in amusement.

“Go on. I thought it was hilarious, myself,” he chuckled.

Zav let himself go, laughing at the absurdity of it all and wondering what the rogues thought of all this brouhaha. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve and snickered.

Outside, the rain had slowed down to a drizzle with just a hint of sunshine now that the heavy clouds had passed. Rafe stood from his chair and looked out the window.

“Would you look at that,” he said excitedly, pointing at something in the sky.

Zav got up to see what it was. A double rainbow hung over the abbey, forming what looked like a multicolored dome. The rain stopped abruptly, and the remaining clouds parted to let the sun shine fully. The rainbow disappeared.

“I need to be going,” Zav told him.

Rafe handed him his jacket and thanked him for his help. He walked Zav to the front door, clapping him on the shoulder.

“Spectacular rainbow... after the flood came a promise, right?” he said with a grin. “Give this to Pen, and tell him I said to take that vacation without delay.”

He handed Zav a sealed, rectangular box before opening the door for him.

“I’ll see you soon, Zav!” he called out, just as Zav reached the end of the walkway, one foot on the cobbled sidewalk.

Then he closed the door, and Zav was left standing in the street in confusion. He didn’t remember ever telling Rafe his name.

“He said that?” Pen asked. “He said to take a vacation soon?”

Zav had come home disconcerted. He’d gone half a block from Rafe’s house before turning around and returning to his door, but there had been no

answer. He'd tried the doorknob and found it unlocked, so he'd stepped inside, but there had been no sign of Rafe anywhere. It was as if Zav had dreamed the whole thing.

"Yes. Without delay, he said."

Pen looked equal parts excited and agitated. "We need to make plans to leave, if not tomorrow night then the day after. We can't afford to stay longer than that."

The other man was pacing and wringing his hands. Zav watched him with narrowed eyes.

"You know who he is."

The smile Pen gave him was full of hope.

"Help comes from unexpected places," he said, raising an eyebrow when Zav looked at him blankly. "It was his benevolence that found you sanctuary with me, and now that I think of it, him being here explains why the rogues aren't around."

Realization hit Zav suddenly.

"Angel? Which one? It would have to be a higher-ranking one to spook the Black Guards."

"Well, their antics are rather hard to ignore. I suppose all those angel sightings were bound to attract the others' attention." He grinned. "I'll give you three guesses who it could be, and the first two don't count."

Zav gave it serious thought, but Rafe's name said it all. "Raphael's always been an uncontrollable romantic," he said with a shake of his head.

"You say that as if it's a bad thing."

Jonah chose that moment to come in, and caught the tail-end of their conversation. He took the seat beside Zav and looked at him questioningly.

"What's a bad thing?" he asked worriedly.

Zav patted his knee reassuringly. "Pen's only teasing me," he said, then turned to Pen. "In fact, I'd say this works in our favor."

Jonah grabbed his hand and laced their fingers together.

"I'm all for anything that gives us an advantage, but what is it?"

It was Pen who answered. He retrieved the box Zav had handed to him earlier and turned it over in his hands.

“Seems to me that we have an Archangel on our side. Raphael’s got a soft spot for true love,” he told Jonah with a grin. “He’s the patron of lovers, among other things.”

Jonah looked astounded. “Truly?”

“Truly,” Zav assured him.

Pen peeled off the tape with a loud rip and lifted the lid eagerly. Zav and Jonah both leaned forward to see what was in the box. Inside lay a twelve-inch trumpet with a golden cord attached to it. It was far smaller than the ones Zav was used to seeing, but he supposed it served the same function. Pen picked up the note that came with it and read it aloud.

“His brothers come to march for him when the trumpet blows; they will be his sword and shield. (Use it well.)”

Jonah reached out a hand, awestruck, and Pen gave it to him to inspect.

“So, you blow on this and he’ll come to help?” Jonah asked.

“That’s the idea, yes.”

Jonah handed it back, and Pen carefully replaced it in the box. He set it on the fireplace mantle.

“I did tell you that you have allies on that side, didn’t I?” he told Zav smugly.

Zav shook his head, not removing his gaze from the box. “If he’s given us that to use, it’s a safe bet that something dire is about to happen.”

Jonah turned to Pen thoughtfully. “How do we get out of here without anyone seeing us? Or Nymi for that matter?”

“Dyn will teleport us out of here.”

“He can do that?”

“Angels and devils both,” Pen explained. “Except for Zav, that is.”

Zav tried to deflect what he knew was coming, asking Jonah instead if there was anything he wanted to take with him, but Jonah ignored his attempt.

“Why aren’t you able to do it?”

Zav glared at Pen, who cleared his throat and stood up hastily to excuse himself, saying that he needed to inform the others of the state of affairs.

“Well, I could, but not right now,” Zav mumbled.

Jonah was shrewd, though, and he gave Zav a long, calculating look.

“It never really dawned on me until very recently that beings like you—angels and devils—should be invincible,” he started. “I saw Dyn reach into the fire like it was nothing, but I remember you burned your hands when you rescued me from the abbey.”

Eyes narrowed, he cut off whatever Zav was about to say. “And that time the scaffolding fell on us, your arms were all scraped up and bleeding.”

“Well...”

“Tell me why that is. Just this morning, Pen should have needed stitches when the knife slipped while he was chopping vegetables, but it didn’t cut him at all,” he pointed out. “You, on the other hand, are able to be hurt.”

Zav held his hand and brought it to his lips. “Don’t worry about it, sweetheart. It’s nothing.”

Jonah snatched his hand away with a sharp glare.

“Don’t treat me like I’m stupid, just because I’m human!”

“I’d never think that,” Zav protested.

They were at a stalemate until Jonah broke off their staring contest first. His eyes softened a bit.

“I know, okay? I overheard Pen and Dyn talking about it the other day, how half of your powers are gone because of some stupid bargain you made.”

Zav’s eyes widened. “It’s not stupid.”

“How could it not be? You’re vulnerable! And don’t even get me started on that equally dumb idea you have of facing those rogues all by yourself,” he accused.

“Did you overhear that, too?”

Jonah stood up and loomed over him, hands on his hips. “I didn’t have to. That nightmare woke me up in a cold sweat this morning, and you weren’t even here.”

Zav got up too, forcing Jonah back a step. He grabbed the other in a hug and squeezed him briefly before loosening his hold.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

“Don’t change the subject,” Jonah said, his voice muffled by his shirt. “I want to know about your stupid bargain, and why that cost you your powers, and also your stupid plan. I want to hear it from you.”

Zav watched Jonah from the other end of the couch, where the other man had retreated once Zav got to the part where he was required to surrender half of his power.

“Why would you agree to that?” Jonah asked.

“It was the only way to get the Council to tell me what happened to you,” he explained. “I needed their consent.”

Jonah shook his head in confusion. Celestial beings have intricate politics that no mortal would ever understand, but Zav could try to simplify it for Jonah. He just didn’t know how. Jonah must have seen him struggling to explain because he shifted to sit sideways, so he faced Zav and nudged him lightly.

“Hey, I don’t need the full disclosure,” he said with an encouraging smile. “A Cliffs Notes version would be very much appreciated.”

Zav gave him a blank look, and Jonah sighed. “A short summary will do.”

“Oh, okay. Do you think you could move a little closer?” Zav requested. “I feel like you’re angry with me... you’re not, are you?”

Jonah scooted until their thighs touched from knee to hip, but that wasn’t enough for Zav. He moved so he could lean against the arm of the couch and shifted Jonah, so he sat between Zav’s outstretched legs. It took a while for Jonah to fully relax against his chest, but he eventually did, allowing Zav to thread their fingers together.

“I’m having trouble understanding why you would need the angels’ permission to find me.”

“I need you to try to forget what you know for now,” Zav told him.

“That won’t be hard to do. I’m finding that most of what I learned about angels and devils is wrong.”

Zav rested his chin on the crown of Jonah’s head and puffed a breath that ruffled his hair.

“First things first, Hell isn’t called Hell because of forever burning fires and boiling pits of tar. It’s on the other side of a great mountain range, separated

from Heaven by neutral ground where the occasional assembly is held,” he explained.

“Angels do love their meetings, but that’s beside the point. Though we are separate from Heaven, we are still a part of their governance. Seven angels and seven devils make up the Council.”

Jonah tilted his head, so he could glance up at him. He looked absolutely amazed at what Zav was telling him, understandably so. Nearly everything that he’d learned about angels and devils was being turned upside down.

“The Council makes laws, but God has veto power, of course. Anyway, one of the laws is that only a fixed number of angels and devils can be on earth at any one time—otherwise the balance is skewed,” he continued.

“Travel between Heaven, Hell and Earth is strictly regulated. We can’t just come and go whenever we want.”

He rubbed his other hand up and down Jonah’s arm and felt gratified when Jonah snuggled in closer. Zav gave him time to absorb it all in.

“Okay, that explains why you needed to ask for permission,” Jonah said. “What about the powers thing?”

“The official reason has something to do with that balance I told you about.”

“More politics?” Jonah asked in exasperation. “What’s the unofficial reason then?”

Zav cleared his throat.

“I hate to break it to you, sweetheart, but I’m no low-level devil,” Zav told him proudly. “Most of the angels didn’t like my petition at all.”

That was quite the understatement. There were accusations of conspiracy, and the angels were all convinced that Zaviel was part of an advance guard set to conquer the world. Why else would a devil’s lieutenant be steadfastly interested on earth?

“So, what, they worried about you going around without a ‘leash,’ so to speak?”

Zav laughed. Jonah hit the nail squarely on the head on that one.

“Angels can be surprisingly paranoid,” he said. “Anyway, me not being in possession of my full powers was never an issue until now.”

“With the rogues?”

“Yes.”

Jonah rested a hand on Zav’s thigh and kneaded it lightly. He hit a particularly sensitive spot that sent a bolt of arousal through Zav, but he suppressed it. There would be time enough for that later. Right now, Jonah needed all the answers Zav could give him.

“I thought Raphael is helping us?” Jonah asked.

“Raphael is a member of the Council. He wouldn’t want to be too obvious in providing assistance, especially to a devil. His angelic standing would be questioned by the more uptight angels.”

He stilled Jonah’s hand then planted a kiss on his head. Jonah surprised him when he tilted his head up and kissed Zav’s chin.

“Sorry for the trouble I’m causing you,” he told Zav.

“No, sweetheart,” Zav rushed to say. “I would turn this world inside out to be with you.”

Jonah blushed, but he gave Zav another kiss, this one on the corner of his mouth. Zav dipped his head to give him a proper kiss, and Jonah eagerly parted his lips to deepen it.

Zav cupped his jaw and put his other arm around his back to pull him closer. They kissed for a few more minutes before parting, and Jonah gave him a worried look.

“Is now the right time to bring up the fact that you can get seriously hurt? I mean, I assume angels and devils are invincible, but I did see you get scraped up.”

He picked up Zav’s arm and looked at it closely, but Zav knew he wouldn’t see anything to suggest any injury.

“I get hurt, yes, but I heal quickly. My wounds mend almost instantaneously.”

Jonah didn’t look convinced. He stroked each of Zav’s palms where the skin had been blistered badly in the fire. Zav had never known pain until that moment, and though the skin regenerated immediately after injury, he doubted that he’d ever forget what pain felt like. Jonah brought one up to his lips and kissed it.

“Is there anything that will kill an angel? Or a devil, for that matter.”

“Not kill, per se; at least not how mortals see it... we are eternal, after all.”

It was hard for him to describe it in words.

“Anything mortal can’t harm us; our own kind is another matter. We’re able to affect each other in ways that no one else can,” he finally said.

“When that happens, we are absorbed back into the void, and our vitality is reclaimed into a different substance. It’s a way for our essence to live on.”

“My head hurts,” Jonah complained suddenly.

He hunched over and clutched his head in both hands. Zav rubbed his back soothingly.

“It’s a lot to take in.”

“Do you think we could maybe table the rest of the discussion? I’d like to lie down for a while and rest my aching head,” Jonah said.

Zav wiggled himself off the couch and held out a hand. He helped Jonah up and kissed his forehead. Jonah smoothed out his wrinkled shirt.

“I’m almost afraid to fall asleep, though a nap sounds lovely right now.”

“Then sleep. I’ll watch over you.”

Jonah narrowed his eyes at him. “Yeah, don’t think I haven’t forgotten about what I dreamed of. I’ll let you know right now that I do not approve of your plan.”

“And I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe,” Zav replied.

The look Jonah gave him was unhappy.

“Don’t do that to me, Zav, please,” he begged. “Don’t make me leave you behind. If we run, we run together.”

Jonah must have sensed his reluctance to make that promise because he grabbed onto Zav’s shirt and looked up at him with teary eyes.

“Give me your word. Swear on the one thing you love the most.”

Zav swallowed, knowing he was caught.

“You don’t play fair, darling.”

“Life isn’t fair, Zav. If it was, I’d still be an angel named Zephon, and I’d be in Heaven with you... or Hell. Where did we usually meet up, anyway?”

“On neutral ground.”

“Yeah, okay, then we’d still be meeting on neutral ground, and you wouldn’t be making me upset like this.”

Despite the seriousness of their conversation, Zav couldn’t help but laugh a little. Jonah was still a spitfire, always ready to go toe-to-toe with Zav and come out on top. He couldn’t deny him anything.

“Very well. I can’t ever bear to see you distressed,” he said. He took a deep breath and looked Jonah in the eye. “I swear on you, Jonah; you are who I love the most. I give you my vow to not ever make you leave me behind.”

“And no going off on your own,” Jonah added with a raised eyebrow.

“No going off on my own, I promise.”

Jonah closed his eyes briefly and let his head fall forward as he sighed in relief. Then he looked up and gave Zav a satisfied smile.

“I’ll hold you to that. Now come on, I need to lie down before my head explodes, and you promised to watch over me.”

It took a while for Jonah to settle down, during which time Zav massaged his head gently and told him random anecdotes about his brothers that made Jonah chortle into the pillows.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to look Dyn in the eye again.”

“Well, to be fair, the human didn’t remember anything that happened afterward.”

Jonah fell asleep after a while, and Zav settled in to keep him company, not letting up on his massage until Jonah’s pained frown disappeared, and his forehead smoothed out.

Zav slouched down on the bed beside him and closed his eyes. He must have dozed off for a while because the next time he opened his eyes, he was slumped on his side in the small space between the headboard and Jonah’s head.

A light tapping sounded in the room, and he looked around to find where it was coming from. A bluebird was sitting on the windowsill, tapping merrily on the glass from the other side.

Zav stood to take a closer look. The bird hopped around several times and ruffled its wings when it realized it had Zav's attention. It cocked its head to the side and looked at him with its beady eye. Zav frowned at it and tapped a finger against the window to shoo it away, but it stayed put and rapped its bill on the glass again.

He glanced at Jonah then cracked the window open, and the bird hopped in. It shook its head and flapped its wings rapidly against its body before opening its beak.

"Meet me at the *cimetière*, at sundown, in front of the Three Wise Men. Come alone," the bird said.

It chirped once then flew off, leaving him to stare after it in astonishment.

"What the—"

"Did that bird just talk?" Jonah asked behind him.

He whirled around in surprise to see the other man sitting up in bed, wide-eyed and dumbfounded. Jonah turned his gaze to Zav and held up a hand.

"Wait, hold on, don't tell me. Let me just absorb what I've just seen... and heard, okay?"

"All right."

"I mean, nothing should surprise me anymore at this point."

Zav closed the window and stepped up to the bed. He ran a hand over the top of Jonah's head and cupped the back of his neck.

"It surprised me, too," he said. "I didn't think Caspiel would sink so low as to use other creatures to do his dirty work."

"Showdown at sundown?" Jonah quipped. "Whoever draws his pistol first is the winner?"

The expression was lost on Zav, however.

Jonah sighed. "Never mind. You're not seriously going to do what he says, are you? Sounds like a setup to me."

"I wouldn't put it past them to do some ganging up. Don't worry; I have no intention of playing into their hands."

Jonah pushed the covers aside and stood up with Zav's help.

"How's your head?" he asked Jonah.

“Not too bad,” Jonah said, making a so-so gesture. He preceded Zav out the door and down the stairs.

Dyn was waiting for them at the bottom. He nodded at Jonah then grinned at his brother.

“You called?”

“Where’s Pen?”

“I’m here,” Pen called out from the living room. Dyn bowed with a flourish and ushered them to where Pen was waiting. Zav told them what happened and waited for his brother’s outburst to finish, exchanging an exasperated glance with Pen.

“Dude, that’s not cool!” Dyn griped.

Zav lifted an eyebrow at him, and Dyn shrugged.

“What? Nymi’s been teaching me the proper way to lingo.” He beamed proudly.

Pen shook his head almost fondly before turning his attention to Zav.

“Take Dyn with you,” he said.

Dyn jumped up, startling them all.

“Of course he’ll be bringing me along,” he growled. “If you think I’ll let him go, so they can get the drop on him, you have another thing coming.”

He gave Zav a challenging look, clearly expecting him to protest. Zav merely nodded calmly.

“I was already planning to have you come along,” he told Dyn. “I wouldn’t put it past Caspiel and his lackeys to be lying in wait.”

Jonah, who’d been watching them tensely from his precarious perch on the edge of the chair, slumped back with a relieved sigh. He smiled at Zav, and Zav gave him a knowing look.

“I did promise you, didn’t I?”

“You did. Thank you, Zav. It’ll put me at ease, knowing you have someone to watch your back, even if it’s not me,” Jonah told him.

Dyn interrupted them when he turned to Pen with a frown. “I don’t know if I’m comfortable leaving this one to watch over the others by himself.”

Pen stood up and put both fists on his hips, glaring at Dyn fiercely. Zav got up as well and angled his body slightly between them.

“He’ll be fine, Dyn. I trust Pen to hold his own,” Zav said, heading off a potential argument between the two of them.

“Do I need to remind you?” Pen asked Dyn with a raised eyebrow.

Dyn grimaced and rubbed his arm, where a dark mark in the shape of a handprint was just visible from under the edge of his shirtsleeve. Zav was almost sure that if he were to put Pen’s hand on it, it would match the imprint perfectly.

“No,” Dyn said with a huff.

Penemue nodded, pleased. Zav gave his brother a warning glare, and Dyn backed off reluctantly.

“I’ll head off first and you’ll follow. Discreetly,” he told Dyn.

“Don’t worry, you won’t even know I’m there.”

Jonah cleared his throat, and everyone turned their attention to him.

“I feel kind of useless right now. Is there anything I can do to help?” he asked sheepishly. “It’s not a good feeling to just sit around doing nothing.”

“You can keep watch with me,” Pen said. “Two pairs of eyes are better than just one.”

Zav swallowed down the protest he wanted to make. If he had his way, Jonah would be downstairs with Nymi and Khatun, locked tight behind a set of heavy oak doors etched with angelic runes of protection. He held his tongue when he saw Jonah’s appreciative smile, though.

Pen nodded at him knowingly. “We’ll be fine,” he whispered.

“I know. I trust you,” Zav replied.

He sat back down beside Jonah and waited until the others settled into their chairs again, then he gave Dyn a sly smile.

“Those rogues will regret messing with us.”

Dyn laughed in delight. “And here I was starting to think you’d gone soft on us, brother.”

“Perish the thought.”

Zav would make certain the Black Guards rued the day they decided to meddle with all of them.

Chapter Five

Lagrasse Cemetière lay at the edge of the village, nestled against the foot of the mountain. It had an air of solemnity to it as any other cemetery, but Zav could feel its hallowed atmosphere tainted by something. Not wickedness or malice, per se, but the raging, misguided righteousness of someone meant to be just and virtuous.

He sensed Caspiel nearby, watching and waiting, as Zav made his way through the aboveground tombstones adorned with crosses and cherubs. One marble statue of a weeping angel stood guard over a grave. Zav stopped beside this one, eyes and ears alert for anything suspicious, but besides Caspiel, there was nothing else that stood out as wrong. In any case, he couldn't sense Dyn either despite knowing his brother was somewhere around here, so Zav was reluctant to believe no other angels were lurking among the gravestones.

The Three Wise Men's tomb was unmistakable. Three massive sarcophagi were set on an equally gigantic stone platform: the central one a tad more imposing and decorated than the other two flanking it. A grand brick wall rose from the far side of the platform, complete with intricately decorated arched pillars and set with a mural of God the Creator above it, resplendent in His golden crown. He looked down benevolently at the silent funerary ground, and Zav thought it apt that an angel and a devil would meet under His ever watchful gaze.

Caspriel sat on the center tomb, chin resting on his hand while he lazily swayed side to side. He perked up when Zav approached and hailed him enthusiastically as one would a long lost friend.

"You sure took your sweet time," he told Zav. "I've been waiting for hours."

Zav could just see the tip of the sun as it dipped low behind the mountain, casting red and orange hues against the sky while it set.

"The missive was for sundown. I do believe I'm right on time," he replied.

Caspriel laughed and stood up on the tomb, so that he had to look down at him. Zav thought it typically arrogant and superior, but he refused to rise to the bait.

"True. I suppose I came across as impatient, but you can hardly blame me."

He jumped down and landed right in front of Zav, forcing him to take a step back.

“I’ve been so anxious to see you again,” Caspiel went on.

Zav snorted. He was never one for physical violence, preferring to strike with his powers instead, but at that moment, he wanted nothing more than to plant his fist in Caspiel’s smug face.

“Too bad I can’t say the same,” he said.

Caspriel faked a gasp and stumbled backward until he could lean against the tomb. He wiped the corner of his eye then straightened up.

“Oh, how you wound me. We were all brothers once, after all.”

Zav was losing his patience fast.

“I didn’t come here to listen to you blow wind out of your hole. What is it that you want from me?”

Caspriel immediately shed his histrionics, and the look he gave Zav was sharp and calculating. He hopped up to sit on the platform between the sarcophagi.

“I’ve come to offer you a deal.”

Zav braced himself. Nothing good ever came out of such arrangements, be it a deal with an angel or a devil. Both beings always asked for far more than one was willing to give.

The angel waited for him to say something, but Zav merely waited until Caspiel was forced to continue.

“My brothers and I realize that we may have been too hasty in our actions. It wasn’t quite our intention to harm a human, especially one who used to be our kin,” he said with a regretful shake of his head.

Caspriel glanced to the side briefly, and Zav tensed, expecting one of the angel’s accomplices to step out of the encroaching shadows, but none appeared.

“Give Zephon our apologies.”

“You didn’t call me here for this,” Zav scoffed. “Your lackeys wouldn’t be lurking if this was a goodwill message.”

Caspriel’s easygoing attitude disappeared. He hopped down to stand eye-to-eye with Zav, an aura of power coming off him. Zav kept his expression blank,

fighting the urge to respond, and kept a lid on the lightning that was crackling just beneath the surface.

He could feel Dyn on the periphery of his awareness, his brother's displeasure radiating from him.

"Very well. I suppose I've stalled enough," Caspiel said. "We are willing to leave Zephon alone... for a price."

Zav snorted. Of course there was a price. "By all means, what dues are we required to pay for you to leave well enough alone?"

"We propose a trade. You are acquainted with an *iyr* and *iyrin*-born. It is the righteous' prerogative to rid the world of sin."

Dyn's anger flared, and Zav watched as the shadows twisted restlessly to mirror his agitation. Zav channeled calm through their bond, willing him to compose himself.

Caspriel spared a glance at the shadows licking around his ankles before smirking, though he didn't pay them any attention.

"The sons of God shall not mingle with the daughters of men for God's spirit is not meant to remain on Earth forever," he told Zav instead. "The *iyr*'s transgressions far outweigh that of an angel's desire for his devilish paramour who—even with his ruinous existence—still bears within him God's limitless spirit."

"I suppose I should be grateful that our sinful love is less offensive to you, and yet Zephon was still banished for his indiscretion," Zav replied sarcastically.

Caspriel ignored his jibe. "A devil like you should have no difficulty with making this deal... or any deal that serves your interests well."

"You are operating on the assumption that devils are preoccupied with furthering their own interests and disregard others."

"Are you saying that you're not? I recall your kind's expulsion from the High Throne quite well... guilty for thinking only of your own selfish interests."

"Sorry to say that you recalled wrong. We left of our own volition to get away from idiots like you," Zav said acerbically.

Caspriel narrowed his eyes. There was a flash of movement in the corner of Zav's eye, then another and another, until they were joined by other Black Guards. They stood behind Caspiel, flanking him while he glowered at Zav.

“We were quite generous in offering this arrangement, but I’ve come to the conclusion that we’ve made a mistake.”

“Damn right you made a mistake,” Zav sneered.

Two rogues stepped in front of Caspiel threateningly, but their leader held up a restraining hand.

“Still, let it not be said that we did not give you a second chance. What say you, Zaviel? The *iy*r for your beloved?”

“And let it be known that a devil such as myself went on to say that one life isn’t any less important than other lives, which an angel such as yourself should know. I reject your offer.”

Caspriel looked displeased. “What would Zephon say if he knew that you had the opportunity to protect him, but you turned it down?”

To this Zav replied, “Zephon would wish for nothing less.” He knew Zephon’s heart, even if it beat in a human’s body.

The taller of Caspiel’s lackeys let his wings unfold from where it lay against his back, but Dyn was faster. He let loose a strong blast of power, nearly knocking Zav off his feet, successfully flattening the rogues. Dyn stepped out of the shadows to stand in front of Zav. He glared at the angels menacingly, the runes on his arms glowing a blazing red. Steam rose from the blackened ground he stood on.

“My brother might be cordial enough to restrain himself from violence, but I can assure you that I have no such qualms,” he growled.

The Black Guards were all taken aback by his sudden appearance. Caspiel spread his hands in front of him in a placating manner.

“There is no need for such threats,” he said, though his wings appeared in a flash.

Dyn crouched low and let his own pitch-dark wings spread fully. Zav let his power course through him, ready to strike.

A harsh caw broke the barely held back confrontation, and they all looked up to see a crow watching them interestedly from the top of the tomb’s wall. It cawed at them again and beat its wings in warning as it glared down at them from its perch.

Caspriel immediately retracted his wings, and the other rogues followed suit. He looked at the bird almost guiltily.

Zav laid a hand on his brother's shoulder, urging him to pull his wings in as well. Dyn did so reluctantly.

"I believe we are done here," Zav told Caspiel.

He watched the angel consider it for a moment, then Caspiel nodded.

"We shall see you soon," he said. Then with one last look at the crow, he and his followers were gone in a whirl of ashen-gray feathers.

Zav was almost sorry to see them go. He was fully prepared to finally fight it out with the rogues once he realized what their trade was about, and Dyn echoed his feelings.

"We could have had them!" he yelled at the bird, but it remained unaffected by his outrage.

It hopped agitatedly and fluttered its wings before flying off with an urgent call, no doubt back to its angelic master.

Zav had a sudden flash of intuition. He watched the crow's stark silhouette in the deepening twilight where it flew into the east, and frowned.

"Raphael must have a good reason for interrupting when he did. We have to get back to the house immediately."

Dyn opened his mouth to protest but shut it. Zav let out his wings, snapping them open so quickly that it pulled a pained grimace from him.

"We have to go," Zav repeated.

His brother needed no further urging, and together they hastily followed the crow all the way back to Pen's house.

The crow was waiting for them when they got back to the house, perched on top of the empty birdbath Pen kept in the front yard. It watched them draw near with an almost otherworldly gaze.

"Remember the horn," it said, Raphael's voice coming out gravelly and harsh from its avian throat.

It ducked its head under one wing and preened before taking off. Zav watched it circle them once then fly away, and then he approached the dark house, where he sensed that something was amiss.

Dyn pushed past him to make his way up the front path in a run, Zav hot on his heels. The door opened just as they got to it, and Pen stood there with a grim look.

“What happened?” Dyn asked. He put his hands on Pen’s arms and pushed him gently to the side, so that he and Zav could come in.

Zav drew short when he noticed Jonah was curled up on the couch, arms tight around his bent knees.

“We had an unwanted visitor,” Pen told them. He closed the door and joined them, glancing down at Jonah who was staring at something on the far wall.

Zav knelt down in front of him and shook him gently.

“Jonah? Sweetheart, are you all right?”

It was Pen who answered. He collapsed into his chair with a sigh. “He’s just had a shock... we all did. Zav, your disreputable friend sent someone to pay us a visit.”

Dyn moved to sit on the armrest but paused. He looked alarmed as he made a half turn toward the cupboard. Pen reached a hand out to stop him, pulling him back, so he could take a seat beside him.

“They’re okay. In fact, we’re all fine thanks to Jonah.”

Dyn put a hand on Pen’s shoulder, and Zav was surprised to see his friend allow it. In fact, Pen leaned close and rested his head on Dyn’s arm.

“I think you should start from the beginning,” he told Pen.

Pen complied, telling them how Jonah had gone upstairs and was then accosted by a rogue who’d gotten inside through an open window. Zav’s anger boiled when he was told that the angel had then attacked Pen when the other came to investigate Jonah’s shouts.

“It’s fine,” Pen said, pushing his sleeve up to show them the fading mark on his arm where the rogue had burned him. “Look, it’s healing already.”

Dyn growled, but settled down, though Zav was even more infuriated when he realized that Jonah could have been hurt if Pen hadn’t been around. He ran a hand down the side of Jonah’s body, wondering if his clothes hid any damage underneath.

“He didn’t touch me, at least not the way he did Pen,” Jonah finally said. He pushed himself up and crawled close to Zav, snuggling against his side when Zav embraced him.

Dyn stood up. “Where is he?” he snarled.

“And why are we sitting in the dark?” Zav asked. He leaned to turn on the side lamp, but nothing happened.

Pen got up and returned shortly with several tea lights he put on the coffee table. Their tiny glow made the room less dark, though they cast shadowy specters against the ceiling that Dyn briefly manipulated with his powers.

Dyn repeated his question, and Jonah looked down. He bunched his fists in his shirt, refusing to meet anyone’s eyes.

“He’s not here... he’s not anywhere anymore,” he said quietly. Jonah looked at Pen desperately.

“We’re not entirely sure what happened, but Jonah seems to have regained some of his powers. The rogue was gaining the upper hand, and suddenly all of the lights were turned on,” Pen explained.

Jonah shook his head in disbelief, keeping his gaze averted from Zav. “It was like an itching under my skin that no amount of scratching can relieve. Next thing you know, the lights were glowing brighter and brighter, and I was absorbing their energy.”

Zav assumed that’s why the lights were off if Jonah absorbed them enough that the bulbs burned out.

“Then what happened?”

Jonah looked troubled. “The pressure just kept on building like a dam about to burst until I couldn’t keep it in anymore. I don’t know what happened after that.”

Pen was pleased, however.

“Light immolation,” he told them smugly. “Haven’t seen anything like it in a long time. It was beautiful.”

“How could you say that? Oh my God, I just killed an angel!”

Dyn snorted. He gave Jonah an admiring glance then leaned toward Jonah and held out his fist. “Better him than you or Pen.”

Jonah reluctantly bumped his own fist against Dyn’s.

“I guess, but it feels like I just committed sacrilege.”

“Darling, remember what I told you before? We don’t get ‘killed.’”

“You get recycled.” Jonah chuckled.

Pen came up to him and bent down to give him a hug. “Thanks for the help.”

Jonah returned the hug with a smile. Zav could tell he was still a little shaken by what happened, but at least he was trying to see it as a positive thing. He gave Jonah’s shoulder a kiss.

“You’re amazing,” he murmured.

“If you say so. Now, enough about me. Should I ask about how the meeting went, or do I just go by how the two of you rushed in here like the Devil was after you?”

“Har-har.” Dyn grinned.

Zav laughed, then his expression sobered.

“Caspiel wanted a deal. The rogues will leave Jonah alone in exchange for Pen, Nymi, and Khatun.”

“What!”

Pen leaped from his chair furiously and rounded on Dyn. “Is that true?”

“I’m afraid so. He said something about greater sin and all that, then whined and called on his lackeys to do some posturing when Zav told him no.”

Jonah turned to him. “They? How many were there?”

“Two, not including Caspiel, though it was clear that Dyn outclassed them all,” Zav said proudly.

His brother puffed out his chest and thumped his fist on his other palm.

“Would have sent those imbeciles to oblivion too if not for Raphael’s meddling.”

Pen sneered. “I shouldn’t find it surprising that they would stoop so low, but I still can’t believe it!”

“Wait, Raphael was there?” Jonah asked.

“Not him, exactly, but a familiar... like Caspiel’s messenger bird. I knew it was him, and I assume that Caspiel and his band knew, too. They lit out of there like—to borrow your phrase—the Devil was after them.”

“And you rejected his deal?” Jonah asked again.

Zav paused, wondering if Jonah approved. He was so confident that the other man would agree with his decision, but looking at the frown on Jonah’s forehead, he wasn’t so sure anymore.

“Yes, I rejected the deal. Is that... are you upset that I did?” he asked hesitantly.

Jonah’s eyes widened, and he nearly lunged at Zav in his haste to put his arms around Zav’s shoulders.

“Of course not!” he rushed to say. “I’m so proud of you, Zav, so proud.”

Zav’s heart swelled, and he returned Jonah’s embrace with a relieved sigh. A hand squeezed his shoulder, and he looked up to see Pen smiling down at him.

“Thank you.”

Zav could think of nothing to say, so he contented himself with a nod. Pen retreated to his chair, and Zav watched as his brother put an arm around him.

Jonah pulled back though he didn’t move away. Instead, he shifted so he could tuck a shoulder under Zav’s arm and leaned his head on his chest.

The four of them sat quietly for a while until Jonah broke the silence.

“What’s going to happen now?”

“We shouldn’t wait any longer,” Zav replied and then turned to his brother. “Dyn, are you ready to move us all out?”

“Been absorbing energy like crazy for a week now, I feel about ready to burst. I’m ready when you are.”

Jonah looked relieved, as did Pen.

“I’ll get them ready to go,” he said, referring to Khatun and his son.

Dyn stood to follow him but stopped in front of Zav first. He held Zav’s chin in a firm grip and tilted his face up. Zav frowned up at him, wondering what he was thinking. Their bond had been unusually silent since coming back, as if Dyn was deliberately blocking him out, but Zav didn’t realize until now. Dyn shook his head slowly then released him.

“Remember that we will always be brothers,” he told Zav.

“Of course.”

Dyn nodded. “Good. Just don’t get all high and mighty on me, and I won’t kick your ass,” he said with a smile.

Zav could feel a touch of his brother’s confusion and worry for him before he reined his emotions back in, and his expression closed off. Dyn walked off after Pen, leaving Zav and Jonah alone in the dark.

“Your eyes glow in the dark, did you know?” Jonah asked suddenly.

“They always have.”

“Not like this, no.”

Jonah leaned in to have a closer look.

“You’ll think I’m crazy, but it’s like they’re on fire. Pen’s eyes are the same only not as bright... Dyn’s eyes don’t glow at all.”

Zav was shocked. Neither Pen nor Dyn had mentioned it though he didn’t expect them to. Was that what made Dyn act so strangely just now? The implication was something he wasn’t prepared to deal with.

“Are you sure?” he asked Jonah.

“Yes. They were blue when I first met you, but they’ve been gradually changing since then.” Jonah frowned. “Tonight’s the first time I’ve seen them like this.”

Zav walked to the hallway mirror and peered at his reflection, stunned at what he saw. His irises were no longer a cerulean blue; instead, they blazed with unearthly flames, surrounding the pupils like a ring of fire.

“Impossible,” he murmured.

Jonah came up behind him and looked at Zav’s reflection in the mirror.

“I take it from your reaction that that’s a bad thing?”

Zav met his gaze in the mirror. “I don’t know,” he said truthfully.

He turned to place both hands on Jonah’s shoulder and looked into his eyes, seeing himself reflected there.

“It could be said that Hell is dark because our fires have been quenched, and Heaven is bright because its inhabitants glow intensely with divine light. That’s why Dyn’s eyes don’t glow, and Pen’s do—albeit not as brightly as Raphael’s or any other righteous angel.”

He watched Jonah think it over.

“Does that mean what I think it means, then?” Jonah wondered.

Zav grimaced, unwilling to give voice to his own suspicions. He tamped down the dread growing in him and shook his head dismissively.

“Let’s not worry about this now. We have more important things to think about.”

Jonah looked at him skeptically but let it go.

“Do you think I have time to wash up? I feel all gross, remembering what I did earlier.”

“Just don’t take too long.”

Jonah took a step toward the stairs and stopped, giving Zav a pleading look.

“Would you come up and keep me company? It’s kinda scary being alone in the dark, and the candles make everything even creepier.”

“You lead, I follow,” Zav assured him.

The upstairs hallway was littered with broken glass from when the lights burst, and the door of Jonah’s bedroom was off its hinges. It lay on the floor, blackened by scorch marks, and if Zav squinted, he could just make out the silhouette of whichever unfortunate angel had decided to accost Jonah.

Zav picked the door up and propped it against the wall, then moved aside so Jonah could go inside the bathroom. Jonah left the door open, and Zav hesitated for a second before leaning against the doorjamb, not quite looking in Jonah’s direction.

The shower started, and Jonah briskly took his clothes off, letting them fall carelessly to the floor. Zav refused to glance his way for a second before giving in and taking a peek. Jonah was thin but not gaunt, and Zav’s exceptional eyesight tracked the line of puckered skin from just below his right nipple to his hip.

He must have made a noise because Jonah paused from getting into the tub and twisted around to look at him. Jonah ran a self-conscious hand down the length of his scar.

“Childhood accident,” he explained. “Tried to climb a fence and slipped.”

Jonah climbed over the tub, and Zav listened to him fumble around for the bottles. The bathroom was soon filled with a citrusy fragrance as Jonah soaped himself up.

Zav cleared his throat and raised his voice slightly, so he could be heard over the sound of water.

“Was it really okay that I turned down Caspiel?”

“I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way,” Jonah answered.

“I promised to do whatever it took to protect you, and I feel like I let you down.”

Jonah poked his head around the shower curtain and pinned him with a disapproving look.

“The only way you’d have let me down was if you sold the others out. We’re all in this together, Zav, in case you forgot.”

“Okay. I have to say it was against my nature so forgive me for doubting myself.”

Jonah ducked back behind the curtain and resumed washing.

“Well, I for one am glad you did,” he told Zav.

The water shut off, and Jonah emerged, shivering and dripping all over the tiles. He reached for a towel, overbalanced, and started to slip. Zav was there in an instant. He caught Jonah around the waist and hauled him up, keeping his arms in place while Jonah regained his balance.

“Thanks,” Jonah said breathlessly.

He pulled Zav down for a kiss, parting his lips to let their tongues tangle. Jonah pressed himself close, the moisture from his skin soaking through Zav’s clothes, and took hold of the edge of his shirt. He tugged it up, but Zav stilled his hands, breaking their kiss.

It was absolutely the wrong time for this.

Jonah licked his lips, swollen and spit-slicked, and Zav followed the movement longingly.

“Sweetheart, you have really bad timing.” He groaned.

“Would it also be untimely for me to say, despite only knowing you for a short time, that I’m falling for you?” Jonah murmured.

Zav stole a quick kiss and then trailed his lips down to the side of Jonah’s neck. Jonah clung to him and rested his forehead on Zav’s shoulder. He tugged at Zav’s shirt but was once again stopped.

“If I take my clothes off now, we wouldn’t be stopping any time soon,” Zav told him to quiet his protests.

“That sounds like a good idea to me.”

Jonah nipped his jaw and then moved his hand to cup Zav through his pants.

“Darling, you make it hard for me to hold back.”

“I don’t want you to hold back.”

He gave Jonah a disbelieving look. “I never would have thought you’d be so bold. I assumed I’d have my work cut out for me trying to seduce you.”

“And here you are, being the coy one while I try to seduce you,” Jonah pointed out cheekily.

He smoothed out Zav’s shirt as his expression turned serious. “It occurred to me that life’s too short to hold back,” he said. “If you love me, and I’m quickly coming to love you as well, why wait? Especially since we don’t know what the future holds.”

Zav was touched, feeling his resolve weakening. Still...

“I want to savor the moment we make love for the first time. Taking you in the bathroom with the lights off and rogues coming after us isn’t conducive to romance,” he finally said.

Jonah sighed. “You have a point.”

He looked disappointed but nodded his understanding, anyway. Jonah turned away and bent down to retrieve his towel, and Zav didn’t like to see him looking so discouraged.

“Come here.”

He grabbed Jonah by the waist and maneuvered the startled man against the sink. Zav brought Jonah’s hand up to his lips and turned it over to plant a tender kiss on his palm.

“When all of this is over, I promise you that we will make love as much as you want—under the stars.”

Jonah gave him a small smile. “I’ll hold you to that.” He reached up to kiss Zav before pushing him away to wrap the towel around his waist. He walked into his destroyed bedroom and pulled out a pair of pants. Jonah had just zipped up when Dyn’s mental warning clamored inside Zav’s head.

“Zav!” Jonah called out urgently. He was standing off to the side of the window and looking out with wide, frightened eyes.

Zav darted to the window to see what had distressed the other man. Caspiel was standing on the sidewalk across the street, looking up at Jonah’s window with the two rogues from the *cemetière*. Then, much to Zav’s alarm, several

more rogues joined them, appearing out of thin air until there were nearly a dozen of them standing there. Yet Zav was certain there were more of them lurking unseen.

He caught Jonah's arm firmly in his grasp and pulled him away from the window. Jonah went without protest, and together they ran quickly and silently down the stairs.

Dyn was waiting for them by the open cupboard door.

"I sense more in the back. Thirty-six in all," he told Zav.

"They're trying to surround us."

Dyn hit his fist on his open palm and let out a burst of power, startling a yelp from Jonah.

"I can take them!" he said with much bravado, letting out another burst in challenge.

"Don't be stupid," Zav hissed at his brother. "Remember what you're here for."

He pushed Jonah into Dyn's arms. "You're here to make sure everyone gets out safe."

It was clear that Dyn was itching for a fight, but Zav didn't want to risk it with Jonah in the crossfire. His brother looked like he was seriously thinking about defying him, but Pen's head poked out of the hole in the cupboard floor.

"What are you all standing there for?" he demanded.

Dyn visibly deflated, and he ushered Jonah in front of him, waiting until Pen retreated before helping Jonah down the stairs.

"Come on then, let's go," he told Zav.

Zav clapped him on the back and nodded for him to go down first. They trailed after Jonah and Pen, and as Zav passed the wooden support beams shoring up the ceiling, he triggered the protective runes Pen had laid down every couple of feet a week ago. Red and white lines flared brightly in their wake, crisscrossing like a spider's web ready to ensnare prey. He knew it wouldn't keep the angels out for long, but he hoped it would be sufficient to hinder their progress long enough for them to get out.

Khatun was waiting for them at the end of the tunnel.

"Hurry!" she yelled.

There was a loud noise above their heads, then a section of the ceiling caved in behind them. Zav glanced to see a pair of rogues jump down from the hole; the wards lit up, entangling them. More rogues came in, and a shock wave wracked the tunnel, nearly throwing them off their feet. Khatun reached for Jonah, tugging him inside with the others right on their heels.

Zav slammed the heavy, warded doors behind them just in time, blocking another shock wave coming their way. They heard the magic crackle as it met the doors. Zav worried it wouldn't hold up when the frame around it started to shake, but the magic fizzed out, and he felt it dissipate into the air.

“Dyn!” Pen cried out as Nymi started to cry in fear. He rushed to gather his son close, bringing Khatun and Jonah along with him. The four of them huddled close together.

“I got this,” Dyn snarled back. His arms glowed as he reached out for the energy he'd stored to teleport several people.

Jonah reached out for Zav, and he clasped their hands together while Pen did the same with Dyn.

The earth shook, and the door trembled while cracks started to appear on the walls around them.

Zav noticed the strain on his brother's face as they stood there, waiting to be whisked away. A feeling of dread came to him when Dyn shook his head in frustration.

“What's wrong?” Khatun asked.

Nymi held her in the crook of one arm, crouched protectively over his friend. He plunged a huge hand into the floor, and the ground rippled. It moved away from him rapidly like a wave, slamming against the door in answer to the constant bombardment of magic from the other side.

A crack appeared on the door, and Pen yelled out to his son in panic.

“No, stop!” he cried out.

The others held their breath as a splinter fell off. Dyn shook his head again and grunted.

“Dyn, hurry up!”

“I can't! There's some sort of barrier or something... they have someone dampening my powers.”

Zav cursed. There was another mighty boom, and the door flew off its hinges, nearly hitting them. Black Guards started coming in with Caspiel bringing up the rear. His eyes lit up almost gleefully when his gaze landed on Nymi.

“Don’t hurt the Nephilim,” he instructed his acolytes. “Eliel wants him unharmed.”

Zav shared a glance with Pen, both of them clearly recognizing one of the higher-ranking angels in Heaven.

Nymi cowered as the rogues went on to surround them. Pen and Jonah flanked him protectively.

“*Abba*,” he whimpered.

“Shhh, little one. It will be okay.”

Zav scanned the group, hoping to catch a glimpse of who among them would be dampening his brother’s power, but he couldn’t pinpoint anyone. Dyn’s arms glowed again briefly before dimming.

“Planning to escape the party? The fun is only about to start.” Caspiel narrowed his eyes.

Dyn huffed angrily like an enraged bull would, lowering his head and bringing his shoulders up in warning. One of the rogues made a threatening gesture, and Zav felt Dyn’s aggression spike. He sent his brother a warning shock, just enough for him to feel it but not so much that the angels would think he was trying to instigate a fight.

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” Caspiel said. “Let’s talk.”

Zav scoffed. “There’s nothing for us to talk about, as far as I’m concerned.” He looked around the room subtly, sending out an exploratory tendril of lightning. The red-haired angel standing beside Caspiel narrowed his eyes, and Zav felt a jolt as his power abruptly cut off as if scissors were put to a thread.

Bingo, he thought.

Zav knew that he needed to distract the rogue enough for Dyn to get everyone out. He sent that thought to his brother, and Dyn sent back a feeling of disbelief and uncertainty at his plan.

“Get them out. Get them to safety,” he sent out forcefully.

Two rogues stepped forward at Caspiel’s nod and came at Nymi with crackling spears. Pen whirled around and kicked at them, but they were nimble

and quick on their feet, dodging him effortlessly. They separated Nymi from the others until he was cornered. His father lunged at the nearest rogue, coming to his son's defense, but was grabbed and held back.

One of the rogues poked Nymi with his spear, and a sizzle sounded out just underneath the Nephilim's howl of pain. Dyn bared his teeth in fury. He grabbed the table lamp and hurled it toward the back of one of the rogues keeping Nymi trapped, catching him off guard.

"Get away from him!" he bellowed.

The wall sconce glowed brighter as Jonah unconsciously absorbed its energy before flickering; it popped as it went out, suppressed by the dampening field.

"Careful with him!" Caspiel yelled out. He then turned to Zav and the others. "Let us have him and we will leave the rest of you alone."

Pen twisted in his captor's grasp, biting and clawing. Jonah and Khatun were held back by another rogue, unable to help.

Caspriel huffed in annoyance. "Give us the Nephilim. Let your sin be expunged."

"Go to hell!" Pen snarled.

Nymi was crying, Dyn and Pen were foaming at the mouths while Khatun and Jonah huddled in each other's arms. It was chaos.

Zav had had enough.

"Dyn!" he roared.

His brother whirled around, and Zav pointed a finger at him in warning.

"Get ready!"

Dyn looked ready to protest, but a quick glance at Pen had him backing off. He rolled his shoulders and his neck while Zav readied himself. He only had one chance at this.

"Let's talk, then," he told Caspiel, slowly maneuvering himself closer. Zav held out his hands in front of himself nonthreateningly.

Caspriel looked pleased even as Pen protested loudly, thinking that Zav was about to double-cross them. He could hear the commotion behind them as his friend renewed his efforts to get loose.

“I was starting to despair that you would never come to your senses.”

“It seemed all I needed was a little bit of encouragement,” Zav assured him. “Why don’t we make that deal now?”

The rogue nodded eagerly. Caspiel came forward and swung a careless arm around Zav’s shoulder as if they were friends or brothers finding each other again after a long time.

“I knew a devil like you wouldn’t be able to resist,” he crowed delightedly.

Zav nodded and inched closer to the redhead, careful not to trigger anyone’s suspicions. He could feel Dyn gathering himself, ready to strike when the moment was right.

“My only concern is Jonah’s safety,” he told Caspiel worriedly. “Give me your word that he will be unharmed once you have the Nephilim in hand.”

He ignored the others’ shocked gasps and looked Caspiel in the eye.

“I give you my word that both of you will be free to leave here unharmed.”

“And also give me your word that no one will come after us... that we will not be harassed by anyone anymore.”

“By my word of honor,” Caspiel replied.

“Zav! What are you doing?” Jonah cried out.

Zav looked back at him grimly. “I promised to always keep you safe, and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep that promise,” he said with determination.

Caspiel squeezed his shoulder with camaraderie then released him. He was only a step away from his target.

There was racket behind him just as he reached deep inside himself, and he turned to see Khatun reach into her shirt to retrieve the golden horn that Raphael had given them, and that everyone seemed to have forgotten until now.

The rogues didn’t look like they realized what it was until Khatun brought it up to her lips, and then they were too late to prevent her from blowing on it. Dyn grabbed Pen in the ensuing commotion, shoving him toward Nymi while he retrieved Jonah and Khatun. He yelled at them to grab hands then looked at Zav desperately.

Zav saw that as his chance. He leaped at the rogue who was using his powers to block their magic and pushed him off his feet, letting loose a mighty

shock that broke the rogue's dampening field. Caspiel let out a shriek as he realized what Zav had just done, and he grabbed at him with biting fingers, all the while shouting orders for his followers to capture the others.

Zav shook him off fiercely and then shocked the rogue again before yelling at his brother.

"Go, Dyn, go!"

Dyn gave him a grim smile before nodding. A circle of dark light surrounded him and the others, repelling the rogues on the outside of its barrier. Caspiel and his red-haired lackey had managed to overpower Zav by then. He looked up just in time to see the others vanish, and he smiled at his captor triumphantly.

The last thing he heard was the echo of Jonah's anguished scream. Then his vision turned dark.

Zav woke up with a gasp. The surface he was lying on was cool and soft to the touch, and it took him a moment to realize that something wasn't right. The last thing he remembered was seeing the others vanish—presumably teleporting to Khatun's sanctuary in Mongolia—and being overwhelmed by the rogues. Yet here he was, alone in an unknown room with no Black Guards in sight.

There was a tightness around his torso when he sat up, and he pushed the covers aside to reveal a swathe of bandages around his abdomen where a spear had pierced him.

Movement from his left had him whipping his head around so quickly that it made him dizzy.

"Peace," a voice said.

A figure stepped out of the shadowed corner and into the beam of light coming in through the stained glass window. It was Raphael with his hands spread in a placating gesture.

"What happened?" Zav asked him.

The archangel raised an eyebrow before sitting down at the foot of the bed.

"You certainly gave those rogues a run for their money," he said. "They're either more wary of you now, or you've just made them more eager for your blood."

He propped his ankle up on his knee. “You distracted them enough to give the others time to escape, and then you were descended upon by very irate rogues.”

Zav perked up.

“So the others made it out?”

“Yes. Though don’t ask me where they are... they seem to be beyond my sight.”

That brought a wave of relief to Zav. If even an archangel like Raphael couldn’t see them, then the chances of others being able to do so would be next to nothing. Jonah was safe. Then a thought occurred to him.

“What are you doing here?”

“It would seem that I saved your sorry ass. No thanks necessary,” Raphael said haughtily. “I was clear across the world when I heard the trumpet’s racket. By the time I got there, you were unconscious in the unforgiving hands of Black Guards and in need of serious help.”

Zav looked down at his bandages. He flexed his abdominal muscles and felt no pain, just a tiny bit of tenderness where the skin had knitted back together. Zav carefully unwound the bandage and was glad to see that his injury was fully healed.

“Where are we?”

Raphael smiled mysteriously. “Come downstairs, perhaps that will jog your memory.”

Zav followed him downstairs. He froze on the bottom step when he recognized the half-dilapidated sitting room of the old, grizzled Rafe. Raphael was sitting on a chair, waiting for him with a huge grin.

“Recognize where you are now?” he asked.

Zav nodded. He walked up to the window and looked out, marveling at how the people went about their lives outside, seeming oblivious to the events of last night.

“I am eager to reunite with the others soon, but first...”

He knew that before he could join Jonah in Mongolia, he needed to deal with the rogues once and for all, or they would never get any peace. He wanted Jonah to live freely, not constantly be looking over his shoulder and confined to the sanctuary for fear of the Black Guards coming after him.

Zav looked at Raphael. “Tell me, what do I do next?” he asked, no longer caring about asking an angel for help. The enemy of his enemy was his friend—or someone on the same side as him in any case. Raphael looked just as eager to thwart the rogues as him.

“You’re asking me?”

“I am under no illusion that we are looking out for each other’s well-being for the sake of kindness or goodwill. I know better than that,” Zav replied. “It would seem to me that we are currently working toward the same goal.”

“And what goal might that be?”

“To defeat the Black Guards.”

Raphael raised an eyebrow and studied Zav for a long moment. Then he smiled knowingly.

“Trust a devil to be so skeptical of everything, always questioning someone’s good intentions. You’re right; I do have some ulterior motives.”

Zav expected nothing less.

Raphael continued. “There is unrest in Heaven... someone has set into motion a power play to try and overthrow the Council of Fourteen,” he explained. “This someone is the leader of the most radical of the angels who believe that humans should have their free will taken from them as free will is what causes them to sin.”

“It will certainly make your job to save their souls so much easier,” Zav said sarcastically.

Raphael cast him a sharp look. “I would have thought that someone who has so long ago exercised his own freedom of choice would find it abominable that someone is campaigning to abolish this freedom,” he replied brusquely.

“Touché. Very well, how do we make this situation mutually beneficial?”

“I have been tasked with finding this angel, the leader of the Black Guards. Caspiel is his agent here on earth,” Raphael explained. “Defeating them will deal a blow to their faction and hopefully expose this renegade and his coconspirators back in heaven.”

Zav straightened up, remembering something from earlier.

“Caspiel mentioned a name,” he said. “I dare say I’m not surprised about who this ringleader might be.”

Raphael raised an eyebrow then motioned for him to continue.

“Eliel.”

The Archangel’s eyes widened for a second before narrowing. He let out a deep sigh and ran a hand through his hair. “Not surprising, indeed. I had my suspicions, but couldn’t find anything concrete.”

“He’s always been a dogmatist. I always thought it was only a matter of time before he stirred up trouble,” Zav snorted.

Raphael’s face darkened. “Too much trouble, as Gabriel reports. He’s found himself a lot of supporters, and not all of them from Heaven. There’s talk that he has an ally among the devils, as well.”

This news was disturbing to Zav. He couldn’t care less about what went on in Heaven, but Hell was a different matter.

“I can understand Eliel and his band of merry rogues causing trouble, but I simply cannot fathom why any of my kind would concern themselves with this,” he confessed. “We vowed to remove ourselves from any human affairs.”

“I cannot tell you the reasons, for they are unclear to us at this time, but know that Lucifer is looking into it,” Raphael sighed. “Which brings us back to the matter at hand. I don’t think it will come as a surprise to you that Eliel’s voice was the loudest against you and Zephon.”

Zav’s mood soured. “Of course it was.”

“So now you see how helping me could benefit you?” Raphael asked.

Zav nodded. He knew that assisting Raphael would also help him in getting the rogues to back off and hopefully stay away from him and Jonah.

“You did say the rogues will be more eager for my blood,” Zav said. “I am equally eager for theirs.”

“And we will use that to our advantage! The rogues will think you are trapped here with no help in sight, and they’ll surely move in for the kill. We know otherwise.”

Zav thought for a second before realizing what Raphael meant. “You wish to use me as bait.”

“You are a sharp one, aren’t you?” Raphael grinned. “My presence here has made the rogues disappear though I know they are still in the area.”

“Then how do you expect them to rise to the bait with you hanging around?”

Raphael *tsked*, looking disappointed in him. “I will clearly need to leave the area, Zaviel. Not too far away, but far enough that they will feel comfortable enough to approach you.”

“Putting myself out in the open when I am vulnerable like this, and with more than a dozen rogues out for my head, and without immediate backup is not my idea of fun,” Zav told him reluctantly.

“Not the big bad devil you once were?”

“I find that false bravado has no place here, do you? I know my limitations, and if I am to get back to Jonah in one piece, I need to acknowledge that I am at a disadvantage.”

Raphael nodded at him approvingly. “I see how that would make anyone cautious. Do not worry, I won’t be too far and will come immediately once I sense that you’re in danger. No trumpets needed.”

He gave Zav an earnest look meant to reassure him, but Zav was still having difficulty trusting him.

Raphael sighed. “There is one more reason why I am helping you,” he revealed. “The Almighty One has deemed your mission noble and your heart true, and it is by His grace that I am here.”

Zav was taken aback. He thought himself neither noble nor true, but if it got him God’s support, well, he wouldn’t say no to that.

“All right, let’s dangle me in front of Caspiel and his followers and see if they bite.”

“It’s not if they bite, it’s when,” Raphael corrected with a wink. “I’d say it wouldn’t take much time for them to be caught in our net.”

“And then it’s endgame.”

Zav watched Lagrasse from his perch on the abbey’s bell tower. His archangel accomplice had left him for the mountains of the Pyrenees just before dusk, and Zav was on his own for now.

The stars looked extra bright that night, and Zav supposed both angels and devils alike had their gazes trained on this impending confrontation.

“You’ve certainly proved to be a serious thorn in my side.”

Zav tensed but didn’t turn around.

“I could say the same about you,” he responded calmly, though he was anything but on the inside.

Caspiel came around the belfry to sit beside him, their legs dangling over the edge almost companionably.

The town was eerily silent; Zav could see no one outside even though the hour was still early. It was as if the humans knew it wasn’t safe. The abbey, too, was dark and still. No prayers or hymns sung, no footsteps ringing in the corridors.

“Twice now you’ve made a fool of us,” Caspiel told him.

“Did you really expect anything less from me?”

“And here I was putting stock in your self-serving nature, but you just had to be contrary, didn’t you?”

Caspiel shook his head in disgust though he made no offensive moves toward Zav. “I think it surprised everybody that you would turn out to be so honorable,” he continued.

Zav scoffed. Was he truly going soft? “It surprised me too.”

“Well, I have to warn you that you’ve made quite an impression on some very powerful beings... and it’s not all that great,” Caspiel said.

There was a flicker of movement down below, and the moon was bright enough for Zav to see the same band of angels from earlier blink into view. One by one they arrived, standing in the courtyard like soldiers waiting for battle. Next to him Caspiel stirred then levered himself to stand. Zav got up as well, and they locked eyes for the first time that night.

Caspiel was the first to tear his gaze away, looking around them deliberately.

“What’s this? Are you alone?” he asked mockingly. “I think it was a rather bad idea on your part to send everyone away. Who will have your back now?”

It took all he had to rein in his growing temper. Zav remained silent, but Caspiel wasn’t done talking yet, anyway.

“And it seems that even your heavenly ally has abandoned you as well.”

“So it would seem,” Zav replied quietly. He took a quick glance at the rogues, now two dozen strong. “I suppose I should be flattered that you think you need all of them to take me down—alone and abandoned and with crippled powers.”

“I am taking no chances with you.”

Between one second and the next, Caspiel had a spear in hand, and Zav barely avoided his strike. He leaped backward and nearly fell off the edge before regaining his footing. He led Caspiel on a merry chase around the belfry. Zav only needed to give Raphael and his allies a chance to get here.

There was a *whoosh* of air as the spear glanced past his ear, leaving behind a burning sting where it grazed his lobe. Zav hissed though the cut was already healing.

The rogues all had their attention on the two of them, their faces upturned while they watched Caspiel take him on. The belfry was a precarious battlefield for Zav as Caspiel proved to be nimble and capable despite his nonchalant attitude. His blade sliced the air in front of Zav and cut through his thin shirt, leaving behind a line of blood where it nicked his skin. The next strike hit the bell before its rebound struck the stone wall beside it, sending crumbling rocks and chunks of mortar down to the ground.

Zav tripped on the dislodged rubble, and he grunted as he broke his fall backward with his hands. The sharp rocks cut his palms, making him bleed. He brought up an arm just in time to block the downward swing of Caspiel’s spear, then reached out with his other hand and grabbed it.

He willed his blood to run along its haft to act as a conductor while lightning crackled on his fingertips. He let it follow the lines of blood along the wood and shock the angel in hopes of getting him to let go. Instead, Caspiel’s hand spasmed and tightened on his spear, which wasn’t what Zav had hoped for.

Caspriel snarled and shoved against him with his spear, overbalancing Zav and pushing him closer to the edge. Zav kept his grip on the spear and prepared for another bolt, but it fizzed out just as fast as it had formed. Zav felt a shift in the air as his magic tried to reach out to him from behind some barrier.

“You’ve certainly come a long way, Zaviel. I’m almost proud of you... a devil on his way to salvation. We could have been brothers again.” Caspiel grinned maliciously at Zav. “I’m afraid it all ends here.”

He then yanked his weapon out of Zav's grasp and hefted it above his head, the sharp, barbed head poised to come down on Zav.

"That's right, it does," Zav answered back.

He caught Caspiel off guard with a kick to the shin, causing him to stagger back, unbalanced. Zav reached out again, took hold of the spear, and jerked it away from him before pushing himself over the edge. He hurtled headfirst to the ground with the spear clutched tightly against his chest, before twisting around to bring it in front of him, its deadly tip pointed straight at his target.

It was over before anyone even realized what he'd meant to do. There was a vacuum of sound as the spear pierced the red-haired angel just above the chest, and all the air was sucked in from around them. Then his being exploded in a shower of light as a supersonic shock wave knocked everyone off their feet.

Zav's wings unfurled just before he hit the ground and he took off, wings scraping the dirt. There were angels right on his heels, their own spears and swords aloft while they surrounded him. They cut off his escape from all directions, their eyes ablaze with fury.

They parted before Caspiel, who looked absolutely murderous.

"Let us add the crime of fratricide to your list of infractions, shall we?"

"He was not my brother, and neither are you," Zav spat. "And if you come any closer, I'll make sure that every single one of you join him."

Caspriel was practically foaming at the mouth. He held out his hand, and his spear came flying into his open palm.

"Filthy devil! How dare you threaten the sons of God!"

"I am His son, too. And from what I've been told, He's been rooting for me all along."

"Blasphemy!" Caspiel roared. "You have turned your back on Him, so He has turned from you as well."

The rogues closed in on Zav with their own weapons all pointed at him, and Zav prepared himself. He drew on the power of his lightning until the sky darkened with the growing clouds above. They blocked out the moon and the stars as lightning raced through them. Thunder rumbled ominously in its wake, and Zav felt as if he was a parched desert, waiting for rain to quench his thirst. And it did.

It started to rain heavily just as the first of the rogues reached him. The clouds roared in anger, producing a lightning bolt so bright that Zav had to shield his eyes from it. It cleaved the rogue straight through then leaped to the next target before dissipating.

Zav's skin prickled, and all the runes on his arms glowed brightly, and it was as if a dam had burst, and he was free again. Lightning greeted his outstretched hands, and he was able to harness its powers, unfettered by any conditions or bargains that had been set to control it. He was lightning once more.

Another rogue fell as a series of bolts rained down from the heavens, but Zav noticed that more had arrived, called to action by the dissolution of their brethren.

Despite regaining his full powers, Zav was slowly being overwhelmed by the rogues as they sought to overpower him.

He'd just backed himself against a tower with the rogues closing in when they were all startled by the blaring of a horn. Zav looked up to see another angel hovering above everyone else, a long, golden trumpet in her hands. She blew on it again and from behind her, just over the rise of the mountains, appeared a great host led by Raphael carrying a flaming staff.

The rogues turned away from him to meet the new arrivals, and Zav watched as brother fought against brother, their weapons meeting again and again in a sonorous clang.

"Zav!" a familiar voice yelled out, and he glanced to the side to see his brother barreling toward him with a wicked grin.

"You didn't think we'd let you have all the fun now, did you?" Dyn asked. He clapped Zav on the shoulder before flying off, his black wings a welcome sight among the angels' white ones.

A warm body collided against him, and his lightning flared up instinctively before the familiar weight of arms around his waist registered in his brain. He looked down, shocked to see the top of Jonah's head as the other embraced him tightly.

"What are you doing here?" he yelled over the sound of battle.

Jonah looked up with damp eyes. "Where else would I be?" he asked Zav tearfully.

There was a shout close by, and Zav was shocked to see Penemue intercept a rogue that was coming for the pair. He had a sword in hand which he used to knock his opponent's weapon out of his hand. Another angel then darted in and secured the rogue's hands behind his back.

Zav saw something flash to his right, and he turned just in time to see Jonah's arm come up to block the sword that was coming straight at them. He shouted in alarm, but Jonah's arm glowed as runes lit up all over it, and a strong blast of magic knocked Caspiel clear off his feet. He skidded across the ground and came to a stop right in front of Dyn, who bent down to sneer at him.

And just like that the battle was over. The rain stopped, and the clouds parted to reveal the star-laden sky once again.

One of Raphael's angels hauled Caspiel up to his feet while another restrained him. Raphael stepped forward and looked at the rogues they'd captured—twenty-eight in all—giving them all a stern glance.

He addressed them all by name before listing the crimes they'd committed. "You are to be taken in front of the Council, to be tried and judged for the infractions you've committed."

Raphael nodded to the dark-haired angel beside him, who in turn signaled to the other angels, and they gathered the apprehended rogues before departing.

Zav watched them streak across the heavens and spared a brief moment to wonder if any human was watching the unexpected meteor shower that was happening right now. Then he turned his attention to Jonah and the others, who he still couldn't believe were here.

Jonah met his gaze and smiled. He embraced Zav tightly, fingers buried in his hair.

"Zav, it's over! We did it!" he cried.

Zav looked at Raphael over Jonah's head, and the archangel nodded at him seriously.

"There are some more things we need to discuss," he told Zav. "He's right, it's over."

A great burden lifted off Zav's shoulders, and he brought his arms up to hug Jonah just as hard. It was over. They'd won and Jonah was in his arms, safe. Whatever Raphael had to tell him could wait. Being here right here, right now, was all he needed.

Epilogue

Mongolia was just as Zav remembered it, full of open land and starlit skies as far as the eye could see. It had been some weeks since the battle with the rogues, and everyone had settled well in what Nymi now called *divaajin*—haven.

The Zunghar, who had now made their home on the other side of the lake, had welcomed Zav's return with open arms. They also extended their hospitality to Jonah and the others, and despite the initial distrust they had of another giant, Nymi's gentle personality was slowly winning them over.

The Nephilim loved to cavort around the lake during the day, even sometimes venturing as far as the volcanic fields before returning to the cave and playing with the animals living there. He would sometimes succeed in getting Zav to come along in his adventures, but more often than not, Zav was never far from Jonah's side.

Jonah, who seemed to have regained a fraction of his powers yet remained unable to remember anything from his angelic life, was just as eager to spend time with him.

They were both lying on the sand that night, the waves lapping at their feet while they watched the stars. Jonah had been strangely reserved the first two days after they'd arrived. Zav had been baffled and not a little bit upset, but he had also understood that Jonah needed time to make sense of everything that had happened. On the morning of their third day in their new home, Zav stepped outside of their *ger* to see Jonah standing on the banks of the lake, looking out into the water solemnly. Then he turned around and saw Zav behind him, and his smile made Zav's knees shake.

There were still days when Jonah would retreat into himself, but he always sought Zav's company after his introspection. He never shied away from Zav's touch and was, more often than not, the one to initiate an intimate caress or a lingering kiss between them.

Zav thought it was only a matter of time until they finally took the next step, and he could fulfill the promise he made in that darkened bathroom in Lagrasse. He wasn't wrong.

Afterward, they lay side by side on the sand, sweat cooling on their overheated skin, and Zav was quick to note that his lover was a quick study in lovemaking despite Jonah's claims of inexperience.

“Hurry, make a wish!” Jonah suddenly exclaimed, jolting Zav out of his thoughts. He pointed a long finger at a shooting star above them.

Zav glanced up briefly before returning his gaze back to his lover. “Everything I’ve wished for is right here in my arms,” he said. “Besides, you know what those really are, and I have no intention of wishing banishment on a disgraced rogue.”

The other man gave him a look, then sighed and plopped back on the ground.

“Would you be mad at me for saying that I kinda feel bad for them?”

He wiggled restlessly beside Zav, his naked skin covered in drying sweat and white sand. Zav reached out to try to wipe it off, but it stubbornly remained on Jonah’s skin.

“Not mad, no, but maybe curious. And confused.” Zav couldn’t find it in him to feel any sympathy for the rogues, whose punishments were now being meted out.

Jonah turned over to dig his elbows in the sand, propping himself up, so he could look Zav in the eye.

“I don’t know... maybe I feel bad because it happened to me, too.”

“Sweetheart, there’s a big difference in what’s going on here,” Zav explained. “You were banished because you loved me. Those rogues out there are being exiled because they chose to use their powers for the wrong reasons.”

He looked away from Jonah. “Do you ever wish that you were still an angel? Do you wish that you could have cast me aside to remain as one?” he asked hesitantly, unable to meet Jonah’s eye.

Jonah was silent. He looked down and drew on the sand with his finger, and Zav didn’t know if he could bear it if Jonah said yes.

“I don’t know if I’d want to still be an angel... that existence is unknown to me. What I do know is that I regret every single moment that we had to spend apart, and being here with you now, I wouldn’t wish for anything else,” Jonah finally said.

Zav sighed his relief. He beamed up at Jonah, who chuckled briefly before turning serious again.

“Okay, there is something I wish for.”

“What is it?”

“Oh, don’t look so tense.” Jonah smiled, poking Zav in the chest. “I only wish that we knew what happens now? Are we truly safe here, or are there anymore rogues looking to come after us?”

Footsteps crunched a few feet from them, and they both sat up to see who it was. Jonah quickly flopped back down on his front to cover his nudity when Raphael showed himself. Zav had no such inhibition. He stood up, uncaring of his own nakedness, and greeted Raphael politely.

The archangel had left quickly after their confrontation with the rogues but had promised to return once the matter was settled to talk with Zav. He’d asked them to allow him to come to their sanctuary, and Zav had reluctantly agreed. He was back now, though, and the expression on his face was carefully neutral.

“I don’t think any of us can take bad news,” Jonah told him warily.

“Not bad, exactly,” Raphael answered slowly. He glanced at Zav. “It depends on Zaviel whether it will be welcome news or not.”

Zav and Jonah glanced at each other apprehensively, then Jonah reached out to grab his pants and handed Zav his. Raphael waited until they were sufficiently clothed.

“Tell us what news you have, then,” Zav said.

“It concerns your presence here. The council has reached the consensus that the decision should rest with you,” Raphael disclosed. “I, for one, think that you would wish to remain here.”

“Yes.”

Raphael held out a hand to interrupt him. “There are conditions should you choose to stay.”

“More conditions? Aren’t you all tired of bargaining and working out deals on just about everything?” Jonah asked incredulously.

“I’m afraid not.”

Jonah crossed his arms unhappily, but Zav gave him a reassuring smile.

“Let’s hear it.”

“I must first say that both the angels and the devils agreed on this. By you staying here, you upset the balance. You know the rules.”

Zav did. He knew that high-ranking angels and devils were normally not permitted to linger in this world for very long. Each side was suspicious of the other, and having the more powerful of their kind on earth could be viewed by their opponents as a tactic to amass power. Zav, as one of Lucifer's distinguished lieutenants, would naturally be seen by the angels as even more suspect.

He suddenly realized what he must do to restore the balance, and Raphael seemed to know that he understood.

"I will need assurance that we will be safe here, and that no one will come after us and seek to do us harm," Zav demanded.

"You have the word of the Council. Your brothers demanded they be allowed to visit you from time to time as well, and there's no doubt they will be keeping a close eye on things."

"Then there's nothing more for me to say other than, I consent."

Jonah looked confused, and Zav explained to him that in order for the balance to be restored, Zav could not possess all of his powers while here, and he would therefore need to relinquish most of them.

"What? You can't do that! I know how hard it was for you, when your powers were restricted," Jonah protested.

"It means nothing to me now. It's a small price to pay to be able to stay with you, and the Council's word is always true. We're as safe as we can be." Zav shrugged.

Jonah didn't look convinced, but he let it drop. They chatted with Raphael some more, and Zav could sense that Jonah wanted to ask Raphael about the rogues but was holding back. He nudged his lover in the side and turned to the archangel with a raised eyebrow.

"Did you find the rest of the conspirators?"

Raphael sighed deeply and shook his head. "Not yet. The good news is that things have settled down, for now at least."

"And the rogues?"

"Exiled, as you probably have already guessed," Raphael replied, pointing at the sky. "They are to start over as humans and live their lives as one until such time as their mortal bodies turn to dust. Only then can they return to the heavens and regain their place among their brothers once again."

“Seems harsh,” Jonah commented.

Zav disagreed. “It is just,” he said.

Raphael opened his mouth then hesitated. He looked over his shoulder to where their *ger* stood before turning his gaze back to the couple. Zav raised an eyebrow at him, unsure what the look on their guest’s face was for.

“There is one other thing,” Raphael finally said.

The couple glanced at each other briefly before Zav took a deep breath, steeling himself.

“What is it?” he asked worriedly.

“A great blow was dealt to the Black Guards when Eliel and his rogues were banished, but the Council believes there are others we have missed,” Raphael told them seriously. “We still do not know who their devil conspirators are.”

Jonah reached for Zav’s hand and gripped it tightly. “So this isn’t over?”

“It will take them a while to regroup, and we will be vigilant.” Raphael looked behind him again. “There are whispers floating around in Heaven that the Guards are interested in your Nephilim friend. They seem to believe that he is one of the seals.”

Zav stiffened and Jonah looked at him askance. He kept his gaze on Raphael, though, mind whirling at the implication, and unable to believe that he’d heard right.

“What does that mean?” Jonah finally asked.

“Raphael is referring to the seven seals needed to herald the end of the world. Your holy book speaks of it, and though my brethren and I scoff at the multitude of inaccuracies in its pages, some of its text is true.”

At this, Raphael clucked his tongue and looked annoyed with himself. “I have brought more worries on your doorstep, when that wasn’t my intention.”

“No, it’s good that you told us, so that we may keep a close eye on Nymi,” Zav reassured him.

Raphael pursed his lips. “Still, I wouldn’t worry too much. The Council has put a safeguard into place to prevent the seals falling into the wrong hands. I cannot tell you anymore than what I already have.”

Zav nodded in acceptance. He wondered if Pen knew and vowed to speak to his friend when they could get a moment alone.

“Keep us informed?” he asked Raphael.

Their guest promised that he would, and no more was said about the matter. They talked of more pleasant things before Raphael made his excuses to leave. He reached inside his voluminous robes to present them with a new golden trumpet, which he handed over to Jonah.

“I doubt you’ll need it but just in case, I trust you know what to do.”

Jonah surprised them both when he embraced the archangel and thanked him sincerely. Then he let him go with a small blush.

“Please come visit us soon,” he told Raphael.

Raphael smiled at him kindly and nodded before saying good-bye. The lovers watched him disappear in a column of light that flew up into the sky before streaking across the heavens as a bright meteor.

Zav pulled Jonah close and kissed him soundly on the lips.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too. Are you sure you won’t mind staying?” Jonah asked worriedly.

A shout from the direction of their *ger* interrupted them, followed by hysterical laughter. Zav gave the other man another kiss. “Nowhere I’d rather be. Besides, I have a feeling that things will never get boring around here.” He smirked.

He steered Jonah toward home, just in time to see Pen rush outside. He looked at Zav hopefully.

“Was that Dyn?”

Zav shook his head regretfully, and Pen’s shoulders slumped.

“I was too standoffish with him, wasn’t I? Why would he even want to come visit when all we did was fight?”

Zav hooked an arm around his friend’s shoulder and jostled him gently.

“Hey, he promised Nymi he’d be back in time for his birthday. Dyn never breaks his promises,” he said encouragingly.

He couldn’t help the brief chuckle that escaped him when Pen perked up immediately.

“I never thought he’d be so great with Nymi, but he is.”

Jonah stepped close and hooked his arm through Pen’s.

“Nymi’s birthday is in three months. That means Dyn will be here before you know it.”

Pen nodded. He looked up at the sky and smiled wistfully, then he jerked his head toward the large *ger* a few yards away.

“Come on, dinner’s ready,” he said.

The three of them walked arm in arm, and as they approached their new home, the door opened, and Nymi’s head poked out.

“Khatun burned the fish!”

Zav laughed and then looked at Jonah from behind Pen’s back. Jonah laughed before breaking away from them. He ran home with his growing hair whipping in the wind, yelling, “Not the fish!”

Zav shook his head in amusement as he and Pen trailed after him more sedately.

Above them, the stars twinkled merrily.

The End

Author Bio

L.E. lives in the Northeast where the weather is either super cold or hellishly hot, and perfect days are few and far in between. She spends those long winter days reading, daydreaming, and knitting. Come spring, she's ready to let loose in the garden with her hands in the dirt, then it's back indoors when it gets too hot. Besides all that, she loves to listen to her mom's stories of the past, watch baseball with her dad, and just plain spend some quality time with her brother.

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