

50,000 words.

Father Figure

HELL ON EARTH 2

by Stacy Phay

CHAPTER ONE

Chapter

"You put me in here, why are we being so covert about taking me out?" Chloe whispered. She was standing behind Jonathan who was carefully sticking his head out the door of her private hospital room.

"We can't just check you out and walk out the front door, his spies are everywhere," Jonathan whispered back at her before motioning for her to follow him out.

"Could you make yourself look more obvious?" Chloe stepped up next to Jonathan who was compulsively checking the hallways and around corners. "Just walk, it isn't against the rules for me to be out of my room."

Jonathan slowed to a pace that indicated they were simply on a casual stroll, through a sterile hospital hallway, white walls, grey floor tiles and bright fluorescent lights highlighted their surroundings. As if Chloe's outfit wasn't already a dead giveaway. White pants, white t-shirt, white cardigan, sensible white shoes.

"You're really not going to tell me what we're doing? Why you're taking me out of here, in such an inefficient manner? Don't get me wrong, I am quite entertained, I haven't had any fun since you put me in this nut house, excuse me 'safe hiding place,'" She held up her fingers in quotes and hated herself immediately.

"There has been movement on both fronts, we, I need a new plan, by the time they figure out you're not here, we'll be on our way to putting it in motion," Jonathan stopped at a side door marked Emergency Exit. He said a silent prayer and pulled the lever to open it, bracing for alarms to sound. It was silent. He pulled Chloe into the sunlight.

Abby sat in the passenger's seat of a beat down Toyota

sedan. "Act natural," she said out loud to the empty car. "What does that even mean?" A tap on her window startled her. She took a deep breath and looked over to see who it was. A security guard. Abby hit the button to roll down her window and smiled as angelically as she remembered how to. "Something wrong?"

"This is a no parking zone, I need you to move your car," the guard did not even flinch at her smile.

"I'm just waiting for someone, they should be back any minute now," her voice cracked at that last part, realizing the implications, if they were, in fact, just about to come out of the emergency exit she had disabled. She watched as the guard scanned the inside of the car. Something caught the guard's attention and he looked behind him. Abby tensed up.

"I'll be back in 5 minutes, if you're still here we're going to have a problem," he said with no emotion and turned toward whatever noises he had heard in the distance.

A minute later Jonathan and Chloe exited the door and ran toward the car. Chloe stopped. "You're kidding," she snapped at Jonathan who was opening the driver's side door. "You know, I

think maybe you two are the ones who belong in there," she pointed to the building behind her.

"Get in the car Chloe," Jonathan snapped back at her.

Chloe stood still.

Abby leaned over and shouted out the driver's side window "In about three minutes a security guard is coming back to check that I have moved the car, you might want to just get in."

Chloe looked around, saw that a shadow was rounding the corner of the building, and bolted to the car, jumping in the back seat. "Go!"

Jonathan pulled the sedan onto the freeway and looked into the rearview mirror at Chloe, who was sulking in the back. "I have a plan, it is not a perfect plan, but it is at least a plan, which is more than I have had in the six months since you and your friends opened the gates of hell on us," he looked away from the mirror. "I need both of you in this plan if it is going to work," he glanced at Abby who was staring intently at the screen of her phone. She looked up at him and rolled her eyes

when she felt his stare on her.

"Are you going to fill me in on this plan, or am I meant to just follow it?" Chloe asked after several quiet minutes.

"You will know what you need to, when you need to,"  
Jonathan answered.

Chloe folded her arms across her chest and went back to sulking.

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"You called for me?" Azazel spoke to the back of the large red leather chair.

"Do you have any news for me, brother?" the crackly voice rang through the room, mixed with the burning fire in front of the chair and the dark, smoky walls on the space. Large bookshelves were lined with ancient texts, some were laid out on tables, many torn at the spines.

Azazel shifted his weight from left to right and back

again. "No, Lucifer, there has been no progress," he answered quietly, hoping the words would not make their way to his brother's ears.

Lucifer's large shadow began to illuminate across the wall in front of him, the fire in the giant fireplace leapt at his movement. He walked toward Azazel. Azazel stood still, tensing his muscles in anticipation for whatever wrath was coming. Lucifer stopped in front of him, his black eyes stared through his brother like fire burning through paper. Next to each other they were the same size, but Lucifer was clearly the bigger force. And he never let Azazel forget it.

"When you brought that, human, to me, you assured me he would be useful," Lucifer spoke more evenly now. "And yet, here you are, once again, telling me that you have nothing."

"I am sorry, brother, it has been, difficult, getting him to be of any use," Azazel told him.

Lucifer laughed, it was a hearty boom, and although it was clearly laughter it did not sound light and fun. "You amuse me, brother," he smiled, a gesture that moved his lips into a curl,

but did nothing to change his face or eyes. "You are one of the most powerful demons in Hell and you are being defeated by a mortal," he taunted Azazel.

"Not just any mortal," Azazel argued.

Lucifer looked through Azazel once again, and remembered the last time they were in this room.

"This is your mess, Azazel," Lucifer reminded his brother, again. "I am going to hold you personally responsible for finding a way out of it. And get him out of my sight before I change my mind about killing him!" his voice boomed through the room.

"I thought you would be happy to see me, Lucy," Tyler cracked a devilish smile at the devil himself.

Lucifer turned from the fireplace and stared at Tyler, wondering what would possess a human to speak to him directly. "Excuse me?"

"You don't remember me," it was more of a statement than a



question. Tyler pulled his arms free from Azazel's grasp and held his hands up to show he was not going to try anything. He reached for the hem of his shirt and lifted up, past his abs. Just over his right pec was a burn mark in the shape of a perfect crescent moon. "You already tasted my soul. You didn't like it." Tyler paused. "You said I was too damaged for hell. It seems I was too damaged for heaven too. You both left me in that church, to suffer, to repent for sins I had not committed. Maybe that's why I was chosen to help stop you. Collateral damage no one would miss. You lost, they won, hell is closed," Tyler spit out at him.

Lucifer showed no signs of recognition. He snapped his fingers at Azazel "get out of here, and take the mortal with you!"

"Lucifer!" Azazel was screaming.

Lucifer's attention snapped back to the present. "Well, while you have been busy playing with your toy, my minions have been hard at work, and they have had many interesting things to say," Lucifer nodded to one of his guards to open the door he was standing in front of. The security guard who had questioned

Abby entered the room and bowed at Lucifer obediently. Lucifer nodded in approval.

"The angel, the preacher and the vessel are on the move," the security guard told them.

"On the move where?" Azazel asked, and quickly glanced at Lucifer, knowing he had spoken out of turn. The security guard remained silent.

"Any idea where they were heading?" Lucifer rephrased the question.

"I was unable to follow them," the security guard said in a sheepish voice. "I had to disappear before I could find out anything, I had only just gone back to where the angel had been waiting when I saw them pull away. It was a sedan, black, I can find it again," he seemed to be begging for forgiveness.

"No need to grovel, my friend, you have done as I asked," Lucifer spoke to the security guard like he was a small animal. He approached the man and put his hand on his shoulder. The white shirt of the uniform began to smoke. The security guard's

eyes began to blacken, and he fell to the ground, holding his throat. "You have been a great servant, but you are no longer needed."

The security guard slumped on the floor without movement. Lucifer turned his attention to Azazel. "I want to know what they are up to, and I want to know now, not when you get around to it," he tapped his finger on one of the books on his table, it had burn marks all over it. "Bring the mortal to me," he nodded to his guard to open the door for Azazel. Azazel did not move toward the door. "Oh, don't be dramatic, brother, I am not going to hurt the boy, I just want to talk to him."

Azazel turned and headed toward the door. It was a defiant move, no one turned their back on Lucifer, it was unwise. But he knew his brother would not hurt him, not yet anyway.

#

Tyler felt like his entire body, inside and out, was on fire. And he looked that way too. He had been breathing hot, smoky air for what seemed to be years, time had a way of avoiding any movement other than slow, down on the lower plane. Lying on a hard slab of concrete that never got cool, despite the descriptions of concrete one would be accustomed to, he had

a lot of time to think about how much this place reminded him of all the cliché stories he read about Hell. He wondered if Heaven was really white and ethereal and peaceful. It was those thoughts that he was lost in when Azazel tapped on the bars of his small cell. Tyler didn't move.

"Get up," Azazel commanded as he unlocked the cell door. "Lucifer wants to see you."

This made Tyler shift. He had not been in Lucifer's presence since the first day in his library. Was this how long it took to receive punishment on this plane? He wondered as he gingerly stood and faced Azazel.

"Going somewhere?" Tyler asked the demon after a brief once over. Azazel was dressed in a black suit with a deep red tie that matched the deep red stitches on the pockets and button holes of the tailored jacket. "You're looking quite dapper, for a demon." Dapper. Who says that?

Azazel grabbed Tyler by the arm, although they both knew he was not going to try escaping, anymore. After several failed attempts Tyler finally gave in to the facts. He was trapped

here. "Your friends are up to something and I have been tasked with finding out what," Azazel told the truth. It was a courtesy he had started extending, hoping it would build trust and open Tyler up. So far all it was doing was giving Tyler more fuel for his sharp tongue.

"Any idea what Lucy wants from me?" Tyler asked as they walked the corridor, passing other cells just like his. All empty. It made Tyler feel both comforted and unsettled at the same time. On the one hand, he was grateful there were no other poor souls down here being held prisoner, on the other, why was he the only one. When he remembered to, he felt honored. Most days he just felt alone.

"No, and I would adjust that attitude, you are becoming more of a liability and less of the helpful soldier I promised him you would be," Azazel put his hand on Tyler's chest to stop him at the door of Lucifer's library.

The touch made Tyler shiver. The sensation changed his demeanor and he straightened his spine, attempting to look both obedient and defiant. He followed Azazel into the room.

Lucifer was standing by his leather chair, staring into the fire of the stone fireplace. He did not notice they had entered. Azazel cleared his throat. Lucifer waited a few beats before turning to face them. "That will be all," he dismissed Azazel with a hand wave and that smile that did not really constitute a smile.

Azazel muttered something under his breath and nodded toward Lucifer before one last pleading "behave" look at Tyler. He exited. Tyler was alone. In the library, with the devil, and a candlestick. Tyler was amazed that his brain had such stupid timing. Lucifer's black eyes on him snapped him back to reality.

"You were right," Lucifer said. "I did not remember you."

"But now you do?" Tyler had hoped his mouth would not betray his will to keep it shut. It did.

"All your life, you have felt unwanted, unloved, untethered to any one person, one faith, one ideal, there is a reason for that," Lucifer told him. "You are what is known as an Omphalos." "Everything inside you, your heart, soul and mind, falls squarely in the middle," he continued, watching Tyler's face try

to process information. "I cannot take your soul, because you have no evil in you, and He cannot take it because, you have no good in you," he took slightly more pleasure in telling Tyler he had no light in him, overlooking the fact he had no darkness either.

Tyler tried to process this. "I don't belong, anywhere?"

Lucifer chuckled. "As much as I would love to help you believe that, the truth is, you belong on the middle plane, and that is the only place you belong, forever."

None of these words were processing for Tyler. Lucifer continued to watch him work it out in his mind. He finally got impatient. He grabbed the book he had been tapping his finger on and shoved it in Tyler's face. On the page in bold letters Tyler read "Omphalos," out loud. "A being who's soul cannot be used for good or evil. The Omphalos is an anomaly created by forces still unknown, to keep the forces of good and evil from destroying one another at the cost of humankind. Omphalos qualities become stronger when war between the Dark and the Light is impending, if an Omphalos is present, shifts in power between good and evil are imminent," Tyler looked up.

Lucifer took the book back with force, and slammed it on the table. "The thing is, Tyler, I cannot hold you here, any more than He can watch over you and save you from me. Do not mistake this as being immortal, you are still human, and can be killed. Unfortunately, for my side, the consequences of anyone on this plane killing you, are more dire than even I am willing to deal with," he admitted.

"Are there others? Like me?" Tyler wondered out loud. He was unsure how much information Lucifer was actually going to give him, despite him being forthcoming so far.

"No," Lucifer answered. "Do not mistake this as a victory, young one, I have not given up on my quest to rule the middle plane, and I will continue to pursue the vessel, she will have my child and I will win this war," he continued as noticed Tyler's face running through different emotions.

"Who else knows about this? About me, about what I am?" Tyler seemed to gloss over Lucifer's threat.

"About Omphalos? Both sides are aware of the myth, none



have come forward and admitted to believing it, you yourself? Azazel does not know, if that is what you are asking," Lucifer answered.

"If I am this, Omphalos thing, why could I not escape the dungeons? Why have I been held here, for, how long have I been here?" Tyler was starting to put things together, slowly.

"You were not able to escape because you were not aware of who you are, you have no faith, not even in yourself, now that you know, well, your mind will allow you to go wherever you choose," Lucifer paused. "I know, not very smart of me, making you aware of this, but I love a challenge, and I plan on running into you often, when I am ruling your plane with fire, and brimstone," he slammed his fist on the desk, knocking the book on Omphalos on the floor.

Tyler picked up the book. "I am going to borrow this," he tucked it under his arm and looked around the room, wondering if some sort of doorway or, exit to his own plane would appear now that he was looking for it. Nothing happened. He noticed Lucifer standing still, observing him. "I don't suppose you are going to help me get back to my own plane?"

Lucifer shook his head "No," he answered. "I gave you the information you needed, you have to figure out the rest on your own, and good luck with that book, it is in an ancient language I have only begun to translate. You were only able to read the page on Omphalos because I made it visible."

"Something tells me I will figure it out," Tyler's confidence seemed to be returning to him. "My mind will allow me to go wherever I choose," he repeated words Lucifer had said. "There's no place like home?" he closed his eyes and pictured his apartment. When he opened them he was still standing in the library, Lucifer was clearly enjoying the show. Tyler closed his eyes again and concentrated hard on one place, the place he wanted to be more than anything.

When he opened his eyes again he was standing in a living room, sparsely decorated, familiar though he had only been there once before. He searched the room for a phone. He was surprised to find a land line and then he wasn't. When the receiver had a dial tone he smiled. "Naturally," he said out loud as he dialed the number he had memorized.

"Hello?" Jonathan's voice came through the receiver and Tyler nearly lost his balance. "Hello?" Jonathan's voice got louder and more confused.

"Hi," Tyler finally spoke. He heard the sound of screeching tires and fumbling and general chaos over the line.

"How, what are you doing in my apartment?" Jonathan's voice was panicked, unsettled.

"I um, I will explain everything, just, where are you?" Tyler looked around the room and remembered waking up on the plain brown couch, he never did get an answer on how long he had been down on the lower plane.

"We were, I'm, I'm on my way home, right now," Jonathan sputtered out. "Are you safe, can you stay there?"

"Yes, yes, I'll explain everything, I just, not over the phone, I'll see you when you get here," Tyler knew it sounded too casual, but he was trying not to break down, everything had just gotten to be too much. He was beginning to realize how much he missed that voice. Any voice other than his own, or Azazel's,

but yeah, Jonathan's voice particularly. "How long?"

"An hour, if I don't get arrested for speeding," Jonathan answered.

Tyler set the handset back on its base, looked at it for a moment, as if it were going to ring again, or he did not know what. When he finally sat on the soft couch he realized even more things he had missed, being held underground. Softness, warmth, not just heat, but the feeling of being at home, even though this wasn't his own place. And comfort. But this comfort was mixed with so many other things. Questions. So many questions. He looked up at the ceiling and shook his head at it. "I bet you know all about this all along," he snarled at the air. "Asshole."

#

"What's happening?" Abby asked as Jonathan pulled the car back onto the highway. He didn't answer her, his focus was on the signs indicating the next exit. "Jonathan," she screamed his name. He snapped out of his single focus just as he was about to slam into the back of a slower car he had caught up to with his foot fully pressed on the gas pedal. The tires screeched, and the car slid to the side, but he avoided the collision and

collected himself. "Dammit what the hell Jonathan!" It was probably the only time Abby had ever sworn in her life. "Who was on the phone and where are you going in such a hurry?"

"Tyler. On the phone, was Tyler," he answered. Abby's shifted in her seat and Chloe sat forward enough to be close to the front seat. "He is just, there, I don't know how or why, he said he would explain when we got there," he knew it sounded unbelievable, and he knew Tyler was really only expecting him to show up.

"Lucifer, let him go?" Chloe asked.

"I have no idea," Jonathan was trying to put his brain back together to form coherent thought. He thought of the phone ringing, the caller ID showing his own home phone number, Tyler's voice, calm, healthy. He was about to tell them he sounded, fine, but he never got the chance.

Chloe let out a shrill scream that made Jonathan slam on the brakes again. This time the car behind them slammed into their rear end and sent them spinning off the side of the highway, into the metal railing. The airbags deployed, the

engine and tire smoked. Laughter rang out from the back seat.

"Brilliant," Azazel's usual tone of bemusement filled the car. "I would ask if we were there yet but I have no idea where you are going in such a hurry, and it's obvious you're not going anywhere in this piece of..." his voice cut off, Jonathan had reached back and grabbed him by the throat. Azazel reached up with his right arm and easily removed Jonathan's fingers from around his neck. He straightened his tie and jacket, brushing powder from the airbags from his dark suit. "Is that any way to greet someone you haven't seen in, what has it been, six months?"

"What, are, you, doing?" Chloe was returning to her surroundings, her bearings had been shifted with the appearance of the demon, and his arm across her chest, shielding her from impact. She pushed it away in disgust. "I thought you were done showing up out of nowhere."

"Your friends had you hidden pretty well," Azazel almost sounded like he admired them for it. "But since you're out in the open now, I was able to find you easily."

"Was that part of your genius plan?" Chloe shot a dirty look at Jonathan.

"It was a risk I was willing to take," Jonathan told her. "He can't take you into purgatory or Hell, you are still under the protection of the angels," he added.

There was a tap on the window. Jonathan rolled it down and saw a police officer standing there, he remembered his surroundings, and what had happened. An accident.

"Everyone OK in here, do we need any medical attention?" the officer was looking around the car, Chloe and Azazel with no visible marks, not even the look of dishevelment. Abby had the worst of it, and Jonathan was covered in airbag powder.

Jonathan looked around at his passengers "We're all good here," he nodded to them. They nodded back.

After handing over his license and registration and proof of insurance he turned his attention back to the situation.

"Ow," Abby's was tenderly running a hand over her face.

"Yeah, I bet that hurt, now that you're human," Azazel pointed at the long red mark that went from her forehead to her chin, from the airbag stitching.

Abby tried to move to take a swing at him but it hurt. Her ribs were bruised from the seatbelt.

"Why are you here Azazel?" Chloe tried to say it calmly, but her voice always sounded annoyed when it came to him.

"Lucifer sent me away, he thinks I don't know what's going on down there," Azazel started. "He found something out about your friend, the one we've had locked in our dungeons, and he let him go. Just like that, he let him leave," he sounded, not so much angry as, disappointed.

"Why?" Jonathan asked. He almost hoped Azazel didn't know, he wanted to hear it from Tyler himself.

Azazel turned his attention back to Abby "What do you know about the Omphalos?"



Abby cocked her head to the side, a habit she had not yet shed from her angel days. "A soul, who has no ties to good or evil, it's a myth," she answered.

"Yeah, turns out, not so much," Azazel was only addressing Abby now. "When I brought Tyler to Lucifer he was still defiant, strong willed. He challenged him, challenged the devil," his voice was one of admiration. "He said he'd been in Hell before, showed us his scar, left pec, perfect crescent moon, and then said something about Heaven not wanting him either. I didn't understand, but Lucifer did, apparently. While he was having me break Tyler's spirit and find a way to get him to help us get to her," he pointed at Chloe "he was translated old ancient text. When he called me in today I noticed a page had been fully translated. All I saw was the word. Omphalos."

"Tyler's not human?" Jonathan broke in to their conversation.

Abby turned to him "He's human, he just, his soul has no anchor. You know how we all believe that some people skew toward good, and others toward evil? Tyler will always remain directly in the middle," she explained.

"Why?" Chloe asked from the back.

"He," Azazel pointed up, "created man in his image, the good, the bad, the ugly," he continued. "But even He has someone, or something, to answer to. The universe is always looking out for itself. So an anomaly is created when the forces of good and evil are about to go to war," he paused. "Especially one that is meant to set in motion what Lucifer is calling a 'cleansing.'"

"What kind of cleansing?" Jonathan asked. He knew that word well, the cleansing of Earth when He decided man had failed him. Forty days and nights of floods and terror.

"Yes, that kind of cleansing, preacher," Azazel knew where Jonathan's mind had gone. Biblical verses and stories from childhood. Noah's Arc and animals two by two. "Except, it would be only Lucifer, this prodigal child he is trying to create, and a worthy mate, for him or her, depending on how well the ritual is performed."

The car was silent for a moment. "Here you go Mr. Cramer,"

the officer had returned with his papers. "You need any other help?"

"No, no thank you officer, have a good day," he knew it sounded fake, but he needed to get back to other things. And call a tow truck. He picked up his phone.

The phone rang three times before Tyler finally answered. "Hello?"

Jonathan took a deep breath "So, I'm going to be a bit longer than I planned," he put it mildly. "There was an accident, everything is fine, I just, need to call a tow truck and get a rental car and it's just going to take longer than I thought," his voice was cracking, the stress of the events and the news of the day was showing. He thought he might actually break down in tears.

"Okay, it's alright, just get here when you can, don't panic, I'm safe, I promise I am safe," Tyler assured him.

The car remained silent as they waited for the tow truck. No one knew what to say. There were still a million questions

that needed answers. Not the least of which was why Azazel was being so forthcoming with the information and why he was not so much in a hurry to get Chloe away from them and out of this protection she was under. Jonathan figured it had something to do with his last sentence, about the people Lucifer planned on saving. Azazel's name was noticeably missing. Maybe the demon had decided to stop being a part of the problem and help them stop his boss, brother, whatever he was. He tried not to think too hard on that, he had already had enough of bad people helping out because the alternative was unfavorable. That's why they were in this situation in the first place. Why Tyler had been held in Hell for six months, why he had to use his remaining faith on Chloe, who he promised to protect despite everything inside of him wanting to send her to Hell in Tyler's place.

When they were finally back on the road, heading in the direction of home, Abby broke the silence. "Why haven't you told Tyler that we're with you?" she whispered.

"I'm not sure," Jonathan answered after a pause. "I just, don't want him to get spooked, I don't want him to leave thinking something might go wrong. I don't know. I just want him

to know I am coming for him, he doesn't need to know anything more than that now, he doesn't need to know what we've been doing," he kept his eyes on the road in front of him.

"What we've been doing, is trying to get him back," Abby put her hand on his arm.

"What else do you know about this Omphalos?" Jonathan changed the subject.

"It's nothing bad," she told him. "He's just, always going to be someone who straddles the line between good and evil," she smiled. "He's special, that's all it means, Jonathan."

Jonathan shook his head. "We knew he was special, Abby, or we wouldn't be doing this, but what does that mean, for us, for him?"

"It means he has a lot to learn about himself, and his role in this war, and he is going to need us," she looked into the mirror, Chloe was sleeping, Azazel was watching trees and buildings go by as they drove. "All of us."

#

Tyler stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist. He reached up and wiped off the steam on the mirror and stared at the face looking back at him. In many ways it still looked like him. Same blue eyes and dark hair, same lines in places that reminded him he frowned too much. But he felt different. He was pale, gaunt, and tired. He thought he looked older, too. He shook off the need to stare at himself until something changed in his features, he wasn't sure what he was hoping for, and headed into Jonathan's bedroom. He stopped at the closet and for a moment wondered if he would find black suits and white shirts and nothing else. Surely preachers dressed in casual clothing on their days off, he concluded. He was happy to find jeans and a t-shirt, they were loose on him. He wondered if he was ever going to find his appetite again.

The sound of a key in the door woke Tyler up from a slumber he was desperately trying to fight, despite needing it terribly. He watched as Jonathan entered the apartment with delicacy, like it wasn't his own home. His demeanor did not change as their eyes met.

"I, um, had to borrow some of your clothes, sorry," Tyler said and tried to smile. Jonathan waved it off and tried to

return the gesture. Tyler could see the worry in Jonathan's eyes. "Yeah, I probably look like hell," he shook his head at the pun. He stepped forward and pulled Jonathan into an embrace. It was warm, comforting. And brief.

"So, I'm not alone," Jonathan pointed behind him.

Tyler raised his eyebrows, "Who's with you?"

Jonathan opened the door again. Abby entered first, followed by Chloe. And Azazel. "Before you panic, he's here to help," Jonathan measured Tyler's reaction.

"Her too?" Tyler pointed at Chloe.

Chloe and Jonathan nodded in unison. "We were on our way to..." Jonathan's voice trailed off, remembering no one had been informed of the plan, other than Abby. "I had a plan, I was getting ready to come get you, and then you called and he showed up and it just turned into a cluster of..." he was rambling.

Tyler shook his head and put a hand up. "It's fine, I know, I knew, you weren't just going to leave me there..."

After several awkward silent minutes Azazel cleared his throat "This has been a wonderful reunion," he quipped. "But we should probably move things along."

"When?" Tyler almost shouted the word. "When did you find out what I am?"

"Today, Tyler, today, just like you," Azazel told him. "That is the truth, Lucifer called on me and the page of that book was open on his table," he pointed at the book sitting on the coffee table. The five of them were sitting cramped together in the living room.

"Until today, both sides, angels and demons," Abby pointed to herself and then Azazel, she shot a look at him as he was about to comment, he kept quiet. "Thought the Omphalos was a myth. Something we were told by our elders to get us to understand we were not all that existed in this world."

"But you know the stories, you know what an Omphalos is, what I am?" Tyler's voice cracked, he was almost pleading.



"We can help you, we will help you," Abby assured him, once again shooting daggers at Azazel.

"What's going on?" Tyler finally asked her.

Azazel smiled, "Yes, Abby, tell the class what's going on with you."

"My angel powers were stripped. All of them, gone. It was the price I paid for defying Him, for convincing the Archangels to join the cause, for 'meddling in affairs that do not concern me,'" she mimicked a stern voice that could have only come from the almighty Himself.

"In a war between good and evil, how are the angels not meant to be a part of the fight?" Tyler asked.

Abby and Azazel both chuckled. "That war is still coming. The battle you experienced was meant to be between Lucifer and the mortal world. Gabriel got involved, and involved me, because he too felt that mortals would be, outnumbered, by Lucifer's forces," Abby explained.

"And Gabriel? Has he been punished?" Tyler asked.

"All of them, all of the archangels who came to your aid, have had their angelic powers lessened, they are no longer higher angels, their powers are at a level of one that has just become a part of the upper plane," Abby wiped tears from her eyes. "They have been tasked to remain here, on the middle plane, and refortify the gates between planes."

"Refortify?" Tyler asked. Azazel sat forward at this news. It was new to him.

"There are 21 missions along the coast of California, every single Archangel, including Michael, who is the only full powered high angel now, are traveling the state opening gates and fortifying them, the gates that had been located here, at the Abbey and Salvation, have been destroyed. The wards have been destroyed as well. The missions. Some will be gates into purgatory and some will be decoys. It is hallowed ground, the wards will be stronger, and it will be easier for Him to have human guards of His choosing to watch over them," Abby explained.

"How many?" Azazel asked. "Gates?"

"Three," Abby answered. "Only Gabriel and his brothers and sisters know which ones," Abby looked at Jonathan who had been quietly listening to all of this. "We were going to follow Gabriel, watch him, see if we could figure out which gates were real," she paused.

"We were going to make a trade," Jonathan looked right at Chloe when he said this. "But not really, I hadn't worked out the details but I was not going to let him take you both," he almost seemed apologetic.

"Lucifer is still planning on carrying out his plan, the ritual, the baby, he is not done with that yet," Tyler said.

"If anything he is more determined to make it happen than ever. It would be quite a feat, taking over the middle plane with an Omphalos protecting it," Azazel told them.

Tyler put his head in his hands and rubbed his eyes. He was exhausted. He was getting too much information and he did not know how to process what he was hearing, what he needed to do

about it. He reached for the book. "The text, is all in some sort of code, the only page that can be read in English is the one on what an Omphalos is. But there has to be more, there has to be instructions or something that will tell me, us, what it is I need to do, what I can do," he looked at the book and begged this to be true.

"It can be translated," Azazel and Abby said at the same time.

"By who?" Tyler asked.

"Not a who, a what," Abby answered. "Lucifer must have found the window," she looked at Azazel.

Azazel shrugged "If he did it's in his library somewhere, I didn't see it," he told her.

"A window, like an actual window with glass panes?" Tyler asked.

"No, it's a, piece of glass, a window between the universe and the planes. Almost like, a magnifying glass, I think you

would call it," Abby said.

"Are we talking about aliens here?" Tyler asked. "Hey, it's not out of the question!"

"It's not aliens, it's, hard to explain, it's, the stars, the planets, the, universe," Abby shrugged. "I don't know."

"It's aliens," Tyler told her. "Okay, I understand that we are in a time crunch here, Lucifer would not have given me the information I needed to get out of Hell if he wasn't planning something already," he said. "But I need to sleep, in an actual bed, at least for a few hours. And then I need food. Coffee and pancakes and bacon."

"He let you go because he wants to be challenged," Azazel told Tyler. "He let you go so that he can defeat you on your own turf, you were weak and fading on the lower plane because you are anchored here, and only here," he continued. "It might have been easier to defeat you, underground, while you were vulnerable, but it would not have been a victory he could brag about. And Lucifer likes to brag. So he let you go, and he is going to give you just enough time to get stronger, to learn

more about who you are, and then he will put whatever plan he has in motion. And I assure you, I was not let in on the plans."

"Good, then let's give him what he wants. A stronger Omphalos. One that has had sleep. And food," Tyler said.

Tyler sat on Jonathan's bed and forced himself to sit upright, not lie down on the soft mattress and just pass out. He watched Jonathan approach the bed and sit down on the other side of him. "When this is all over, we are going to have to pretend we're normal people and go on a date," Tyler tried to joke.

"I think we're way past the dating phase," Jonathan smiled at him. "We're well into the married for years and finishing each other's sentences stage, despite being apart for six months, not to mention the tenuous way we got together in the first place," he remembered the kiss in the church that was their silent promise to stop pretending they were on opposite sides of everything.

"Six months, I forgot to ask again, how long I had been gone. Time seemed to stand still down there, but I knew it was going by because every minute I felt further away from the

world, from you," Tyler stopped.

Jonathan crawled forward and wrapped himself around Tyler's body. He could feel the bones under his skin. Tyler grabbed his arm and pulled them tighter around himself. Jonathan pulled him backward and laid them both onto a pillow, he kissed Tyler gently on the neck, and then the temple, and whispered a goodnight into his ear. Tyler was already asleep.

#

The altar stood at the front of the church in its original form. Red ceiling tiles made of clay and decorated with blue, Jesus and Mary on either side of a painting of the crucifixion scene, a quant green gate protecting the space like a white picket fence might protect a house in a neighborhood that never has any crime in it.

"We should probably get the ritual started," a voice whispered. "Gabriel?"

"Yes, yes, you're right Uriel, let's begin," he turned to his companions, Uriel to his left, Saraqael on his right. They

each held up their hands, palms facing the altar, and spoke an incantation. "Tunc dicet et his qui a sinistris erunt: Discedite a me , maledicti, in ignem aeternum , qui paratus est diabolo et angelis eius" Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

The air in front of them shimmered briefly before a black rot iron gate appeared and disappeared in an instant. The angels dropped their arms to their sides and stood in silence. "It is done," Gabriel spoke. "Let us move on to the next mission."

"You really need to stop talking like you're from another plane," Uriel shook his head at Gabriel as he followed him out of the church. "I thought we were meant to be fitting in."

Saraqael's tinkering laughter was echoing through the mission walls. "Let us move on," she mocked. "Gabe, lighten up man."

"Gabe?" Uriel quipped at her.

"Yes, Gabe, Uri, Sara," she pointed at Gabriel, Uriel and



then herself. "If we are to fit in with the mortals we must have nicknames," she informed them.

"Mission San Francisco Solano was the last mission built, by Father Jose Altimira in 1823," Saraqael was reading from a pamphlet as Gabriel pulled their rental car out of the mission parking lot. "Fitting. It was built without the church's consent."

"How far until we get to the next one?" Uriel asked .

Saraqael pulled the map out of the glove compartment. "About an hour," she told him. "Just keep following that one highway, the 101," she hoped Gabriel knew what she meant.

--

Lucifer's fire jumped in the fireplace, catching his attention. He was standing over his desk, in his library, a place he almost never left these days, pouring over books and scrolls and ancient pages filled with symbols and words he had yet to be able to translate. He looked around the room to see if someone had entered. It was empty, quiet, even more so now that

Azazel was noticeably absent. Lucifer figured it was only natural he had not returned from his task of locating their enemies. And become one of them.

He held the mirror up to a yelling piece of parchment paper and waited for the lettering to change. It stayed where it was. He tossed the page aside and picked up another. And another. He had let Tyler leave Hell with the book he had translated about Omphalos, and he was beginning to regret that decision. It appeared that was the only text on the topic, and the only thing the mirror was useful in translating. He continued his task, hoping he was wrong.

--

Raphael pulled the sedan into a nearly empty parking lot and parked it in a space marked visitors. A white building with a red Spanish tile roof stood in front of them. A sign read San Luis Obispo de Tolosa. He nodded to his passengers, Raguel and Remiel that they had arrived.

The altar in front of the church was gold toned with green decorative markings. A large crucifix was hanging from the wall

framed by beams that made a V at the top and straight beams on the sides. Red tile stairs with floral decorative touches led to the altar. The trio approached the stairs and stopped just before the bottom one.

Holding up their hands, palms facing forward, they spoke the same incantation "Tunc dicet et his qui a sinistris erunt: Discedite a me , maledicti, in ignem aeternum , qui paratus est diabolo et angelis eius" Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

The air shimmered and a black rot iron gate appeared and disappeared just as in Gabriel's ritual. The angels dropped their arms to their sides and paused to remember that there was a purpose for this. It did not seem right turning sacred altars into gates into Hell, but these were dire times.

--

The fire jumped again and Lucifer looked around once more, wondering what had the flames in such a state of unrest. The room was still quiet, and he was still fiddling with the mirror

and ancient texts. The pile on the floor was getting bigger than the one on the desk, but not by much, yet.

--

Michael stood at the altar of the San Diego de Alcala Church staring at the vastness of it. Old wood gates protected brick stairs, candles and flowers were placed carefully on either side of a table draped in blue silk. Archways carved into the left and right of the wall held statues of Jesus and Mary. It was pink and gold and green and he was angry that he was about to desecrate it with evil. But this was his task, it was his duty.

He held up his palms toward the altar and spoke the incantation. "Tunc dicet et his qui a sinistris erunt: Discedite a me , maledicti, in ignem aeternum , qui paratus est diabolo et angelis eius" Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

The usual shimmering and rot iron gate appearance and disappearance occurred and he dropped his hands to his sides,

bowed his head and prayed for forgiveness, and for hope that this was not a mistake.

--

Lucifer's fire made one last jump and then settled in to its normal state of flickering lightly. The final jump did not catch Lucifer's attention, he had left the library in search of someone to take out his frustration on. There were many souls down on the lower plane that had not yet had his full attention. It was time he got back to his duties, handing out tasks and punishments and the like. He passed through the dungeons and made his way into the area he had not frequented since Azazel brought the mortal down into his space. He stepped into Azazel's quarters. It was empty. Azazel's grand taste of gold statues and velvet pillows were prevalent throughout. It made Lucifer shudder. Such gaudy taste. His brother had spent too much time between planes. It made Lucifer even more angry remembering Azazel could travel between the two. If Azazel had returned there was no sign of it. Nothing was out of place. Lucifer wondered if his brother was bold enough to come back. He knew the demon had figured out what he had planned. And was not going to be a willing partner in it. Especially since it meant his own

demise. Plus, he thought Azazel had grown too fond of the mortal. The Omphalos. He was going to have to get used to that.

He shook off the thoughts and took one last look around Azazel's large bedroom before exiting. He continued down a long hallway, walls that looked like the underside of mountains surrounded him, the heat from fires underneath his feet warmed him as he continued to the main dungeon, the place where everyone except Tyler had been held. Tyler had his own special area. At Azazel's request. Lucifer should have never granted that request, he thought. He stopped at a large steel door and placed his hand just over the handle. It left a glowing handprint and the door opened for him automatically. Inside were small cells lined against the walls, floors and floors of them. Going down as far as he could see, and as high as he could see. The lower the cell the worse kind of being you were. The higher cells were reserved for the souls of mortals who had one foot in the dark and one foot in the light. Every so often he would visit the area and several of the souls would be gone. Taken by the light. It annoyed him. So he rarely visited them.

Lucifer's guards nodded to him as he made his way through. He stopped at each door and placed a hand on the middle of the

steel door, as he held his hand on each door his eyes glowed red, then gold, and returned to black. He took a deep breath and let it out before moving on to the next door. These souls were ending their sentences. And Lucifer had not realized how hungry he had let himself become. This ritual went on for several floors, he ascended each one lower, and lower, until he was nearly at the bottom. He was not ready to consume the souls of the worst quite yet. He had plans for these creatures.

He returned to his library, full and even more determined to put his plans in motion. If Azazel truly was not coming back, his first order of business was to find someone to take his place. He needed an officer. Someone who he could send in to spy on the others, who would be competent. Who that was he had yet to figure out. There must be some poor soul still willing to help him take over the middle plane. He sat at his desk and laid out a page of blank parchment paper, scribbling words onto the page. He stood up and walked to the fireplace, folding the paper and calling out "to anyone out there still willing to follow me, please follow these instructions." He threw the paper into the fire, it turned black, green and bright orange before returning to its red and yellow flicker.

#

The Esesa Jane Karaoke Bar and Pan Asian Restaurant was filled with clientele ranging from Japanese businessmen holding meetings to hipster white kids on a fun night out. The dining room held at least 200 people, with a stage at the front where brave souls could sing their heart out to whatever it fancied. A large flat screen television hung from the wall where words to songs could be followed by the singer and their audience, and giant black speakers sat on either side of the stage to blare out the music that drowned out their terrible tone deaf voices. Off to the left of the stage was the bar. The glass shelves behind it held every kind of booze one could want. The bar itself was a thing of beauty. Dark wood covered with the most extravagant marble top one could imagine, with dark reds, oranges and yellows that made it look like it was on fire. On the right of the bar overlooking the dining room was a large window which housed the owner, Phuong Chow's office. Mr. Chow was watching as a Japanese man in a suit and tie was fumbling his way through "Total Eclipse of the Heart," without much success.

"Lucifer has requested your presence in Hell," a voice behind Phuong Chow spoke before he felt the stab of pain in his chest. He crumbled to the ground before turning to ash and



disappearing completely, clothing and all.

Inside Lucifer's library the demon waited for his guest. He paced in front of the roaring fire and watched for it to flicker and take the shape of a man. He stepped back as the fire continued to build itself into the shape of Phuong Chow. He was a tall man with dark features and an angry expression. Once he was in full form, his dark suit and red, orange and yellow tie wiped of the ashes they had accumulated, he charged at Lucifer with fists clenched. Lucifer held his hands up, not in a defensive stance, but in one of surrender.

"I apologize, Phenex, for the manner in which I have called upon you," Lucifer said.

"Do you know how hard it will be to explain my absence? I have 200 people in my restaurant right now!" Phuong Chow screamed at him.

"I will return you to your office before anyone notices you are gone, Phenex. Excuse me, Mr. Chow, as you are referring to yourself these days." Lucifer both appeased and taunted the man.

"I am a legitimate business owner now," Phenex announced.

"Yes, a karaoke bar, I believe you called it ashes rise, in Marathi, how poetic," Lucifer folded his hands across his torso.

"I have a proposition for you," he got right down to business.

"If it has anything to do with your plan to try to defeat the Omphalos and take over the middle plane, I want no part of it," Phenex told him. "I still have an army down here, Lucifer," he said, off of Lucifer's curious look.

"What do you know of the Omphalos?" Lucifer asked him.

"Of the myth? Only what we have been taught by our elders," Phenex answered. "If you are speaking specifically about the mortal who has been chosen, I know nothing of him, other than his name," he added.

"I have been translating the old texts, trying to determine if there is any way to defeat him," Lucifer said. "Everything in this world has a weakness Phenex, you know very well of that," he said.

Phenex smiled. "If bringing me down here by force to remind me of old wounds is how you planned on convincing me to join your crusade, I have serious doubts your plans of defeating the Omphalos will work."

"I will defeat the mortal, no matter what his soul is made of, and I will do it despite the doubts of my enemies and my friends," Lucifer spit out.

"Do you have any more friends Lucifer?" Phenex poked at him. "It seems to me that I would be the last person on your list to call, so if I'm here and you're asking me to join you, the word desperation comes to mind," he was eyeing the fireplace.

"Not yet," Lucifer stood in front of him to block him from returning to the fire. "I need someone on the middle plane who can be my eyes and ears. Someone who will do the job with efficiency. I cannot rely on the lesser demons to do this, they are too easily detected and too easily defeated. I need someone of your strength and skill," Lucifer said.

Phenex contemplated this. "Word has it you're planning on

Noah's Arcing the place, with fire instead of floods. And though the fire will not kill me, this rebuilding does not seem to benefit me in any way, as I have already come to enjoy my new life as a legitimate business owner," he pointed out. "Not to mention the fact that my clientele thoroughly enjoys my rendition of Friends in Low Places," he grinned.

"You would prefer living as a human, your true form hidden, rather than being yourself?" Lucifer wondered.

"My true form," Phenex scoffed. "You have been underground too long. This is my true form, I enjoy being human. For the first time in my long life I am not looking to burn down the world for a seat on the higher plane that is never coming to me. You are still under the impression that humanity is weak, is, less, they are not. They are strong, and admirable, and they will fight back," his voice rose as he spoke. "Your plan will fail, and I will not be a part of it," he took one last look at the fire and dove for the hearth. It consumed him and he was gone from the room. Lucifer stared into the fire as if it was going to spit Phenex back at him. It didn't.

Mr. Chow stood overlooking the restaurant once again. A

knock came on his door. He shook off his dizziness from the trip downstairs and went to answer it.

"There is a man here to see you, he says you will know him, called himself Azazel," the woman on the other side of the door told him.

Phenex nodded at her. "Show him in."

Azazel entered the large office and looked around, admiring the gold tones on the walls, the red painted birds scattered here and there, statues and paintings from Asian culture spread throughout. He found Phenex back in his place by the window.

"Your timing, is interesting," Phenex spoke to the demon with his back still to him. "Your brother just summonsed me downstairs."

Azazel tensed up and joined Phenex at the window, looking down over the diners, drinkers and singers.

"No, not there, he has not figured out a way to return to this plane yet," Phenex assured him. "He wants me to join his

fight. Bring my army together with his to destroy the Omphalos," he told Azazel.

"You declined?" Azazel was not sure of the answer. He and Phenex were never close, but they had a better suited relationship than that of Lucifer and, anyone really. Azazel understood the desire to remain on the middle plane and blend in to the mortal world. He often wondered why he had not done so sooner.

"Yes, I declined," he turned to Azazel. "What he is planning, it is madness," Phenex turned back to the mortals below. "There are some bad people out there, but there are also good ones. And it is unfair to leave them to a fate that they do not deserve simply because Lucifer has a beef with the Almighty. Someone needs to tell him to get over it and live with his choices. But no one will, and if they do, they will not live long enough to see if he heard them anyway."

"I stood by his side, I helped him begin the process," Azazel said. "But as I watched him, as I watched the events unfold, I realized I cannot control the destruction he has planned. I could not stop him from unleashing his beasts on Los

Angeles and nearly lay it to waste," he paused. "We know that I am and will always be a demon who is only out for himself. But I honestly tried to reason with Lucifer, until it was clear there was no changing his mind. So instead I helped him, in order to save myself."

"And now that you know the Omphalos is real, and is someone you know, you have abandoned your brother and joined with them to defeat him," Phenex asked.

"How many other myths are true if this one is? How many times can I look my brother in the eyes and have him tell me about how unfair his treatment was, when everything we have been told is to the contrary. How long are we going to let him believe he deserves to be the one ruling all three planes when it is clear he cannot even run the one he is tasked with now?" Azazel said.

"We both know that Lucifer will not stop until everyone in his path is dead and the Earth is on fire," Phenex turned to him. "We have to do whatever it takes to make sure none of that happens. As I said to him, he must be desperate if he is calling on me to join him. He must have gone through all his other

choices first. But he will fight alone, and it will be messy."

"The angels are moving against him," Azazel said, with hesitation. "They have destroyed the wards and gates in Los Angeles and turned to higher powers to protect the planes," he continued. "The Archangels, many of whom have no more powers than a lesser angel, are traveling the coast of California turning mission churches into hell gates, some active, some decoys."

Phenex processed this information. "And they will be guarded?"

"By the mortals who run the missions, all of which are tourist destinations for hundreds of people year round," Azazel told him.

"That is a dangerous game He is playing," Phenex said. "If it is Him calling the shots."

"No one knows, as far as the angels are concerned it is Michael who has been tasked to protect the plane now, He has disappeared completely, again." Azazel said.



Phenex laughed. "Michael, a group of Archangels with no powers, two demons," he pointed at himself and Azazel, "and an Omphalos. I am not sure I like our odds."

#

Abby sat up and rubbed her shoulder and side where it had been resting on the hard carpet. Her hair was matted to her face. She looked over and saw Chloe sitting up on the couch looking freshly rested and comfortable. "How did you get to sleep on the couch again?"

Chloe shrugged "You might have lost your angelic powers, but you have not learned how to be human," she suggested.

Abby was going to retort, with what she had no idea, but she was cut off by Azazel popping into the room. He just, appeared there. "Were you gone all night?" she asked him.

"I am a demon, I don't need to sleep," he said. When she stared at him for a better answer he told her "I went to see a friend."

"You have friends?" Chloe feigned shock.

Azazel glared at her. Before he could answer Tyler interrupted. "Is this how it is going to be all the time with the three of you?"

"Probably," Abby. "Yes," Chloe. "Definitely," Azazel.

"Great," he said under his breath. Behind him Jonathan joined the group of groggy people. Azazel was disturbingly alert.

"What's the plan?" Abby asked Jonathan and Tyler equally.

"I wasn't kidding about large amounts of coffee and pancakes," Tyler announced.

Abby, Chloe and Azazel grumbled and moaned in protest. It was a rare moment of agreement.

"Let's talk over plans while having coffee and pancakes, OK?" Jonathan offered to the room.

Getting ready and leaving the house took longer than any of them imagined. Jonathan was a bachelor, he had one bedroom, one bathroom and little supplies for everyone he was having to serve. The only silver lining was their road trip plan that had been cut short. Abby had a suitcase of clothing and products she assumed she might need, never having had to travel as a human before, and Chloe was able to take advantage of them being similar sizes. Azazel watched the process with amusement, preferring to remain in his dark suit rather than put on a pair of Jonathan's jeans.

When they were finally out of the apartment and in Jonathan's sedan, Azazel suggested a place he knew that had amazing food. After several assurances that despite not needing food, he knew where the good stuff was made, they were finally on their way.

As it turned out the place Azazel suggested was not only next to the Esesa Jane Karaoke Bar and Pan Asian Restaurant, it was also owned by Phuong "Phenex" Chow. Jonathan pulled the Toyota into a parking space behind the Sakali Cafe. The place was quaint, with a red and yellow awning in front of what looked like an old timey bakery. Inside was filled with red leather

booths, a soda fountain counter and the smell of bacon, coffee and baked goods. Tyler took a deep breath and nearly floated across the floor as the hostess showed them to an empty table.

Tyler ordered copious amounts of coffee and the largest stack of pancakes and as much bacon as they would allow. He was pretty sure he would not be able to eat all of the food he had ordered, but he wanted it anyway. Azazel scanned the room, looking to see if Phenex looked in on this place as diligently as he did Esesa Jane's. He did not see the demon anywhere.

The table was silent while they waited for their food. Everyone wanted to talk, but no one knew how, or where, to start. It had been six months since they had seen Tyler, Chloe and Abby weren't exactly the kind of people to chat each other up, and Azazel was off in his own world anyway. Jonathan thought about many things to say, but kept them to himself.

After consuming as much as he could before feeling like he was going to throw up, Tyler finally spoke. "I know that you all want to put a huge plan in motion, but I think it would be better if we figured out what I am, before we go chasing after Lucifer. He is going to be prepared, and we need to do better

than we did when he sent you and his monsters to destroy the plane with reckless abandon" he pointed at Chloe who had the sense to bow her head in shame.

"Last night, while you were all in dreamland, I went to see a friend," Azazel broke the silence. He shot a look at Chloe to ensure she made no more snarky quips. "Mr. Chow," he started. Everyone looked at him like he had grown another head. "Phenex, as he is known down below," he hoped that would help them pay better attention, "a former ruler in Hell, he had his own demon army, several of them, actually, still does, for the most part," he continued. "Phenex was approached by Lucifer to join him. Phenex refused," another set of worried looks began to fade as he spoke. "One of the leaders of his armies, a demon named Nathaniel, is well versed in all the legacies and stories of the demon and angel worlds," he said. "Phenex is going to contact Nathaniel, see what he knows about Omphalos."

"Is this Phenex, an ally?" Jonathan asked.

"I would not call him an ally. He is a friend, that is certain, but he is not putting stake in either side, or rather, he is putting his hopes into the side that isn't Lucifer taking

over the middle plane and laying it to waste. If that means he helps us, that is what he does, but it is not because he believes in the war. It is because he wants nothing more than to see Lucifer remain in Hell where he belongs," Azazel answered. "And, he is very comfortable on this plane, he owns this place, and the one next door."

Tyler looked around "Is he here now?"

"I do not see him," Azazel said. "And yes, that is why I suggested we come here, I was hoping to introduce you."

"What do we do in the meantime?" Abby asked.

"We figure out a way to get into Lucifer's library and take the mirror," Jonathan said with assurance. He looked at Azazel.

"Me? You want me to go to back down there and steal the mirror?" Azazel laughed. "Did you lose your mind in the last few months?"

Jonathan sucked in a breath at that. "Is there anyone you trust to carry out the task?"

"I can do it," Tyler suggested. "That much I know. The only thing Lucifer was sure to clue me in on was my powers of teleportation," he hoped it sounded as cool as he was making it seem. "Although he did not tell me how to control it. When I thought of home, it took me to your place."

There was an awkward silence. They were all getting used to these moments. "No," Jonathan said after a few minutes. "We can't risk you getting caught down there," he noted. "Lucifer let you take the book with you because he knew you would need the mirror to translate it. He knows that someone, either you or Azazel, is coming back for it, so he is going to be prepared."

"Let's see if Phenex comes through with Nathaniel," Azazel suggested.

"Are we sure this Nathaniel demon, thing, will be able to tell us anything?" Tyler asked.

"He can tell you many things," a melodic voice came from behind them.

Azazel recognized it immediately. "Phenex, I take it you were able to located Nathaniel?"

"It was not without some manuevering, but yes, I was able to locate him," Phenex moved to stand at the edge of their table, so that he could see all of them, and they could see him. He was still in the same smoky grey suit with a red, orange, and yellow tie. "I had to perform some rituals that are a little, disorienting for a demon of his size, he is resting in my office at the moment, it won't be long, but I suggest letting him get his rest before asking him to recall a lifetime worth of tales, he is also, very curious to meet you, Omphaplos," Phenex eyed Tyler.

"Demon of his size?" Jonathan asked.

"He will be in human form now, but yes, in the lower plane he is, a very large creature, a dragon, in mortal terms," Phenex sounded proud. "He has always been my most faithful warrior. I found him chained to the ground, apparently Lucifer is smarter than the average devil," Phenex chuckled at himself. "He knew we would seek out the dragon, but he did not know that the dragon would be loyal to me, and refuse to kill me when I appeared to



him. He assumed that since I abandoned the lower plane long ago, there would not be any of my followers left. Lucifer is mistaken, but we have been trying not to call attention to how many are still under my control."

"You will let us know when Nathaniel is ready to see us?" Azazel asked. He seemed to treat Phenex with more respect than anyone Tyler had ever seen him interact with. He made note of it.

"As you wish," Phenex half bowed to the table. He paused before heading off. "You are welcome to dine in any of my businesses free, as long as you are respectful to my staff, and the clientele," he told them.

Tyler looked down at his plate and wished his stomach would let him consume more of the delicious pancakes and bacon, but he felt ill just looking at the leftovers. "Thank you," he croaked out.

"Is he really a Phoenix?" Jonathan asked Azazel when Mr. Chow had gone out of earshot.

"Yes," Azazel answered.

Jonathan looked around the table and shook his head. "I just trying to wrap my head around this. We are battling the devil himself, helped by a demon who was only recently his right hand man, a phoenix who owns a karaoke bar and pancake restaurant, and a giant dragon disguised as a human."

"Essentially," Tyler nodded.

#

"Let me begin by dispelling some of the myths about me. There is rumor that on the lower plane, in my natural form, I am a giant dragon with multiple heads and a tail so powerful it can wipe out galaxies. This is not true. Well, the heads and tail of it is fiction. I am a dragon, who guards the ancient texts and treasures collected over time, by the demons and yes, Lucifer himself, but I serve only one entity. The treasure," Nathaniel was sitting on a couch in the large windowed office of Mr. Chow's Esesa Jane Karaoke Bar and Pan Asian Restaurant. He took over the entire red leather seat cushion. His arms reached end to end of the back cushion. He was simply a large man. One could only imagine how gigantic he was in his true form. "You have questions about who you are?" he addressed Tyler.

Tyler felt slightly eased by the term "who" rather than being referred to as a "what" which was what he had taken to calling himself. The awe of the sheer presence of The Dragon rendered him unable to speak. Which was a rare occurrence. He nodded rather than try to speak.

Nathaniel stretched his large legs out in front of him. "The Omphalos was born out of necessity. In ancient Greece the gods that ruled over the lands, the sea, and the sky, foresaw that they would always need someone who could be the center point of any conflict. In their time, they created many such beings. Gods who ruled everything from family conflict to the flowers and plants in one's garden. In simpler terms, they created children who would constantly rebel against their elders, keeping them from becoming too powerful. When their ultimate demise was coming, they pulled their forces and created one soul. One anchor. One being who would be the moral compass between good and evil," he paused to catch his breath. Tyler wondered if he was imagining light puffs of smoke coming from Nathaniel's nose.

"But, what am I?" Tyler took advantage of the pause. "I

mean, am I a god? Am I mortal? Am I a demon?"

"Yes," The Dragon answered. "You are all of those things," he amended when Tyler looked confused. "I imagine what you really want to know is what that means, in this upcoming war."

Tyler nodded again. He was wondering if it had been a mistake to meet with Nathaniel alone. Not because he felt like he was in danger, but because he was having trouble asking the right questions. His companions would know what to say.

"Your presence means that the universe is aware that something terrible is coming," Nathaniel told him and paused for a long break. "If you are hoping you have some super heroic powers, like your movies and books and television characters have taught you, I am sorry to say, you will be greatly disappointed. You are a damper of fuses. Your presence brings calm, even to the most chaotic times. Do you wonder, at all, why things ended so abruptly, when Lucifer's minions were let out of purgatory?"

It had crossed Tyler's mind, the many sleepless nights alone in the dungeons of Hell, that things ended easier and more

quickly than he had imagined. He wondered how so few people could end the destruction of an entire city, without so much as raising a hand in actual combat. He nodded. "Sorry, I am having trouble finding words today, nodding seems to be appropriate."

The Dragon smiled, it was a wide gesture that took up his whole face. But it was genuine and nice, despite his large frame and the legends of dragons Tyler had read in books and seen on film. He reached into the pocket of a jacket he was wearing, Tyler only just then realized the man was dressed in a shiny suit that reflected light in gold tones, with flecks of green and red that almost looked like scales. He briefly wondered if there was some sort of dress code on the lower plane. There were a lot of men in suits. He shook off the thought as Nathaniel handed him a scroll, it was older but not as old as many Tyler had seen scattered around Lucifer's library.

"You may find this odd," Nathaniel said as he encouraged Tyler to take the scroll. "But even the higher plane sends their texts and treasures to be guarded by The Dragon," he referred to himself in the third person. Tyler let it go and took the scroll.

Once it was unrolled the scroll revealed text written in English. The top was dated July 13, 1988. His birthdate. It told the story of his birth, things he already knew and was too painful to re-live, how much love his parents had for him, how they felt he was their prodigal child. How happy and calm he was. How he slept through the night and could not have been a better baby. His teen years began to look bleaker. Rebellious as most teens are want to be, but with bursts of goodness and then just straight out confusion. It detailed the days when Tyler's parents brought him to the church and asked them to exorcise whatever demon had taken over his body and made him like boys. Tyler skimmed over these words, he knew the story. But when he began to read text detailing his death during one especially brutal session of shock therapy, he slowed down.

The text was written in a different hand than any of the previous accounts. He looked up at The Dragon who had been watching him read his life story. "Who wrote this?"

Nathaniel knew the scroll's contents by heart, a product of his being the guardian of information and a creature with a photographic memory. "Michael and Gabriel," he answered.

Tyler nodded, pretending to understand but, not really. He read the next few paragraphs, taking his time to absorb every word.

Upon receiving a jolt of electricity, the mortal's body gave in and his soul travelled downward, as if it was pulled there immediately. We were struck by how fast it returned to the middle plane, and then pulled itself toward the upper plane. It did not stay there long either. The mortal's soul was gone just long enough for his parents and the preacher to realize he had died, and revived him just as they were about to administer CPR. The mortal's mother tore the electrodes from the mortal's body and promised him that they were done with this torture.

A year later, when Tyler was eighteen and legal, he left his parent's home and headed west, vowing never to return. In eight years he had kept his promise. He remembered the day vividly. Once the thought had entered his mind he shook it off and continued to read.

Michael and I brought this to the attention of Him and He agreed that it was an anomaly. We had seen many souls who were not ready to die out, fighting their way back into their

vessels, but none that so quickly left the vessel and traveled below and above without stopping to see where it belonged. It was I (Gabriel) who first suggested to Him that this mortal might be an Omphalos. He and Michael pushed away my suggestions as myths that no one believed in. Upon further research, I believe the mortal to be the Omphalos created by the Greek gods in ancient times. He has promised to take my words seriously and watch over the mortal to see if any more indications present themselves.

The writing changed again. Tyler kept reading.

Gabriel has insisted that we have found an Omphalos, but I am unsure this is true. I cannot sense any disturbance of the planes and am not ready to agree with his assessment. While the mortal is indeed an anomaly, it is unclear if this is simply a result of his being the victim of torture, or truly an indication that war is coming.

Several more paragraphs about his time in Los Angeles followed, in what Tyler figured was Gabriel's writing, and then one sentence in bold, His writing.



The mortal is an Omphalos.

Tyler looked up at Nathaniel who was quietly resting on the couch, stretched out and simply watching. No emotion one way or another. "This scroll has been sent between planes, upper and lower, over time. "They have both been watching you. Gabriel and Lucifer," he told Tyler.

There were several different emotions rumbling around in Tyler's psyche. It was definite that being an Omphalos did not render him without feelings on either side of the boards. Anger was not out of the question. He knew this already. He also knew calmness. Right now both emotions were battling each other.

"I am only here to bring you the information, I am not going to pretend to have any answers on how to process it," Nathaniel tried to make himself sound as understanding as possible. He knew that hearing things about yourself was never an easy process, he had been doing this for centuries.

Tyler nodded. "Thank you," he hoped that sounded genuine. He meant it. "Can I keep this?"

"I'm sorry, I have to bring it back down to our archives," The Dragon answered. "But, I can help you remember what it says," he sat forward and did his best to not be as menacing as he must seem to Tyler who's slight frame was barely taking up space in the oversized orange leather chair.

The Dragon put a long finger on the right temple of Tyler's head and closed his eyes. Tyler saw the words, exactly as they were written on the scroll, enter his mind and store themselves there. When he opened his eyes he noticed that Nathaniel's eyes were reptilian. It was both disconcerting and fascinating at the same time. In a small part of his mind he wished he had been given cool eyes too.

#

"So you can't eat, or you just don't like to?" Abby asked Azazel as she dunked a potsticker in soy sauce, deftly using chopsticks like she had been doing it for ages. She hadn't. Before just then.

"If I am in a situation where I need to appear human, I can eat, but I prefer not to, food does not sit well in my body, terrible things happen to it," Azazel shuddered as he answered.

A waiter brought more plates of food. Azazel stared at them and eyed Chloe and Abby as he set them on the table. Chloe shook her head at him. "He said to order whatever we wanted," Abby said.

"Not sure he meant the whole menu," Azazel sniped.

"Just because you can't eat doesn't mean you need to be snarky about the fact that I can eat whatever I want," Abby stuck her tongue out at him.

"You sure about that?" Chloe had taken to watching everyone talk to each other lately. This was her opportunity to push buttons though, and she pounced on it. "Your angel powers are gone, humans need to be careful about what they consume, don't you get full?"

Abby looked down at her plate, she had taken three more potstickers and several wontons. "No," she was not sure she meant it.

"The human body only needs a certain amount of nutrients to sustain itself," Mr. Chow's voice came from behind Abby. "If you

eat too much of the wrong thing it can lead to heart conditions, health issues, diabetes," he sat in an empty chair at the table. "You are, of course, welcome to whatever you would like from either of my eateries, but, I would caution you to be aware of how much you consume, and how often," he suggested.

Chloe sneered at him. She wanted to tell Chloe that same thing, but in her own way. The way that said things like 'you'll get fat' and 'they might have to cut your toes off.'

"Do you think he's okay up there?" Jonathan broke in to the food makes humans fat conversation. It made everyone but Phenex jump. He had been sitting there so quietly, not eating, that they forgot he was there.

"Nathaniel will not hurt him," Phenex assured Jonathan.

Jonathan looked up at the windowed office. "Did you see the size of that man?"

"He's a dragon soul in a human body, you really think he was going to be small?" Azazel scoffed.

Jonathan shook his head.

"The Dragon, Nathaniel, might be a giant but he has a gentle soul. Your stories about how dragons scorch the earth and kill men who try to get near them are greatly exaggerated. They are more like, the ones in your fairy tales, who watch over the princess until the correct suitor comes to rescue them," Phenex felt proud that he could reference someone so, human.

Chloe coughed. "You should ascend the staircase and see if you are the correct suitor for the princess," she poked Jonathan's arm.

"I am going to pretend you did not just call a gay man princess," Jonathan pushed her finger away from his personal space.

"Touchy, this group," Chloe folded her arms over her chest.

Abby continued to eat, though she was picking at vegetables, after Mr. Chow pointed to the potstickers and wontons and told her they were fried in oil, which caused clogged arteries.

"We need to be prepared for whatever it is he is hearing up there," Jonathan announced to the table. "Whatever it is he can or cannot do, as an Omphalos, and whatever his role is in this war, we are a part of it now, whether by choice or by force," he looked at Azazel and Chloe. He already knew Abby was on board for whatever it took.

Phenex quietly excused himself and left them to their discussion. "Like I said, he's a friend, but he is staying out of the fight," Azazel told Jonathan who was watching the man walk away.

"I was just looking to see if he had any feathers," Jonathan said. "He meant it as a joke, mostly."

"Now who's being offensive," Chloe snipped.

Jonathan rolled his eyes at her. Abby dropped her fork on her plate and pushed it away. "Okay, first order of business, we need to agree that we are all in this together and stop this nonsense sniping, for better or worse we're all on the same team, and heaven help us, we are going to need each other," she

looked up at the ceiling and then at the table. Azazel, Jonathan and Chloe were all grinning. "What did I say?"

"Heaven help us?" Azazel said. "See, that's a very human expression, but whether you meant it as a figure of speech or not, there is no help coming from above. There is only fire and fight coming from below. That is also something we need to come to terms with."

"Instead of pretending we all get along, let's just lay it all on the table, so to speak," Chloe suggested. "I am here because I have no other choice. I don't want to die. And I certainly don't want to be used to create a literal spawn of the devil, so I am going to stick around with you all, because I know you do not want a devil child roaming around either, so you will protect me. But, I am fully aware that my death is not something any of you would be sad about."

"I am here because I swore an oath to serve mankind, bringing faith and healing to the people, and because I love Tyler and I need to know I am doing something positive in this fight, because my faith is hanging by a string. I need this. I need to stop the war between dark and light," Jonathan fought

back tears. It was the first time he had admitted his faith was waning. He was questioning everything he'd learned about God, Heaven, Hell, the Bible. Everything.

"I am here because I helped start this and I want to see it finished. With or without angelic powers, I am going to stop Lucifer from entering the middle plane, I am going to make sure he does not get his hands on Chloe, and I am going to do whatever I can to keep Jonathan's faith in tact," Abby looked away.

"You're out of your minds if you think I am going to just bare my soul to you all, like some mortal support group," Azazel snarled.

"You're here because you finally figured out that Lucifer's plan to lay waste and start everything over means you will die along with everyone else, and you're just too proud a demon to go down in flames, so to speak, while Lucifer rules over a plane you are so enamored with. You are here because, despite your feelings to the contrary, we are the only hope you have of surviving this war. And a small part of you is here because you want to see how it all plays out from this view, rather than



standing by Lucifer's side, like the good lapdog you have been for so long," Jonathan spit out. Everyone stared at him. "Tell me I'm wrong."

Even Azazel remained silent.

"Is tea harmful?" Abby asked, genuinely.

"Green tea is known to be medicinal," Azazel answered her, and shrugged when Chloe and Jonathan shot him an odd look.

Abby sipped hot tea and the rest of the group picked at lint on the white tablecloth. Jonathan looked up toward the office and watched the door every thirty seconds. He nearly knocked the table over when he looked there at the count of thirty and Tyler was coming down the stairs.

Tyler approached, stood between Abby and Azazel and looked at each one of the people at the table. "I'm a weapon," he announced gleefully, hoping to cheer up the very dire faces he saw looking back at him. "Unfortunately I am not a very lethal one," he said. "That does not mean I cannot stop Lucifer. It just means, despite all my wishes to the contrary, I do not have

superhuman strength, I cannot shoot lasers from my eyes, run fast, leap tall buildings," he paused. "You get the idea," he paused again and looked around the table. "My job, our job," he amended. "Is to find Him."

Blank faces stared at him. "What do you mean find Him?" Jonathan asked.

Abby sat straighter in her seat. "The thing is, he's missing," she told them. Now everyone was staring at her. "For years, maybe decades, we have been pretending that orders, and miracles and whatever else you associate with Him, is coming from Him, but Michael has been bearing the brunt of it," she explained. "What he can manage, of course. None of us have the power that He has," she was looking down at her hands now.

"You know, I thought that it would take me a very long time to process the news, if I ever found out that there either is no all-powerful being or that he simply stopped paying attention to us," Jonathan said. "But, instead, I feel at peace. It explains so much."

"As much as this hurts me to say, He may not have

disappeared by choice," Tyler told him. "He may have been taken, stolen, kidnapped, whatever you would like to call it."

"Do you know anything about this?" Jonathan asked Azazel.

"If you mean, did Lucifer steal the Almighty and lock him away in the dungeons of Hell, no," Azazel answered. "Lucifer is not the type to fight against an unfair opponent. He wants to fight on equal ground. The only person who fits that description is the Almighty. The news that He is missing makes sense on that end as well. I have been wondering why Lucifer has not simply made a move on the middle plane and drawn Him out to fight. The demon army that used Los Angeles as its playground was nowhere near the powerful hoards of creatures Lucifer has at his disposal," Azazel told them after several looks of disbelief challenged his assessment.

"So the ruler of Heaven is missing and the ruler of Hell won't come out with full guns blazing because he thinks it would be unfair? I am failing to see why we don't just leave things as they are," Chloe suggested.

"Did you not hear the part about Him possibly being

abducted?" Jonathan pointed out.

"The only way this war ends is if we find Him and return him to Heaven," Tyler said. "I mean, if that's not where he is, the only information Nathaniel had was his disappearance and what I had to do to restore order. If he knew where He was, this would have been over already."

"I need to meet with Michael," Tyler looked at Abby. "I need you to tell me, the best to your knowledge, where he would be in Heaven, because I only have a certain amount of time that I can travel between planes before I become, weakened."

"Michael is not in Heaven," Jonathan said. "He's in California."

#

"Surely the angels have returned to the upper plane by now?" Abby suggested.

Jonathan looked around the table. He was still trying to figure out a way to feel right about giving out information when Azazel was sitting so close by. "The angels are not returning to the upper plane, until they can be certain the humans they are

putting in charge of the gates can handle guarding them."

"Well, who's minding the store then?" Azazel asked, almost too eager to know that Heaven was open and un-guarded.

"How do you know this?" Tyler asked him, not unkindly.

Another long pause. "Gabriel. I have been keeping in contact with Gabriel. He agreed to keep me informed if there was any movement on the upper plane. When they were sent here, by Michael, it appears now, he came to see me, explained their plans," Jonathan answered.

"Gabriel. Nice that he's being so forthcoming with information now that the world is ending," Tyler sniped.

"What?" Jonathan asked.

"He knew, what I was, when it happened," Tyler answered. "He never mentioned it. Not once, all that time we spent saving Los Angeles from demon destruction, all he said was I had been chosen," he was getting slightly agitated.

"He had his reasons," Abby defended the angel. "You were already reluctant to help, what could he have said? Hi Tyler, you're an Omphalos, you are going to end a war between Heaven and Hell. In the meantime there's a bunch of demons about to invade Los Angeles. Help us?"

Tyler knew she had a point. It still made him mad. "Whatever, so the angels are still on the middle plane, any idea where Michael is now?"

Jonathan took a cell phone out of his pocket and typed on the screen.

"You're keeping in contact with Gabriel, via text message?" Tyler laughed. "Archangels have cell phones. Welcome to the modern world."

"Angel. He's just an angel now," Abby corrected him.

"Right, so Michael is the only angel with the full mojo. Everyone else is just, regular old angel?" Tyler asked her.

Abby nodded.

"How do we know Michael is not making a play, how do we know he's not the one behind all this? Seems to me he's got it pretty good. He's the only one with all the powers, he is the one calling the shots in His absence. He was the only Archangel who did not help us with the demons," Tyler paused. "Come to think of it, he was supposedly standing by His side as Los Angeles was burning. So many lies, so much deception."

"Again, you are not seeing things big picture," Abby defended. "Before today, you all believed He was still fully in charge of the upper plane and that made you feel pretty comfortable. Now that you're aware, don't you feel the least bit, worried?" she said. "Can you imagine if the mortal world, the people of faith who believe strongly that He is and will always be looking over them and granting wishes and whatever else you are all praying for, knew that He was missing?"

"Michael is in San Francisco," Jonathan broke in to their little argument.

"Is he burning it to the ground?" Tyler remarked. "God Hates Fags? They must mean Michael since he's been in charge so

long."

Abby started to defend again, but Tyler held up his hand. "I am aware, that it is humans that hate gay people, I was trying to be funny," he paused. "Who wants to see the Golden Gate Bridge?"

--

The transition from the middle plane to the lower plane was always the worst part of visiting it. The Dragon curled his tail around himself in his chambers and was just about to fall into a deep sleep when a knock on the door woke him. He lifted his head and snorted grey smoke from his nostrils. "Who is it?" he roared toward the knock.

"Lucifer," the voice came through the deep wood of the door. The Dragon snorted smoke again. "Enter," he was one of the only creatures on the lower plane who could speak to Lucifer that way. He watched the demon come in and survey the room. It happened often. The fascination with the gold statues, gems and coins, paintings and books, thousands of books, that filled The Dragon's lair. "What can I do for you?"



Lucifer brought his attention back to the large creature that filled the rest of the space in the room. The Dragon was covered in green and purple scales, which were solid and rough. He was laying on the floor of the lair, so his large head with its long snout and even longer teeth were even with Lucifer's face. "I tried to call on you earlier but you did not answer."

"I was needed on the middle plane," The Dragon told him. It was in his nature to always tell the truth.

Lucifer knew this and often exploited it. "Needed for what?"

"The Omphalos requested information, I provided it to him," The Dragon answered.

"Did you see anyone else while you were there?" Lucifer pressed.

"Phenex," The Dragon told him. "He was the one who called on me, set up our meeting, and let us use his office, I did not see anyone else."

"What did you tell the Omphalos?" Lucifer asked more questions.

"I let him read his scroll," The Dragon continued to answer the questions as he was asked. But his strength was failing and he would soon have no choice but to either kick Lucifer out, or fall asleep in front of him.

"When you spoke with Phenex, did he seem to be helping the Omphalos, or was he simply a middle man?" Lucifer wondered.

"That is a question without an answer," The Dragon cocked his head to the side.

Lucifer nodded, "Thank you, I will show myself back out."

--

"Remind me again why I did not just teleport myself to San Francisco?" Tyler asked Jonathan who was behind the wheel of the rental sedan. Tyler was next to him in the passengers seat, with Chloe, Abby and Azazel packed into the back seat. "And why

didn't Azazel?"

"We're bonding?" Jonathan suggested.

"Like oil and water, we're bonding," Tyler looked behind his shoulder. All three passengers had their arms folded around their chests and looks of disdain on their faces. It was clear they were doing everything it took to not touch each other in any way, despite the small space.

"We haven't seen each other in six months," Jonathan reminded him.

Tyler knew that was the real reason he had not disappeared as soon as they decided they were heading to the Bay Area. Time with Jonathan. Time he was not sure he would always have.

--

Michael stood on the balcony of his hotel room looking out over the city. The fog had just started rolling in, the Golden Gate Bridge was still visible. Gabriel had contacted him on the cell phone device he had been given for that purpose. The

Omphalos was on his way to see him and he would have questions. Michael wondered how many of them he should answer. How does one explain to others that the Archangels somehow allowed the ruler of the upper plane to disappear. And how does one tell others how long ago it occurred. He watched as the fog began enveloping the large red structure until the only thing he could see was the top of it sticking out like it was pushing through clouds. He thought about home and whether his disciples were keeping it running as he carefully instructed. Was this all a big mistake? Coming to this plane, remaining here, protecting it so fiercely while leaving the upper plane so vulnerable? He shook off the thought and returned to his room, he had little concept of time, Gabriel had said it would take the Omphalos a "while" to arrive. Michael wondered how long that was.

--

Lucifer stared at the small room he called his library and wondered how he could call it that, when he had just seen the largest collection of books and papers he'd ever be next to. There was information in those books, information he needed. But The Dragon was clearly not going to give any of it up, not easily anyway. He had already turned down the offers of more

treasures in exchange for an alliance. Lucifer was not surprised that The Dragon would remain neutral. He was still confused by the lack of loyalty from Phenex, though. "I just have to figure out the right questions," Lucifer said out loud. "And someone on this plane has to be willing to help me," he slammed his fist on his desk, causing books to topple. Under one of the books he saw a sheet of parchment paper, newer, and remembered what it was. The contract he had created between himself and Chloe, to keep her alive, remove her cancerous tumors. As long as she completed the tasks that were asked of her, she would remain cancer free. Wait, did she complete those tasks? Lucifer grabbed the piece of paper and began reading through it, stopping to think about whether or not the task had been completed.

--

Tyler had reached over and taken Jonathan's hand in his, they silently watched trees and buildings pass by as Jonathan drove the car north. He was listening to Abby and Chloe bicker about something related to how poorly Abby had packed her bags. Chloe was mid sentence when her voice went silent. Abby screamed, Azazel stirred from his meditative state and Jonathan fought the urge to slam on the breaks. Tyler unbuckled his seat

belt and turned around to see what the commotion was. Chloe was slumped in her seat, eyes closed, not moving. Abby looked at Tyler and pleaded with her eyes, to explain what had happened. He shrugged.

"Whenever you can, we need to pull off the road, something's happened to Chloe. Something not good," Tyler calmly told Jonathan who was still trying to concentrate on the road and not wreck another car.

#

Jonathan pulled off the highway as soon as he could get to the next exit. Despite Chloe's unconsciousness he felt calm. His passengers were equally relaxed. When the car came to a full stop Tyler looked at Jonathan and smiled gently. "It's part of my Omphalos thing. I'm able to create calmness in chaos. This was my first try at it," he nodded to his companion and turned his attention to the back seat. Chloe was motionless.

Abby was checking her pulse. "She's alive," she told Tyler.

"I think Lucifer might have taken over," Azazel suggested.

"Will he kill her?" Tyler asked him.

"At this point I am not sure what Lucifer is planning,"  
Azazel answered.

Tyler turned back to the front seat and closed his eyes  
tight.

"What are you doing?" Jonathan asked him.

"I'm going to find out what Lucifer is doing with Chloe,"  
Tyler answered as if it was the most obvious thing ever.

"No, you're not," Jonathan protested.

"What else is there to do Jonathan?" Tyler pleaded. "If he  
has Chloe there's a reason, and it's been my experience that  
whatever the reason it's never good," he paused. A terrible  
thought ran itself through his mind.

"What are you thinking?" Jonathan asked him.

"It's crazy, I can't, we can't, but dammit I want to,"

Tyler whispered to him.

"Want to what?" Jonathan whispered back.

"Let him win. Let him take over the middle plane. There is no way He can remain hidden, right?" Tyler said.

Jonathan took a pause himself. "No, we can't do it, you're right," another pause. "We have no idea where He is, it is very possible that He is being held captive somewhere, and if we allow Lucifer to carry out his plans, there is no guarantee He will return, wherever he is."

"I know," Tyler closed his eyes again. Then opened them and looked at Jonathan with some concern. "You've changed," he told him.

Jonathan did not answer. "It's been a long year."

"No. Six month ago if I had suggested we just let Chloe be used as the vessel Lucifer wants her for, you would have protested, you would not have allowed her to be sacrificed, even if she's not the most desirable soul on the plane," Tyler



pointed out.

"Six months ago we were fifteen seconds from winning," Jonathan would not look at Tyler. "We had eliminated the threat, we were about to send Chloe and Azazel back to where they belong and close the gates, you were in my grasp. And then. I was left with an evil soul, a dying angel, and a serious sense of abandonment. From my church, from my savior, from humanity."

Tyler reached out and squeezed Jonathan's shoulder. He wanted to kiss him, hug him, make him feel not so alone. But they were already wasting time. "I have to go find out where she is and if she's in trouble," Tyler said.

Jonathan nodded and watched as Tyler closed his eyes and held them tight.

Tyler pictured the inside of Lucifer's library, saw the fire roaring in the fireplace, the oversized red leather chair, the books, papers and chaos of his months of research. He felt himself shift, and float, and he was standing in the middle of the library. It appeared to be empty. He searched around, with his eyes, and then by walking toward the fireplace where the red

leather chair sat being consumed by the flickering of the flame. When he rounded the side of it he noticed it was not empty. Lucifer was sitting in the chair, motionless.

Tyler stood still, not wanting to disturb the demon. Azazel had warned him that if he woke him up while he had a hold of Chloe's mind, he could do permanent damage to her. Tyler almost told him he didn't care about Chloe's already damaged mind, but he refrained. Now, he stood next to the chair and wondered what he would do. The Dragon's information said nothing about whether or not Tyler could enter anyone's mind. He figured if he could, it would be over time, not a day after finding out who he was.

Lucifer stirred in his chair and Tyler stepped back behind it, out of sight.

"I know you're there," Lucifer's voice rang out. "I figured you would come, I am afraid our Chloe's soul is unavailable to the middle plane at the moment."

"What are you doing with her?" Tyler did not move from his spot.

"Well, you see, she signed a contract, Chloe. When I took away the brain cancer that was killing her," Lucifer told him. "And it appears that she did not, in fact, complete the tasks we agreed upon in said contract. Therefore her mind and soul are still mine to do with what I please."

"You're holding Chloe against a contract she signed in which tasks were agreed upon, and were not completed, because she was incompetent," Tyler said. "I see how that's a fair deal, she did sign her life away to you," he paused. "But it seems to me that you need more than her mind and soul to complete your own task. And it seems to me, the tasks that have not been completed, have not been done so because my friends and I beat you," he poked.

Lucifer shifted in his chair. Tyler hoped he was not making matters worse inside Chloe's brain. He shook off the terrible thought of being inside Chloe's mind. "I understand that you are a proud creature, Lucifer. You have decided you deserve to run the universe, and you are going to do whatever it takes to make that happen. But the universe has other plans. Your fellow high demons are staying neutral. You are no closer to reaching the surface, and you're holding on to a damaged soul because you

read in some book about blood rituals and heirs to the devil."

"Remember, mortal, that the same could be said about you," Lucifer said calmly.

"No, Lucifer, it is not the same. You believe, with all of your being, that this text you saw, is the real deal. I myself, never believe anything I read. I don't believe in any of this. Heaven, Hell, God and the Devil. Demons and Angels. All things I grew up learning about in fictional books written by people who wanted me to be different. Books that wanted me to follow certain rules, and live by certain codes. Delivered by messengers who did not live as they preached. The only reason I believe in any of this is that I am smack in the middle of it, and because the universe has a sense of humor, I have been asked to stop a war between two entities I don't even believe exist. So see, the difference between me and you, is that I do not follow blindly, the things that I am told. I look for proof. I weigh the sides. And I determine what to believe based on facts. Fact, I can teleport between planes. Fact, I am able to create calm in a situation of chaos. Fact, I am standing inside your library talking to you, and your mind is in two different places. You are vulnerable. And I am feeling quite frisky,"

Tyler stepped forward and stood directly in front of Lucifer, who was gripping the arms of his leather chair, a little tense.

Tyler put his hands on Lucifer's arms. They began to smoke, as if he was burning them. Lucifer struggled. "What are you doing?"

"My soul is both good, and evil, Lucy," Tyler answered him. "I can summon heat from below, or light from above. Right now I am burning you with your own hellfire. All you have to do is put Chloe back in her body and I'll let go."

Lucifer pulled on his arms, Tyler's grip could not be broken. He stopped struggling and opened his eyes. "She's back in the car with your friends," Lucifer told Tyler through gritted teeth. The burning was making its way through his skin, into his blood and bones.

"The thing is, when the Greek gods created me, they weren't looking for a physical weapon. They just needed a mediator, someone who could stand in the middle of the universe and tell the gods to go to their rooms. But these are darker times, and stronger measures are needed. So I am the upgraded version. The

universe, it makes adjustments for these things," Tyler had stepped back.

Lucifer was rubbing his arms, which were still smoking. "You are very proud of yourself. You shouldn't be. Just because you have weapons you can use against me within you does not mean that I will give up on my plans to take over. If soldiers quit fighting because the other side had bigger guns, well, nothing would ever get done. I do thank you for giving me a sneak preview of what I am up against. I will make sure I am prepared, next time."

"This has been real, but must be going, it was nice doing business with you," Tyler smiled and closed his eyes. Getting back to the car was easier than getting to Lucifer's library. He would never say it out loud, but wherever Jonathan was, Tyler would be able to find his way to him.

His presence back in the passenger seat of the car startled everyone, including a very alert Chloe. "I'm sorry, I wish there was some way I could warn you when I am returning," Tyler said. "You OK?" he asked Chloe.

She nodded. "He was taunting me, something about still being under contract, and then I heard him talking to someone, then I heard your voice, and for some reason it made me feel like I was going to be okay. This world has truly gone insane," she tried to tease.

Tyler recognized it. "He wanted me. He knew that I would come find you, he wanted to see what progress I have made. I let him see a few parlor tricks. He does not know the true scope of what I am capable of though."

#

"Does this feel weird to anyone else?" Abby asked quietly. She was standing behind Tyler and Jonathan in a hotel elevator. You could tell by the decoration that the elevator was hotel in nature. "I mean, we're meeting the most important Archangel in a hotel room. He's probably sitting there in silence. Do you think he's been able to figure out how to work the television?" she kept talking. She could see Tyler and Jonathan grinning in front of her. She was not alone in her feeling.

When they reached room 2104 Jonathan and Abby decided Tyler should be the one to know, and greet the Archangel. They did this by pushing him forward and standing at least a foot behind

him when he tapped on the door. Michael opened the door a crack and looked to see who was there. He recognized Tyler, despite having not met him in person. He opened the door wider and greeted Tyler with a smile and nod. Tyler rolled his eyes at Abby and Jonathan who were still standing far away. "Go," he said through gritted teeth. They entered the room before he did.

Abby was right. The room was silent. And clean. Nothing had been moved.

"Where are your other companions?" Michael asked.

"We thought it best not to bring everyone," Tyler answered.

Michael nodded, like he understood. But he did not. "I am unsure of how I can be of help to you. I know that you are looking for information on His disappearance. I have none. If I knew where he was, or with whom, I would have gone to get him myself."

"Maybe there is something you can tell us that might help us look in a direction you have not thought of," Jonathan suggested.



"I will tell you what I know," Michael agreed.

--

Michael walked the long hallway toward His quarters. He had done this dozens of times before, but for some reason this time felt different. Something was wrong. It was quieter than usual. And that meant a lot. It was already a serene setting, white marble tiles, white columns and white walls made everything bright. The soft sandals worn by all people of the upper plane made no sound against the floor as Michael made his way toward the large archway that led to His office.

The office was empty, which would not have been odd except that it was the exact time Michael met with Him to discuss upper plane matters each week. Nothing was out of order in the room. His desk was organized as it always was. Michael headed out of His office and went toward his sleeping quarters. It was empty as well. Also pristine with nothing out of place. Every room He went into had to be well organized. Michael had watched Him spend hours putting papers and books in order in his brothers and sisters own rooms when they were supposed to be having

meetings.

Michael did not want to send anyone into panic, so he continued to search the many places He was known to relax and hold court in the upper plane. He went to the gardens, the overlook, he went to the edges of the plane and back again, until he knew he could not keep silent about this anymore. He called on his brother Gabriel, to meet with him in his own chambers.

"I went to His chambers to meet with Him like usual, and He was not there. I have searched the entirety of the upper plane and I cannot find Him. I do not wish to worry anyone, but I feel, uneasy. I think He may have been taken. It is the only explanation I can come up with. He would not just leave, He just would not," Michael told his fellow Archangel. Gabriel stood silent. "We need to find Him," Michael had hoped that was already a given, but it did not seem Gabriel was ready to jump into action.

"I do not believe we should be so quick to assume something has happened to Him," Gabriel said. "You have only discovered He was not where He was meant to be recently, correct?"

"I do not know how long He has been missing," Michael protested. "I only went to see him today, that is true, but how do we know if He was not taken between the time I met with last week, and I looked for him all over the plane, I did not assume He was gone on a whim, brother."

"Have you asked anyone else if they have seen Him?" Gabriel asked.

Michael shook his head no.

Gabriel put a gentle hand on his brother's shoulder. "We will speak with the others, inquire if they have seen Him and when, and if we find that they have not, we will decide He is missing then."

--Michael went to the fountain in the middle of the main garden and found his sister Saraqael reading to a group of angel children. She did not notice him until she had read the last page and looked up to see if the children had any questions about what she had read to them. "Children we have a special guest. You all know my brother Michael," Saraqael announced.

Michael nodded to her, and them. "You are excused," Saraqael told the children who jumped up from their sitting positions and ran toward the grassy area of the garden. "What brings you to class, Michael?" she asked him.

"Have you seen Him today?" Michael asked as soon as the children were out of earshot.

"Today, no, why?" Saraqael answered.

"I went to His office at our usual meeting time, and He was not there," Michael said in a low voice.

Saraqael cocked her head to the left, a gesture all angels used when not understanding what is being asked of them, or told to them.

"I believe He is missing," Michael said this even lower. "Gabriel suggested that before I bring the entire upper plane into a frenzy, I ask all of you if you have seen him."

"It has been at least a few days since I have seen Him," Saraqael answered. "He was in the garden, entertaining the

children with his stories of the old days. You know how animated he gets when speaking on the past," she smiled.

"Thank you, sister," Michael nodded to Saraqael.

Michael returned to his sleeping quarters and found Gabriel waiting for him. Gabriel has spoken to Uriel, Raphael and Remiel. Uriel had seen Him watching over the middle plane at the overlook bridge three days ago. Raphael had seen Him in the garden the day before that. Remiel had not seen him, but Remiel was not one to wander the upper plane, so Michael did not consider that as worrisome. Michael told Gabriel about his discussions with Saraqael, who had seen him four days ago at the fountain and Raquel who had gone to visit His library and spoke briefly about the text he had requested on the same day as he had been with Saraqael's class. Gabriel agreed that three days missing was long enough to consider someone missing. Especially the leader of the upper plane.

Word quickly spread that Michael and Gabriel were asking the angels if they had seen Him, and as was predicted, the upper planed turned into chaos. It was decided that before any other plane got word that He was missing, Michael and Gabriel would be

in charge of matters He would have handled. Michael continued to search for answers, as did Gabriel. Years had passed, and things were running as smoothly as they could be, allowing the plane to fall into a system of normalcy, despite their missing leader.

When word reached the upper plane that Lucifer was planning on taking over the middle plane, Michael began to search farther outside the walls of the realm. Searching the middle plane, secretly. There were no signs of him.

--

"It was I who sent Gabriel to find you," Michael told Tyler. "We agreed that it was time to contact the Omphalos."

"Who's idea was it to keep the fact that I was the Omphalos a secret from me?" Tyler's words had venom. He had no regrets speaking in the tone.

"Both of us," Michael answered. "As we understood it, Lucifer was testing the waters. We were not in need of an Omphalos, we were in need of someone who would become one. At the time you were needed as you were. You are needed in a larger

capacity now, which is why you were told the truth."

"If there were no signs of struggle, and no one came forward claiming to have Him, is it not possible he simply, decided to take a vacation and never came back?" Jonathan asked.

This made Abby and Tyler both stare at him like he had lost his head. Jonathan shrugged it off.

"It is entirely possible that He left on his own. I have never wanted to believe it, but recalling the events, and having had no clear signs of where he is or with whom, has begun me on the path to thinking this was his choice," Michael answered.

"On the plane, when someone is taken, there is a reason, and the people who take them, kidnappers, contact family members and ask for something in return for the person they took," Jonathan explained to Michael. "It is hard for me to believe that if someone took Him years ago, they would not have contacted someone on the upper plane and made demands."

Michael nodded. "It was easier to believe he was taken, than believe he would walk away without telling someone where he

was going, and how to contact him if, something like this impending war, were to occur."

"No one can predict wars," Tyler said.

"Every species has someone, mortals, demons, angels and creatures in between, who will fight to be in charge of more than whatever it is they have in front of them. It is a fault we are all created with. Some are content to remain satisfied with being in charge of what they have. Many cannot bare the thought. Lucifer will always want to rule the lower, middle and upper planes. Just because he has failed to win any of the wars he has started in the past, does not mean he will cease trying, and we can never assume he will not win one," Michael told them. "I have maintained my belief that He would not leave us because He has always known this. It is one of his greatest worries."

"If someone took him, they have been extremely patient," Jonathan pointed out. "To have held on to Him so long and not come forward with demands or admitted they were capable, that takes someone extremely powerful."

Michael and Abby both took in a long breath. "Oh. OH."



#

"But why would he?" Michael said at the same time as Abby said "He's a friend, he would never."

"You know who has Him?" Tyler asked them.

"There is someone who is capable of this," Michael answered.

"But it's just, we're not sure if he would do this, and if he did, why?" Abby was still questioning their conclusion.,

"Do you know where he is and can we go there and find out?" Jonathan pressed.

Abby and Michael exchanged looks. "This is getting very complicated," Abby remarked.

--

"Explain to me again why we allowed Tyler and Azazel to teleport themselves to Greece instead of having to fly like the rest of us?" Jonathan whispered to Abby once he was secured in

his seat.

"It was too dangerous to let Michael and Gabriel go alone," Abby whispered. "Just be happy we convinced them that we should be in Athens with them."

"Ah yes," Jonathan buckled his seat belt and tried to get comfortable in his seat. "I am sure they are quite safe with the former right hand demon of Lucifer, ruler of Hell."

Abby looked about as comfortable as she would be if she were tied to the wing outside. "Look it isn't ideal, and isn't fair, but this is how it has to be. We need to go to Greece and it was easier not to travel as a group," she told him. "They won't do anything to each other as long as Tyler is with them, plus what if something happens to the aircraft?"

"An angel who's afraid to fly?" Jonathan inquired watching her continue to twitch and stare out the window.

"Former, why do I have to keep saying that?" Abby snapped at him. "And flying in a metal tube is nothing like flying as an angel."

"Ladies and gentlemen the captain has turned on the fasten seatbelt sign. Please return your seat to its original position as we make our way to the runway. We will be taking off shortly," an announcement came over the speakers.

Abby's grasp on the armrests tightened. Jonathan put his hand on hers and assured her everything would be fine. She tried to nod but felt ill. The plane jolted forward and then up, Abby let out a gentle squeak that was almost a scream. She held tight as she was pressed against her seat before the aircraft leveled and everything evened out.

"Ladies and gentleman thank you for choosing Air Athens. This is your captain speaking. Your flight time is 14 hours and 5 minutes. Please feel free to relax. I will try to point out important points of interest as we approach them. In the meantime take advantage of our in flight bar and meal service. We will see you in Greece," a man's voice came through the speakers.

"I know it won't surprise you, but when I studied to be a priest, they didn't teach us a lot about Greek mythology. Other

than not deny its existence. They focused more on recent gods. It is the belief of many in our society that He is the creator of the universe and the highest power there is," Jonathan said.

"According to many He is a thought and does not exist at all," Abby pointed out.

Jonathan nodded.

"We teach our young," Abby started to explain, Jonathan's face dropped. She looked around to see if something was wrong with the aircraft and realized it were her mention of young angels that bothered Jonathan. She gave him a gentle smile. "It is true, there are some young souls who traveled to the higher plane from the middle, but we have many young angels who were born there. Death is not, permanent in the higher plane. We still reproduce, we continue, just, differently," she assured him. "We read to them, the stories of ancient Greece. The gods and titans and monsters who came before us. They are our form of fairy tales, except they are real."

"I am beginning to wonder how many of our fairy tales have been made up, or are actually happening somewhere in the world

right now," Jonathan said. "After everything I've seen in the last year, nothing would surprise me at this point." Abby looked at him and cocked her head to the side. "What?" he asked.

"Prometheus, may no longer live in a time of gods and monsters and titans, but he has not let go of them. He has adjusted to modern society in his way, but he will surprise you. You have not seen anything like him yet," Abby told him.

"Is he dangerous?" Jonathan asked her.

"Dangerous, no, he is still a warrior but he will not harm anyone, unless he is challenged," she answered.

"Something is worrying you about that," Jonathan noted.

"The whole thing worries me, Jonathan," Abby said.

--

"Explain to me again why we are in San Francisco when we could be in Athens looking for Prometheus?" Azazel asked, followed by a sigh.

"We are waiting for Jonathan and Abby to arrive in Greece, we agreed on this, you said understood why it is important we all remain together on this," Tyler answered.

"I do, doesn't mean I can't be impatient about it," Azazel folded his arms around his chest and sat against the headboard of the bed he was lounging on.

They had not left Michael's hotel room. Michael had contacted Gabriel telepathically and he appeared almost immediately, scaring the crap out of Tyler and making Azazel chuckle at his jumpiness. The air in the room was tense and heavy. If Tyler had not been present, things would most definitely get ugly.

"So Prometheus, the Titan, still alive and well in Athens, Greece," Tyler said to break tension.

"Titans do not die," Gabriel said.

"Just so that I have the story correct, tell me again why you think Prometheus has Him?" Tyler just wanted to keep them

talking so that they would stop staring at each other like they were going to shoot fire and ice at one another.

"Prometheus created man," Gabriel spoke. Calmer this time. "Man created Him," he continued. "Prometheus is the only being stronger than Him, the only thing strong enough to hide someone as powerful as He is, the only one who would be patient enough to wait around until the moment of his choosing before claiming that he is responsible. He has all of eternity to wait and see how this all plays out," he explained.

"But if he created man, would it not be important to him that the human race remain, in tact? Why take Him away from the upper plane, all but ensuring that Lucifer will take over the middle plane, if he has stake in our remaining, relevant," Tyler asked.

"We believe," Michael spoke this time. "That Prometheus is testing you," he told him.

"Because he created me to stop an event just like the one that is coming and he wants to watch his handiwork like an artist admiring his own work of art," Tyler finished the

sentence.

Azazel smirked. "The Titan always had a hard on for mankind, but his most prized creation was the Omphalos. He named you after a rock, by the way, I wouldn't take too much pride in yourself just yet," he taunted.

"You are certain you can find him, and we can speak to him without him going, full Titan on us?" Tyler asked.

Michael and Gabriel exchanged looks. A long silence indicated they were speaking to each other telepathically.

"Care to share with the class," Tyler pretty much requested.

"It will be difficult to get to him, but we are certain that once we reach his location we will be able to speak with him without any problems. Especially with you there with us," Gabriel assured him.

"When you say difficult," Tyler asked.



"For the mortals, there will be a long journey, not just on an airplane, on foot as well. Prometheus lives inside a mountain. Your friends will need to climb it to reach him, we will wait at the entrance for them," Michael told him.

"That was probably something you should have told us before we put Abby and Jonathan on an airplane for 15 hours, there is no way they make it up a mountain after a long flight, I am not so sure either of them could climb one before sitting that long on a flight," Tyler had stood up and began pacing.

"It was important that we allow them to take the journey, with you, it will make Prometheus accept our visit that much easier, if he knows the struggle it was for our party to be in his presence, he will be more likely to speak to us without more trials," Gabriel said.

"Climbing the mountain is not the only trial they may have to complete?" Tyler stopped pacing and stared at them. "Also information we could have used earlier."

"Also important, for them to be unaware of what they may face," Michael said. "If they know what is in store from them,

they may not be so determined to get to their destination. You were right when you said it is important for you to all be together on this journey. It is important that Prometheus see that we are all working together for this. To save his creation, that we are cooperating with each other to fight against the being that is trying to erase his greatest achievement," he told Tyler.

"If Prometheus is stronger than Him, why has he not simply destroyed Hell with Lucifer in it?" Tyler asked them.

"When Hercules freed Prometheus from imprisonment he made Prometheus promise not to interfere in the dealings of mankind again, destroying Hell would erase history, it would change the course of mankind forever," Gabriel answered.

"But kidnapping Him and holding him hostage for a hundred years doesn't?" Tyler pointed out.

"Prometheus can see things before they happen. Heaven did not cease to exist just because He is no longer in charge. Mankind has no idea that He is even missing. There is no hiding it if Hell is destroyed. And before you ask about kidnapping and

imprisoning Lucifer instead, I am certain Prometheus thought about that option and saw that there was no one capable of running the plane in the same way," Gabriel clearly aimed that at Azazel to make sure the demon was listening.

He was. Tyler quickly moved to stand between the angels and the demon, hoping he would not catch fire from the stare that was clearly being shot through his back.

#

Inside the rooms of the Electra Hotel in Athens Greece you would never know that you were in a different country. Jonathan and Abby had arrived shockingly on time and taken a cab to the modern building in the center of the Greek Parliament building and the Academy of Athens near Syntagma Square. As the cab driver explained to them on their drive through the city. Jonathan sat on one of the two beds in the room, a request that confused woman at the front desk to no end. She just could not understand why such a beautiful couple would want two beds. Before Jonathan lost all his patience and blurted out his sexual preferences, Abby assured her that they would be fine with two beds. Abby was flittering around the room opening all the drawers and checking the small closet.

"What are you looking for?" Jonathan asked her.

"People leave things sometimes," she answered. "

You're making me nervous, sit down," Jonathan commanded.

Abby huffed and sat on the empty bed.

Jonathan was paying close attention to the room, so he did not jump out of his skin when Michael, Gabriel, Azazel and Tyler popped in without warning, in that order. Tyler immediately smiled at Jonathan and it made him feel at ease.

"I have bad news and worse news, which one would you like first?" was what Tyler greeted Jonathan with.

Jonathan shrugged. "What's going on?"

"Prometheus lives inside a mountain," Tyler said. "You two are going to have to climb the mountain to get to him," he said in a lower, less confident voice.

Jonathan took a deep breath. "Was that the bad news or the

worse news," he asked on the exhale.

"That's the bad," Tyler answered. "The worse, we have to bring him a gift."

"Can't we just tell him the gift is climbing a mountain to get to him?" Jonathan suggested.

Michael, Gabriel, and Abby all shook their heads "no."

"Mount Parnitha is the tallest of the four mountains that surround the Attica Basin," Abby read out in the visitors guide she had picked up from the bedside table.

"Of course it is," Jonathan remarked. "We need supplies, different clothing, better shoes," he looked Abby over to see what she was wearing. He noticed the heels on the borrowed pair she had taken off. "Everything went OK with Chloe?"

"She is unhappy, but what else is new, there are three angels posted at the hotel, she'll be fine," Tyler told him.

"There is a mall nearby," Abby announced, still thumbing

through the tourist guide.

--

"What kind of gift are we meant to be bringing?" Tyler asked once Jonathan and Abby had left for their shopping excursion. "I mean what do you buy for the centuries old Titan?"

"That is not something we can help with, it has to be thought of and acquired by the gift giver, in this case, you," Michael told him.

This annoyed Tyler to no end. After an hour of silently thinking about what he could possibly bring Prometheus that would wow him enough to allow them into his mountain lair, Gabriel reminded him "a gift is not necessarily a physical object." Great.

--

Abby and Jonathan returned from their mall trip with bags of items, and looking like they had already climbed the mountain.

"What happened to you two?" Tyler asked about their appearance.

"The metro was a nightmare, the mall was crowded, and we had to go to several places to get what we needed," Jonathan answered.

Abby had flopped onto the bed face down and was not moving. "They were ill prepared to service two tourists looking to climb the largest mountain in Athens," she said into the bed covers.

"We only told one person that, after her reaction we made up a story about our luggage being lost, and needed to replace items we needed, for our long walks around the city and maybe some possible camping if there was anything like that around," Jonathan told them. "That did not work any better, but at least it was not met with the berating we received from the first woman."

"Did you get everything you needed?" Tyler tried to sound sympathetic to their mall plight, but it worried him that a trip to a shopping center had frazzled them, what would a giant

mountain do?

Jonathan nodded. "Boots, heavier clothing, lighter clothing, canteens, backpacks, food," he listed off. "According to the sales woman, if we were to be crazy enough to attempt to climb a mountain such as Parnitha, it would take three days, and we are likely to fall off the side of it and die."

"Do you plan on falling off the side of the mountain?" Michael asked, without irony.

"No," Abby yelled into the bed.

"Thankfully you will not need to go all the way to the top," Gabriel told them. "Prometheus's door is in the middle."

"Fitting," Tyler noted.

--

Jonathan and Tyler climbed into bed after mapping out the course of the journey up the mountain. Abby had already fallen asleep. "We're going to be fine," Jonathan whispered into



Tyler's ear, more to reassure himself than to promise him.

Tyler held Jonathan close and felt him breathing steady next to him. He wanted to not be worried about his safety. He wanted to be able to teleport all of them up the mountain, but his abilities were limited. He continued to ponder what he was going to bring the Titan as a gift. And soon he was sleeping soundly.

His dreams were rough and chaotic that night. Images of Jonathan and Abby making their way up the mountain, slowly, Prometheus rejecting their offer and sending them away. His creator being disappointed in his creation. Prometheus swearing up and down that he was not responsible for the missing prophet. Arguing the semantics of the words god and prophet. His final image was Jonathan slipping on loose gravel and tumbling down the side of Mount Parnitha.

Tyler sat straight up and held in a scream. Jonathan stirred next to him. Abby was still dead to the world. He laid back down and tried to push his thoughts out of his mind. Everything was going to be okay. Jonathan was strong, and determined. Abby would proved to be stronger than she looked. He

kept telling himself that as he watched the sun come up outside the window.

"Did you get any sleep?" Jonathan asked next to him.

"A bit," Tyler admitted. "Did you sleep?"

"Everything is going to be okay," Jonathan repeated what Tyler had been telling himself all morning. "This is all one big test, and I am excellent at taking tests."

Tyler kissed him, gently, and then passionately, before remembering there were two Archangels and a demon in the other part of the room, and Abby was next to them. He pulled back and smiled. "We will get through this, like everything else," he agreed.

Abby and Jonathan were dressed head to toe in khaki. Hiking boots on their feet. Canteens and backpacks strapped to their belts and shoulders. They looked like they were going on a week's long journey.

"We will see you in a couple days," Jonathan nodded to

Tyler.

"Be safe," Tyler nodded back.

#

Jonathan could not decide which was worse, the way people were looking at him and Abby in the Metro station, or the fact that they were about to climb Mount Parnitha. The Metro dropped them just outside the city, to the north, about a mile from the base of the mountain. They took one last assessment of their supplies and stepped onto the path toward their destination.

"Don't use all your energy on the first day," Gabriel had suggested. "Conserve your water, food, and energy so that it lasts."

Getting to the mid-point of the mountain would take them just under two days, by their calculations. Everything in Jonathan's mind told him to walk faster, ignore Gabriel's advice and just get there and get it all over with. But he knew the angel was right. If they used all their strength in the beginning, if something happened, they would not have any to rely on later. They slowly made their way up the side of the mountain, where a path had been carved, others had tried this

before. Jonathan wondered if he should have done more research on this. Did the people who made this path make it up the mountain? He looked over the side to see if there were any bodies, or skeletons of bodies and shook off the thought.

They walked until it grew dark, Jonathan was surprised that Abby made it so far without a complaint, without stopping. Not because she was female, but because she was in human form, full human form, not just an angel soul living inside a human shell, for the first time, and he wondered how that felt.

"You doing okay," he asked her when they sat down to rest for the night.

"My feet hurt," she answered. "But otherwise, yes, I am doing fine."

"As we continue to make our way up, the mountain will get steeper, it will get harder," he told her the truth. It was better that way.

She nodded. "Let's get as much rest as we can, then."

The noises of a mountain, animals, insects, whatever else Jonathan thought he could imagine hearing, made it harder to sleep soundly. Everything he heard made him believe something was coming to attack them. He would open his eyes, sit up, look around them. Nothing was there. It would be ironic, he thought, to be eaten by a bear, when his biggest worry starting this journey was falling over the side.

Jonathan and Abby ate a quick meal before packing up their supplies and returning to the path. As they went up, further and further, Jonathan checked the signal on his cell phone, and found it surprisingly stronger than it had been in the city. He wondered if Prometheus had some sort of cell tower or boosting device inside his mountain. That took him into thoughts of televisions and computers and modern technology with Prometheus happily sitting in front of them. It was an image that made him chuckle.

"You cannot seriously be having fun," Abby said breathless, from behind him.

"I was just, imagining Prometheus enjoying the comforts of modern technology," Jonathan told her.

She caught up to him. "You laugh, but he is very up to date, he is fascinated by the world that man has created, and everything in it, he may live inside a giant mountain, but it is not a dark cave filled with rocks and dirt."

"Tyler said that Prometheus can predict the future, do you think he sees us coming?" Jonathan asked her.

"I am not sure," she answered. "It is believed that his visions are more broad than specific."

They stopped talking for a while, conserving their air, as it was getting thinner the more they climbed. They paid close attention to their footing, the path was becoming very rocky, with loose stones and pebbles strewn throughout. Jonathan noted that it did not seem to have been travelled recently. He tried not to let that bother him.

After a short lunch break in which they looked over their map and calculated how much more they would have to climb before darkness, they got back on their path. Jonathan felt his backpack getting heavier, his feet harder to lift. He pressed

on, willing himself to keep climbing, to keep going. He glanced behind him to check on Abby, who was further back than she had been all morning. She held up a hand and waved it to tell him to keep going, she would catch up. They were out of breath and neither attempted to speak.

By the time the sun went down over the back of the mountain they were huffing so hard Jonathan thought they would both hyperventilate, and everything on his body hurt. He swore that even his teeth were sore. They stopped and made camp for the night. Silently eating their canned dinner and trying to slowly drink water, despite wanting to chug it down in gulps.

That night Jonathan slept more soundly than he had in his life. Despite the hard rocks underneath him and the growing environmental noises, he was out by the time his head hid the tiny pillow he had with him. Morning came faster than either of them wanted, but they were still determined to make it to Prometheus's door before the time assessment everyone had given them. Just before noon on the third day, the path ended.

It was all rock, no cut out pathway to follow. "We are going to have literally climb the rest of our way up," Jonathan

told Abby when she reached him. "The path is gone, it just, ended," he pointed to the ground.

Her shoulders slumped when she heard that news. But she shrugged off her pack, as did Jonathan, and they took out gloves and rope they had the good sense to buy and bring with them and began to prepare themselves for the worst. When Jonathan had helped Abby tie the final knot and test that it would hold to her, and him, a booming voice echoed over the side of the mountain.

"Who are you and why are you trying to climb my mountain?"

"Prometheus" Abby mouthed to Jonathan.

"I am Abigail, and this is Jonathan," Abby called out, looking at the mountain like it was what had been talking to them.

"Why are you trying to climb my mountain?" Prometheus repeated.

"There is an urgent matter we need to discuss with you,"



Jonathan said and shrugged, "well, it's true," he whispered to Abby.

"You are aware I have a telephone?" Prometheus asked them.  
"The number is listed."

Jonathan and Abby exchanged embarrassed looks. "This matter cannot be discussed over the phone," Jonathan told the mountain.

"Then by all means, continue your journey," Prometheus was clearly laughing at them.

"You wouldn't happen to have a side door, or hidden pathway we could follow, would you?" Jonathan asked. He shrugged, "can't hurt to ask," he said when Abby rolled her eyes at him.

"Luckily you have caught me on a forgiving day, mortals," Prometheus's voice boomed and the side of the mountain began to crumble.

Forgiving? Jonathan wondered why he was trying to kill them if he was in such a good mood. Then he saw that a doorway had opened just above them. He pointed it out to Abby and they began

to climb, as quickly as their hands and feet would allow them.

--

"Huh," Tyler said out loud after checking his phone, which had beeped at him that he had a text.

Everyone was on high alert, which is to say Tyler was checking the phone so often he almost missed the text alert, and Azazel, Gabriel and Michael were sitting still, watching Tyler check his phone incessantly. Azazel sat up straighter and stared at Tyler waiting for the follow up.

"They're, inside," Tyler told the room.

"I'll be damned," Azazel remarked. "Shut it," he shot a look at Tyler knowing he had just made his own pun.

"Inside?" Michael asked.

"Prometheus, invited them in," Tyler told him. "Something wrong?"

"That is, just, Prometheus does not usually invite people in so, freely," Gabriel told him.

"Well he did, so we should really be going now," Tyler suggested. They agreed.

--

Tyler was always the last to arrive despite timing the teleportation to the exact moment the angels are about to pop out. He decided now was not the time to question that though. They were standing at Prometheus's door. Carved into the center of Mount Parnitha. "Do we knock?" he asked them. There was no need, the door opened on its own and a voice welcomed them inside.

Once on the inside of the dwelling, one would never know that this was the inside of a giant mountain. There were actual walls, with art and shelves and tapestries hung neatly, there was furniture in specific formations and lighting, electricity, Tyler noted. Fully functional. They made their way through a long hallway and entered a large living room, with soft couches made of fine fabrics. Sitting on one of the couches was Abby and

Jonathan. Safe, Tyler noted. They look safe, and healthy and clean.

"Your companions have been telling me interesting stories," Prometheus greeted them. Tyler had not seen the man sitting in a leather chair just near the couch where Abby and Jonathan were sitting so, comfortably. "Please, sit down," he waved to the empty couch.

Michael and Gabriel sat on the couch Prometheus had pointed to. Tyler chose to join Jonathan and Abby on their couch.

"I am sorry, that you have taken such pains to travel here," Prometheus seemed genuinely upset that they had worked so hard to get there. Although Tyler hadn't done anything but concentrate really hard on a door Michael had shown him a picture of. "But I do not have your prophet."

"Do you know who does?" Michael asked him.

"I have a hunch," Prometheus said.

"You do not do hunches, Prometheus," Gabriel spoke to him

like they had met before. Tyler stored away the information and hoped to ask him about that later.

"It is odd, my friend, that you instructed these mortals to come to me," Prometheus directed his words at Gabriel. "When you know that my brother, Epimetheus, is the one more likely to carry out such an act."

Gabriel had the good sense to blush. Tyler was still getting used to them being so, human, at moments he did not expect them. "I had not actually thought of it," he admitted.

#

"Please tell me we do not need to climb another mountain," Abby moaned.

"No little angel," Prometheus assured her. He was surprisingly gentle. Abby wondered if the stories she had been told were untrue, or if time had softened the Titan. Despite the feeling, she did not challenge his use of angel as she did with others.

"Why would Epimetheus want to kidnap Him?" Tyler asked.

Prometheus took a moment to think on the question.

"Jealousy, spite, victory," he answered. "We created mankind, as brothers, but it is my name that is spoken more often, in history books and on the tongues of those we brought to life, it is I who receives gifts and praise. Epimetheus would like nothing more than to see my, our, creation fail, so that he can rebuild it on his own, and receive the glory."

"Do you think he could be working with Lucifer?" Gabriel asked.

Another thoughtful pause. "No. We have, very limited contact, my brother and I. But when I told him that I saw a terrible war coming that would put mankind in jeopardy, he pressed me for more information, and then he stopped all contact, I knew that he was up to something, but when it comes to Epimetheus, my forethought is, cloudy. He has the ability to block my ability to foresee his actions," Prometheus admitted.

"You were aware that all of this was coming, though," Jonathan spoke up. "And you haven't tried to do anything about it?"

Abby's eyes widened. No one had ever challenged Prometheus's actions. No one who wanted to live. Prometheus smiled at her, and then at Jonathan.

"A history lesson, if I may," Prometheus sat forward and put his hands together. "When Epimetheus and I set about creating this world, we were to simply set in motion what the universe was already working on. Life on Earth. But I did not stop at planting the seeds and letting your kind grow. I interfered. You were, are, my greatest achievement. My pride, got the best of me, and I tricked Zeus into giving this world things that were important to our survival, the gods and Titans. I was imprisoned. I will spare you the details. After many tortured years, I was rescued, by Hercules. There was only one condition he asked for in awarding me my freedom. Never again interfere in the dealings of mankind. I can observe. I can tell you things I have seen, and allow you to help yourselves, but I cannot stop the events from happening. Believe me, it has not been the easiest task, there are times when I have been tempted, to interfere, out of desperation to help, and out of disappointment in what I created. But, alas, self preservation is a fault even someone such as I cannot overcome."

"So, you can tell us where Epimetheus is, but you cannot help us fight him, if it comes to that," Tyler spoke after giving Prometheus the respect of silence to let his story sink in.

Prometheus sat back in his chair. "I can answer questions, I cannot volunteer information unless it pertains to those questions. As with all other things, even us titans have what you refer to as grey areas."

"In that case, I would like to speak with you alone," Tyler told him. "If that is alright."

Prometheus stood up. He was not particularly tall or overbearing. He was average height and not overly muscular, though no one would consider him unfit. Tyler waited to be addressed before he stood. Even his disrespect of authority was being stifled in this setting. "Come with me," Prometheus said. It was not a command.

Tyler followed the Titan into another room that turned out to be a library. It made Tyler smile that everyone had libraries. Being surrounded by books was one thing that calmed



him.

"Please, sit," Prometheus pointed to two chairs that faced each other next to a fireplace, if he thought on it any further he would have wondered how there was a fireplace in the center of a mountain. Tyler did as he was asked.

"As I said, I can only answer questions, I cannot offer information," Prometheus's reminder was a way of telling Tyler to ask carefully.

This was the first time Tyler was actually in the presence of someone who could answer his questions directly, not read from a book, or assume the intention of his creator. He was sitting in front of the man, the being, that brought him to this life. It took him a long time to unfreeze his mind and ask the first question. Prometheus sat patiently, waiting for Tyler to find the right words.

"Why me?" he finally spit out.

--

Abby fought the urge to fall asleep on the comfortable couch. Michael and Gabriel sat still. Jonathan was taking in every inch of the living room. Abby stood to get her blood flowing, hoping to keep herself awake for the next leg of their long journey. As she watched her companions, she realized Michael and Gabriel were speaking to each other. It was one of the worst parts about no longer having her angel powers. She could not communicate silently with anyone, and she could not hear what they were talking about. It appeared that she was the topic, Michael would glance in her direction, then Gabriel, and then Michael. It seemed to be a lively conversation, their eyes were darting and their facial expressions were stern. Abby wanted to ask them what they could possibly be discussing that intensely but she held her tongue.

They finally stopped the dramatic facial expressions and turned their full attention on Abby. "Come here child," Michael told her. She hesitated, but angel or not, she would never disobey a command by an Archangel, not one as powerful as Michael anyway. Michael had stood up from the opposite couch, Abby was at least a foot shorter than him, and he was not a tall man, not in his human form. She stopped and stood in front of Michael, glancing curiously at Gabriel who gave her a reassuring

nod. Michael put his left hand on Abby's forehead and it glowed bright white. She gasped and nearly lost her footing, but stayed upright.

"Why?" Abby asked when she realized what he had done.

"We need you, full strength," Gabriel told her. "Michael agreed to restore your angelic powers, temporarily," his voice showed guilt that he probably felt, but did not know it. "I convinced him, to allow you to earn your them, though. They will remain restored, if he feels that you are worthy of them."

Abby, her human emotions still at war with her angelic peacefulness, nearly argued, but she realized that arguing with the Archangels was never fruitful. For whatever reason Michael had it in his head that she had lost her powers from lack of worth, and she would do whatever it took to make sure they remained in tact this time.

#

"Is it possible that Epimetheus is jealous because he does not have his own mountain?" Tyler pondered as he and Jonathan rode the Metro back to Athens.

"It says here that the homes on the ocean side of the Parthenon are where the richest people of Greece live, doesn't sound like he has it too bad," Jonathan was reading from his phone screen. "Look, that's like, Beverly Hills mansion rich," he showed Tyler the screen, a picture of a large terra cotta house was on it.

Tyler raised an eyebrow. "Prometheus did mention high security. Cameras, alarms, gated driveway."

"Thank you for taking the long way with me," Jonathan smiled at Tyler.

Tyler smiled back at him. "I still think Michael and Gabriel should have put their hands on you and given you magical powers," he blushed. "That sounded worse than I meant it."

"Shudder," Jonathan teased. "Besides, I haven't earned it."

"Earned what?" Tyler asked.

"The right to have angel powers," Jonathan told him.

"I beg to differ, but that's a discussion we will have to have when there are not so many prying eyes staring at us," Tyler noticed that a number of people were glancing in their direction.

"They're not used to seeing gay people in the wild," Jonathan whispered.

The Metro dropped them off at the square where their hotel was located. Tyler had to drag Jonathan past the entrance, he felt bad, knowing that he had just spent three days on the side of a mountain, for virtually nothing. He wished he could tell him that the effort was much more worth it than it seemed. But now was also not the time to discuss his particular situation either. He and Jonathan walked through the main square, past buildings both old and new, and around the large hill that housed the Parthenon. Tyler wished more than anything that this was not such an important mission, that he and Jonathan could take the time to climb the steps and stand inside the large columns and look out over Athens. Once again he noted that this would be the perfect honeymoon destination. Internally.

Waiting. Abby forgot what it was like to have to wait for mortals to arrive in the same place she had just, appeared out of thin air. When she first closed her eyes and pictured the place she had wanted to be, she arrived in Los Angeles, at her apartment, with her nice bed and not dirty clothing. She vowed that after this trip she would never wear the color khaki again. Technically she had enough time to shower, change, and maybe even take a quick nap, but Michael and Gabriel would never allow it. Granted, they never changed their clothes or got dirty, or bored of their bland black pants and white shirts. She kept meaning to tell them that they looked like penguins. They would neither find that funny, nor understand the reference.

Abby shook off the wandering thoughts and turned her attention to the large black rot iron gate that sat in between two very large walls, white painted cement, with cameras pointed at the street in front of it, where she and the Archangels happened to be standing. She grabbed them by the arms and pulled them off to the side, hoping whoever was watching the feed missed them, or figured they were lost tourists. They did have that look about them.

"Cameras," she pointed at the devices after Gabriel and Michael shot her disapproving looks.

--

"I was really beginning to feel bad that we were left behind, but it sounds like it we got a better deal," Azazel said to Chloe after he had read the text message that had come through.

"Did someone die on the mountain?" Chloe hoped.

Azazel shook his head. "No," he sounded almost as sad as she did hopeful. "Abby and Jonathan climbed for three days, only to find that Prometheus does not have the missing deity. His brother Epimetheus does," Azazel chuckled. "I probably should have warned them he was capable of that," he noted. "Met him a few times, he tried very hard to befriend Lucifer, but Lucifer was not having any of it. The Greek gods and titans have always been a point of contention for him. Anyway, it seems that old Epimetheus lives right outside Athens. A short walk from the Parthenon," he laughed again.

"I am beginning to wonder why I am still here," Chloe told

him. "It seems my usefulness has worn out, if it was ever there at all."

"Tsk tsk," Azazel clucked. "Don't tell me you've lost your edge. And you're here because you need to be protected. Believe me, it's not a job I would have volunteered for. Except the thought of being in the same room as Prometheus makes me chilly."

"You two have some kind of history?" Chloe asked.

"Funny choice of words," Azazel remarked. "Prometheus and Epimetheus created mankind. Prometheus, he was very proud of his creation and wanted men to have everything they deserved, in his eyes. He deceived Zeus and was imprisoned. Without Prometheus's guidance, Epimetheus took an offer given by Pandora and, Lucifer and evil was born."

"So, he's the evil twin?" Chloe suggested.

"Something like that," Azazel said.

Chloe suddenly felt extremely tired. Her run in with



Lucifer in her head had begun to take its toll after all. "I am going to try to sleep some more."

Azazel watched as Chloe slept. He wondered what someone like her dreamed about. He pondered the idea of finding out, but he valued his human skin, and decided it best to leave her be.

--

Chloe could see a figure standing at the edge of purgatory, or what she assumed must be purgatory, she had never actually seen the place before. It was dark and ominous, with a heavy fog that covered the darkness. He was reciting something, she could not hear what the words were, but she could hear them as mumbles coming over the air. The figure's hands were out in front of him, his eyes closed. She watched as the air shimmered in around him. The figure opened his eyes and smiled, a gesture that made her skin crawl, and she realized that it had been Lucifer. He stepped forward into the dark forest that made up most of purgatory and continued forward until he reached a gate, it looked endless, when he approached an archway appeared in front of him. He reached out and placed his hand on the knob of the gate door and it turned for him, like it had been unlocked. She

screamed. She felt hands on her arms and fought against them. A voice began to come through clearly, she recognized it. "Chloe!" it yelled her name over and over. She finally opened her eyes and saw Azazel standing over her, shaking her. "You were screaming," he said, backing away.

"Lucifer found a way out," Chloe told him.

"How do you know?" Azazel asked her.

"I saw it, in my head, it was like, it was a dream, but not," she answered. "It's almost like, he wants us to know, he smiled at me when he stepped through purgatory and opened the gate into this plane. Like he saw me, or was sending me the message," she said.

Azazel sat down hard on the empty bed. Chloe watched him contemplate what they should do about this. "If it is true, then he's in California. And we are, not," He pointed out. "I don't think we should tell anyone about this yet," he said. "If he is indeed on this plane, it is more important than ever for us to find Him and get him back to the higher plane. The war is coming faster than anyone planned."

Chloe shuddered again, a few minutes ago she was wondering if the danger had been imagined. Now she was wondering if Lucifer was taunting her, letting her know he was coming for her.

--

"Tourists," the guard said to his partner in the booth when the camera caught the three people lurking around in front of the iron gate.

"They look like salesmen," the second guard offered.

"Salesmen would have tried to knock, tourists get lost and wander around until they figure out they went too far off the walkway and turn back around," the first guard said.

"How long does that usually take?" the second guard asked.

"Not long," he answered.

"It's been fifteen minutes," the second guard noted after

they had not seen the two males and one female pass by their screens again. "Should we tell him?"

"You tell him, he creeps me out," the first guard said.

"Maybe it's nothing," the second guard hoped this was true.

"Maybe we should check it out though?"

"Be my guest," the first guard nodded to his eager counterpart. Just as he was about to step out onto the driveway and check out the perimeter, the first guard pulled him back in. "We can move the camera around dimwit."

The guard typed something in his computer. The camera panned to the right. Where Michael, Gabriel and Abby were standing. "What do you think they're doing?" he wondered. "I guess we're going to have to check it out after all," he said with a sigh. As he stood up to exit the security shack just inside the gate the figures disappeared. He smacked the side of his screen to see if it had gone out or had a problem. "Dammit," he swore under his breath. "I am going to have to talk to the boss." He picked up the red phone on his desk and waited for the other end to pick up. A voice answered. "Sir, you asked us to

call you if there was any suspicious activity at the gate," the guard said into the phone. He then explained what he had seen. "Well, that definitely qualifies as suspicious," the voice on the other end replied and hung up.

#

"We should have stayed in flux, like I suggested," Abby said through gritted teeth. She had seen the camera move in their direction, and hoped she got Michael and Gabriel to disappear with her in enough time. They were floating in the space between the upper plane and the middle plane. Unseen to the mortal eye.

"Relax young one," Gabriel tried to calm her.

Abby had a hard time being calm, despite having her angel powers restored. One of the things she most regretted about her decisions and the loss of her powers, was how nervous she was as a human. The residual effects were still with her.

"I do not understand why we need to wait for the mortals," Michael argued, again.

"Brother, we need the Omphalos here, you know this, we agreed to allow the universe to dictate this mission, not interfere with it," Gabriel answered.

Abby could swear Michael was pouting as they stared down at the front gates of Epimetheus's Greek mansion. She surveyed the surrounding area, there was no activity on the grounds, so if they had been noticed, there did not seem to be any panic about it. The house covered a large area, Abby noted several buildings. A garage, the main house, what looked like a guest house, possibly maids quarters? A small building sat just inside the gate she assumed held guards. The grounds were perfectly landscaped, Greek statues and fountains were placed in several areas. Flowers and trees here thriving. Abby tried to visual Him, tried to feel Him. She could not get a read on his aura anywhere. Abby remembered that Prometheus had told them to watch for forces outside of the human realm at play.

"Can you feel Him at all?" she asked Michael and Gabriel. They both shook their head no.

--

"I swear my toes are going to fall off," Tyler complained to Jonathan as they trekked through the streets behind the large hill that housed the Parthenon. It was large and ominous behind them. The sun was setting in front of them. It had taken hours to get around the monument. Despite the loss of feeling in his toes, Tyler felt excitement when they finally rounded the corner and found themselves in what could have been mistaken for a Los Angeles neighborhood. Aside from the giant structure behind them that reminded them they were still in a foreign country.

"We're almost there," Jonathan encouraged him. "Need I remind you, I climbed a mountain yesterday?" he teased.

"Sorry," Tyler smiled sheepishly. "When this is all over, we're going to go on vacation, like, Hawaii or somewhere quiet. And sleep for a year."

Jonathan smiled at him. "You seem pretty certain we're going to win this war," he pointed out.

"Certain, no. Hope," Tyler said. "I have to have hope."

"You must have had quite a conversation with Prometheus," Jonathan commented. "Hope was not something I would say you had, even just a few days ago. It's like, you've been going through motions, but I never saw it as belief in what we were doing."

"I still do not believe in what we are doing," Tyler admitted. "As far as the conversation, I can't share what he told me, not right now, but being able to talk to him, helped put things in perspective."

Jonathan reached out and took Tyler's hand in his. "I understand, the feeling of hope, without belief. My faith has been on a knife's edge since the demon attack. But I need you to know, no matter what has happened, and may be coming, I have always believed in you."

Tyler squeezed Jonathan's fingers between his own. He decided that would have to be enough of a response to the conversation. He would either kill the mood, or at best make it uncomfortable.

As they rounded the corner and approached the large black gate that Prometheus had said belonged to Epimetheus, Tyler



dropped Jonathan's hand and grabbed his head.

"STOP THERE!" Abby had screamed into his brain.

"OW! Was that necessary?" he screamed back at her.

Abby, Michael and Gabriel appeared behind them. "Sorry, but yes," she answered.

--

Chloe sat on the hotel bed with her hands over her eyes, rocking back and forth. "It's like, he was showing me," she said. "Taunting me. But only gave me so much to look at. I mean, all I saw was Purgatory, and a doorway that clearly lead to this plane."

"I have no doubt he was taunting you, or all of us, more than likely," Azazel told her. "I am going to go out on a limb and assume that he is in California, at one of the supposedly secure gates the angels put into place," he stopped. "He knows, somehow, that Michael and Gabriel are not there to guard them," he realized.

"We've missed something," Chloe told him. "Maybe he does have someone on this plane after all?"

Azazel looked at her. "I suppose that is entirely possible," he admitted. "We have friends here too, though," he pointed out. "Might be time to call on them."

"I thought the Phoenix was on his own side, and the Dragon, is back on the lower plane," Chloe said. "You have other people, uh, beings, in mind?"

"There are others," Azazel told her. "I think, we should probably get back to Los Angeles, or, go somewhere safe, if Lucifer knows about the gates, he has to know that you are close by. I cannot explain it, but I have this feeling, that he's been playing us all along."

"We are not leaving," Chloe told him. "We are going to find him, and we are going to stop him."

"With what?" Azazel stifled a laugh. "Do you really think that if I was strong enough to beat Lucifer alone, I would have

waited around to take him down? And you're not at full strength. Whatever he did in that head of yours has you jumbled. If you think you and I can simply walk up to him and tell him to go home."

"You said that you have others on our side, wherever they are, it is time to get them here, and get them ready to do battle," Chloe was standing now. Her adrenaline had kicked in to high gear.

"It is entirely possible that Lucifer showed you that he was coming to this plane, to get this exact reaction," Azazel had not moved from his position, lounging against the backboard of the other hotel bed. "It is quite possibly a trap."

"He's the devil, everything is a trap," Chloe pointed out.

Azazel could not argue.

--

"I still think we just ring the bell," Tyler suggested.

"Look, if he saw you, they know we're coming. If they didn't, we

could play the lost tourist act and see where it gets us."

"Is now the right time to be taking that kind of risk?"

Jonathan asked.

No one could answer that question. They came to the conclusion that Abby should ring the bell, she was the least intimidating looking of the group. She stepped up to the gate and pressed the call button on the security pad. A voice came through. "Can I help you?"

Abby looked at her companions and back at the speaker. "I think we're lost," she said into it, as innocently as she could make herself sound. "We were following a path and then we ended up here, where is here, by the way?"

There was a silence on the other end. "Hello?" Abby said into the speaker. Within a few seconds the gate began to slide open, revealing a stone driveway leading up to an off white building just inside, and a large house set back off the road. A guard stepped out of the building to the left of the gate and approached Abby. "Epimetheus has been expecting you," he told her, and nodded toward her companions.

The guard led the group onto the grounds, they could hear the wheels closing the steel gate behind them. A large wood door was opening at the front of the house as they approached. A man greeted them, this was not Epimetheus. Definitely a butler or some sort of house staff, Tyler noted. From the description Prometheus had given, his brother was short, and stout, and despite his hatred of it, was living quite well off of what mankind had to offer.

"These are the guests Mr. Soulis has been expecting," the guard told the man at the door.

The man nodded and led the group into the large foyer. Blue and yellow tiles covered the floor and parts of the walls, a large Greek statue sat in the middle of the room with the biggest crystal chandelier known to man hanging from the domed ceiling, which Tyler noted had the same blue and yellow tiles as the rest of the room. "Wait here," the man commanded.

Tyler and his companions surveyed the room, glancing at each other in both wonder and worry. This was most definitely not a positive thing, being inside Epimetheus's house. He had

known they were coming. What that meant none of them could say. But it was not good, however he had meant it. "What do we do?" Tyler whispered to them.

"We came here to talk, not to attack," Gabriel whispered back.

Tyler saw Michael roll his eyes. On any other day he would point it out, but today was not any day. And, in a lot of ways, he agreed with the angel's assessment of the situation. Epimetheus might not be willing to simply have a conversation, and give them what they came for. At least he knew that Michael was ready and willing to fight if it came down to that.

"What if he's not in a talking mood?" Jonathan spoke what Tyler had been thinking.

"Oh, I am always in the mood to talk," a loud voice boomed through the room, it was so large the sound echoed off the walls and felt like it was careening through each of them individually. The group turned to see what could only be Epimetheus standing in the doorway leading further into the house. "Please, follow me."

#

Epimetheus led the group into a large living area. Where Prometheus's dwelling had all the comforts of a home made by someone who was not only a lover of art, but an appreciator of technology, Epimetheus's living room was more like a museum space with couches, but even those were fine works of art.

No one knew where to sit. How do you walk into the home of a titan, ready to accuse him of stowing away the ruler of Heaven, and risk sitting on a chair only to break it?

"Please, sit down," Epimetheus implored. "Alexander, fetch these folks some tea, would you like any pastries or anything to eat?"

Tyler sat gingerly on a small couch covered in a tapestry that looked like it told the story of a great battle. The wood armrests and legs were perfectly carved and well oiled. He stared at them, just barely hearing their host being, extremely welcoming.

"We do not need anything," Gabriel answered, he seemed to be the only one paying any attention to anything other than the

furniture or their surroundings, Michael seemed to be surveying the room, looking for clues, Abby was running her fingers over the velvet on the purple chair she had chosen, Jonathan was trying to assess what battle he was sitting on.

"So, Michael," Epimetheus clapped his stubby hands together. "To what do I owe the pleasure of such high ranking angels as you, and your mortal, friends?"

Michael did not speak. Tyler wondered if he was answering the man telepathically. He was about to ask him not to do that when Michael finally found his voice. "It has come to our attention that you are holding our father hostage."

Michael. Highest ranking Archangel. Never one to be subtle. Tyler nearly choked on his own spit. He coughed, cleared his throat and silently asked Abby or Gabriel to smack Michael. "You're closer," he heard Abby say in his head. It took him a few seconds to realize she had answered his request. His eyes widened and he forced a cough again to cover his surprise telepathy.

Epimetheus laughed. "That is quite an accusation," he said.



"Did my brother send you?"

"We have seen Prometheus, yes," Michael answered truthfully again.

Epimetheus laughed again. It was not a pleasant sound. Like you are used to hearing from a jolly fat man. It was deep, and cavernous, with a hint of monster. "Did he, by any chance, tell you why he believes I would do such a thing?"

"He had many things to say about you," it was Gabriel's turn to speak without filter. "I have to say, that I did not believe him," he admitted, much to the surprise of his companions, "but as I look around here, I feel that, his assessment of you is pretty much on point."

Tyler remembered the exchange between Prometheus and Gabriel, in which it was revealed that the three of them had previously been involved in some sort of scuffle they would not be specific about. Tyler wondered if Gabriel knew more about Epimetheus than he had been letting on. He seemed to speak to him like they were old acquaintances.

Epimetheus looked around the room, following Gabriel's eyes to all of the statues, paintings and art pieces displayed on rich furniture. "Just because I have a disdain for mankind, does not mean I cannot appreciate the things created by them."

"Is that what he is to you?" Gabriel kept up the interrogation. "An object created by mankind?"

Epimetheus was not smart, but he did have the sense to pause before he answered. "That is exactly what He is, isn't He?"

"Sit down!" Gabriel yelled at Michael and Abby who had both jumped up at the titan's suggestion that He was simply an art piece he had acquired for his collection.

Tyler shifted in his seat. He had never seen Gabriel raise his voice at anyone, let alone his superior.

Epimetheus laughed. "What I want to know, friend, is why it took you nearly 200 years to come looking for Him, if He is indeed, so important to you."

Gabriel did not answer. Alexander returned to the room rattling a large silver tray of tea. Tyler wondered if he was going to drop it. It was not so much that the man was nervous, as it was, the man was old. He poured out six cups of tea and handed them out one by one. The silence was deafening and Tyler was getting increasingly uncomfortable being there. He took note of the fact that no one, not the angels or the titan, had mentioned his status as Omphalos. He wondered if Epimetheus even knew.

"Do not drink it," Abby told Tyler in his mind. "It might be spiked," she answered when he asked why. He held the cup in front of him, hoping Jonathan would take his cue. He wondered why some magical telepathy between him and humans could not be developed in like, the next fifteen seconds. He did not need to worry about it, Jonathan had noticed no one in the room drinking the tea and decided not to take any chances himself.

Epimetheus shook his head. "So untrusting," he held the cup to his lips and took a sip, making a show of drinking it in, and remaining perfectly upright and sound. "It's just tea," he told them.

"We did not come all the way here to have tea, Epimetheus," Gabriel set his tea down on the table forcefully. Tyler and Jonathan cringed, it did not seem to matter to anyone else, that it was very expensive wood he was spilling tea onto.

"As you have said," Epimetheus answered, taking another deliberate sip from the cup he was holding like British royalty. "But Alexander is a very old man, and he has taken the time to brew it, so why not enjoy it while it is still, luke warm."

Tyler decided to take the chance, and brought the cup to his mouth. It smelled like perfectly normal black tea. It was only then he realized he was starving. And the titan was correct, it was only luke warm. He tried hard not to gulp it down, but failed.

"Would you like more, Omphalos?" Epimetheus asked Tyler.

There is was. His answer. The titan was well aware of who he was. Tyler once again started to choke, this time on residual tea he was still swallowing.

"Yes, I am aware of who you are," Epimetheus told him. "I

know all of you," he said. "Abby, angel sent down to the middle plane because of subordinate behavior, who lost her essence during the demon battle, but seems to have gotten it back, Jonathan, the mortal who's undying faith made him the perfect choice of mortals for this mission, and you, the soul without a home," he looked at them and smiled. Like his laugh, it had not warmth to it. "Not as stupid as advertised," he boasted.

"But just stupid enough to be holding a higher being hostage," Gabriel was done being quiet.

Epimetheus set down his cup, on the wood table. In a way it made Tyler's tension lessen, but only slightly.

"I hope your plan was not to talk me into handing him over," Epimetheus all but admitted he had the deity.

"The plan is to take him by force," Michael was on point with the truthfulness today.

"Is this your army?" Epimetheus pointed a stubby finger at the group.

"If you know who these people are, you are aware that they were able to save their city from a demon attack, and live to tell about it. You know that the Omphalos was created for situations such as this, and he has only just begun to show his potential. And you know that Michael and myself would be enough of an 'army' to take you on, as history has shown," Gabriel was also done being nice.

Tyler watched the light in the angel's eyes burn brighter. He sat forward, getting ready to jump up if anyone got the idea that they were going to start throwing punches. Gabriel did not move to attack, and neither did the titan.

"We are not gladiators anymore, Gabriel," Epimetheus remained strangely calm. Tyler could not tell if it was confidence or something else. "I can assure you, your father is being well taken care of," he said.

Gabriel's eyes were on fire now. Michael was sitting forward in his chair. Abby's eyes were darting between them, Tyler tried to see if there was some silent conversation going on between them. He was going to scold them for planning some sort of sneak attack without cluing the rest of them in on it

when Jonathan's pocket began making noises. Everyone's eyes turned to him, as he pulled out the cell phone and showed it to Tyler.

Tyler grabbed the phone and excused himself. "This better be an emergency," he answered it.

"It is, Tyler, it is definitely an emergency," the voice on the other end spoke, it was not Chloe or Azazel as Tyler had expected. The voice was the familiar smoky tones of Lucifer.

"How?" Tyler did not know what else to say.

"Imagine my surprise, when I showed up on the middle plane, looking to engage the Archangels and their friends in an epic battle of good versus evil, when the only challengers turned out to be my former brother and the future mother of my child," Lucifer clucked at him.

Tyler's heart sank as the words hit him and he began to realize what Lucifer was saying. He was on the middle plane, and he had Chloe. "Where are you?" he asked the demon.

"Promise you'll come alone," Lucifer commanded.

Tyler took a long pause.

"Tyler, promise me that you will come alone, and I will tell you where to find me," Lucifer said again.

Tyler looked at the group in front of him, Gabriel seemed to be engaged in conversation with the titan again, Michael and Abby were intently listening to their conversation. Only Jonathan was looking at him. Tyler closed his eyes. "I promise."

#

"I'm sorry about this," Tyler whispered to Jonathan as he handed him his cell phone back. He gave him one last smile before closing his eyes and popping out of sight.

Jonathan sat stunned, holding the phone tight in his hand. He could hear Abby saying his name but he did not answer her. He looked down at the phone, pushing the wake button. On the screen were the words "Lucifer found way in. Has Chloe and Azazel. Requested my presence. Do not follow." He handed the phone to Abby.



Abby read the words aloud in her mind so that Michael and Gabriel could hear her. "It is even more important we take care of business here, if Lucifer is indeed on this plane," Michael told them.

As the angels had their own private conversation Epimetheus sat and drank his now cold tea as slowly as if it were piping hot. Jonathan watched as he kept one eye on the angels, and the other on his tea cup. He did not seem to be worried about anything at all. Despite having Archangels in his house looking to rescue their father. Jonathan wondered if the rumors of the titan's lack of smarts was making him oblivious or if he had some kind of hidden trick up his sleeve.

What Jonathan knew for a fact was that he was odd man out now. Although even with Tyler there he was the only true mortal. He was beginning to wonder why he was a part of this mission, and how he could possibly affect its outcome when he had no powers, and very little fighting skills.

"Jonathan!" Abby said his name loud. He turned to her, confused as to why she yelled at him.

"I said your name seven times," she told him.

"Sorry, I was lost in thought," he apologized. He noticed Michael had stood up and was standing close to him. "What's going on?"

Michael tapped his forefinger against Jonathan's temple. He saw a bright light behind his eyes, felt an itch against his brain. He opened his eyes and looked at Michael, then Abby. "What was that?"

"You are connected to us telepathically now," Abby said in his mind.

He tried not to look startled. It did not seem to matter, Epimetheus was still sitting in his chair watching. "Does anyone else find it odd that we are doing all of this in front of the titan? Or that he is just sitting there watching us without preparing himself for whatever we're about to do? What are we going to do, by the way." Jonathan's words flowed so quickly he wondered if they had gotten any of them.

"Our main priority is here, in this house," Michael told

him, sternly. "I need you to understand that first."

Jonathan knew he meant Tyler. Getting Him back was priority right now, Tyler would have to deal with whatever Lucifer had going on alone, for now. "Understood," he told them. And he did. Despite his waning faith in everything and everyone else, his belief in Tyler had grown.

Epimetheus finally moved. He set his tea cup on the table and stood up, recognizing that everyone else had been standing for several minutes. "There is nothing I would like more than to see my brother's most prized creations fail at existing. As I said before, I am surprised it has taken you so long to come see me. As I waited for your arrival, I devised a series of tests for you to complete, before I concede. If you passed the tests, I would give you your father back. But I have a new idea. It seems you have bigger issues than I had imagined. So I am going to allow you to take him. No tricks, no strings," he told them.

Jonathan silently asked the angels if they were buying what the titan was selling. True to form, they were.

Epimetheus called for the butler and waited for the

gentleman to come into the room. "Fetch our house guest," he commanded. Alexander did not move. The titan snapped his fingers at him. "Now," he said with more force.

--

Tyler popped back into sight at the Mission San Francisco Solano front steps. He stepped up to the door and pushed against it. The hinges creaked but it opened without much force. The inside of the church was quiet. He would never call a church peaceful. The flashbacks of pain, both mental and physical, would always be at the forefront when he stepped inside a house of worship. He could still see the confused look on Jonathan's face, he had just left him, he hoped he would listen to his request not to come after him. Tyler was pretty sure Lucifer would do very bad things to them if they tried.

He looked around the room, empty wooden pews lined up facing the altar. He let his eyes travel to that area. He half expected to see himself lying on a slab of wood, half naked, electrodes stuck to his skin. He didn't. It was empty. Completely empty. No pulpit, no statue of Jesus, no flowers. He stepped forward and felt the pull of energy coming from in

between the wood gate that separated the two spaces. It seemed fitting, the congregation cut off from the pastor. He reached up and felt the air. It shimmered under his fingers. He stepped back and stared. Nothing. Felt again, shimmering air. "The gate," he said to himself, out loud.

Tyler stepped into the shimmering air and found himself in darkness. "Purgatory," he noted. "Now I'm talking to myself," he said and clamped his mouth shut between his teeth.

He stepped back and found himself outside of the pulpit again.

"Neat trick, isn't it?" a smoky voice came from behind him. Tyler whipped around and came face to face with Lucifer. "Hello again."

"Yes, how did you manage to get through it?" Tyler asked him.

"So much for pleasantries. And don't you want to know where your friends are?" Lucifer taunted.

"This is not a social call, and they are not my friends," Tyler pointed out. "My friends are far away from here," he made sure to emphasize that.

"Greece, as I understand it," Lucifer nodded. "Just because I am on the lower plane does not mean I cannot see what is happening on this one," he said. "You think it's only the upper plane keeping an eye on you?"

"Why am I here, Lucifer," Tyler got back to business.

"You are going to be so angry," Lucifer seemed to be in an odd mood. "I just wanted to see if you would come."

Tyler stood, stunned. "This is not a game, Lucifer!"

"Oh, but it is, Tyler, it is a big, long, chess game, that I have been playing with the almighty for so many years we may have misplaced the chess pieces a couple thousand times," Lucifer chuckled.

"You are acting as if you have won," Tyler pointed out.

"Not quite, but I am about to trap the queen and there is not a move He can make that will keep me from calling check mate," Lucifer was tracing a long finger along one of the wooden pews. Tyler wondered why the demon was not burning to ash, standing in a holy house.

Tyler chuckled. "If you are referring to me, as the queen, there are all sorts of things wrong with that statement," he said.

"I am sorry to say, my young friend, that you are but a pawn in the game," Lucifer answered. "In this case, the queen is the middle plane."

"I don't know anything about chess," Tyler tried to keep the demon talking.

"Not surprising, it is a high class game played by beings with the greatest minds," Lucifer continued to taunt Tyler like a wolf with his prey.

"You do understand that you are intent on destroying the people, the greatest minds, that created the game," Tyler

pointed out.

"When will you realize that I am not out to destroy the middle plane forever," Lucifer stepped forward, getting entirely too close for Tyler's comfort. "I am going to recreate it, better!"

--

Alexander returned to the living room. At first it seemed he was alone. But when he stepped aside, trailing behind him, was a frail, aging man. His shoulders slumped, his facial hair and head hair was out of control. He was dressed in a white sleeping gown, Jonathan was not so sure it wasn't the same gown he had been wearing when he was taken. It was oversized and greying. Abby, Michael and Gabriel gave audible reactions upon seeing him. When he saw them he seemed to brighten, he stood straighter, and the light in his eyes began to return. Epimetheus did nothing to stop them from approaching their father. They hugged him, carefully. It was an act Jonathan was surprised by the act. It seemed, so human.

Jonathan watched as the angels looked over their father,



making sure he was unharmed, assuring him that they were returning him home. He stayed back and let them have their time. He wondered if he had somehow become invisible. As he stood there he began to feel a warmth he had not remembered feeling since he took this vows to the church years ago. He realized the deity was watching him. A tear streamed down Jonathan's eye. For a moment he was at peace. He turned to share the moment with Tyler and remembered. Tyler had gone after Lucifer. Now that He was back in the arms of his family, it was time for Jonathan to get his family back.

Jonathan quietly stepped out of the titan's large estate and made his way down the driveway. Instead of heading to the hotel to collect his things, most of which he had acquired just that week, Jonathan walked into the first area of town he saw and called himself a cab. When it arrived he instructed the driver to head straight to the airport.

#

"Can't you summon one of your demon friends to get us out of here?" Chloe huffed.

Azazel rolled his eyes at her and pointed around the room. The walls were solid cement, the door was steel, there were no windows. "We're not in some mortal jail cell," he said. "You really think Lucifer is going to lock me in a room that wasn't warded against my powers? No, I cannot call on any friends, I cannot just get us out, I cannot do a damn thing."

"That's not my fault," Chloe felt his accusatory tone.

"Really, it is though, it was your idea to go after him," Azazel huffed back at her.

"Since when do you follow my orders? You could have said no, you could have stopped me," Chloe reminded him. "Admit it. You wanted to see what he was up to, so you agreed to come along. You thought he'd see you and all would be forgiven, and it did not exactly go as you planned."

"Shush," Azazel put his hand up to Chloe who shot him an evil look. He held his hand to his head, closed his eyes, and held his finger to his lips. "I think someone is trying to contact me," he told her.

--

Tyler stood at the empty altar watching Lucifer set out talismans, candles, bowls of substances he could only imagine the ingredients of. In his mind he was reaching out to whichever side would hear him first. So far it was neither. Lucifer hummed a tune Tyler was unfamiliar with as he worked. Tyler was not entirely surprised that it was Azazel who answered first.

"I am at the mission, watching Lucifer set up for the blood ritual," Tyler told him. "Where is he holding you?"

"In the dungeon, where we were holding you," Azazel answered. "I suppose it serves me right."

"I'll gloat later, listen I am not sure I am going to be able to get to you, he wants me to be here, to see his victory, or some crap," Tyler said.

"Is anyone else with you?" Azazel asked.

"He told me to come alone, made me promise, I left them in Greece, with Epimetheus," Tyler told him.

As they spoke, silently, Tyler watch Lucifer work intently. He wondered if the devil would notice his absence, but decided it best not to risk it. Lucifer stepped back, checked a page in a giant, ancient text he seemed to be following instructions from, and admired his creation.

Tyler was about to make a snarky comment when the ground under him shook violently, he heard heavy rain fall outside, thunder and lightening clack and flash all at once. Lucifer's perfectly set ritual toppled, dripping wax onto his drawn pentagram and extinguishing the flames in all the candles. He looked up to the sky, then at Tyler.

"Daddy's home. And he seems to be very angry with me," he smirked.

--

"Sorry for the turbulence folks," the voice of the pilot came over the speakers. "It seems we have run into a thunderstorm. Please continue to utilize your seatbelt until we are through the storm clouds. Should not be long."

Jonathan watched as heavy rain fell outside the tiny airplane window. He could see lightening bolts light up the sky, hear loud thunder. For some reason he knew what was happening. The almighty had been returned to his home, things were putting themselves back into place. He tried to let the peace of that keep him from being afraid that the events were going to knock the large metal tube right out of the sky.

For the first time in a while, he prayed. He prayed for safe landing, he prayed he could save Tyler, he prayed he was not truly alone.

He nearly jumped out of his seat when a voice answered him. "I will never leave you alone," it was Abby.

Jonathan regained his composure. "Tyler was right. You need a bell or a buzzer or some sort of warning that you are going to speak," he said to her, in his head.

"Yeah after we stop another apocalypse, we'll work on a bell," Abby tried sarcasm. It almost worked the way she planned.

"Is this Him?" Jonathan asked about the storm.

"He's speaking to Lucifer, indirectly," Abby told him.

"Letting him know he's back in charge."

"Good to know He has warning bells," Jonathan gave her back the sarcasm. There was silence. "Abby?"

"I'm still here," she answered.

"I meant what I said, a bit ago, please don't let this plane crash," Jonathan almost begged.

"There will be no plane crashes today, Jonathan," this time it was Gabriel who spoke to him. "You are about to play an important part in the defeat of Lucifer."

--

"What was that?" Azazel asked Tyler.

"Earthquake followed by rain, thunder and lightening, Lucifer said it was Him returning home," Tyler told him. "Please

tell me frogs and locusts and the plague are not coming next."

"He's trying to save the middle plane, not destroy it," Azazel said. "Also none of those things would bring any harm to Lucifer, so, no, you're safe."

"Tyler," another voice broke in to their conversation. Tyler looked around to see if it was someone in the room. It was still just himself and Lucifer, who had begun putting his bowls and candles back in their places. "It's Gabriel," the voice told him. "Are you with Lucifer?"

"Yes," Tyler answered.

"What is he doing?" Gabriel asked.

"Setting up the blood ritual," Tyler told him.

"Your message said he has the vessel, are they with you as well?"

"No, he is holding them in a cell, in Hell," Tyler said.

--

"What happened?" Chloe asked Azazel, who was clearly trying to get whoever it was in his head to come back to him.

"I think someone else broke in, Gabriel, if I have my Archangel voices right," Azazel answered. He was shaking his head, like one would try to get sound out of a speaker. "Tyler is with Lucifer, who is setting up for the ritual. He is alone," Azazel told her. "The shaking, was the almighty returning to his post in Heaven."

Chloe looked around the room. "There has to be something we can do, something we can hit him with when he comes to get me for the ritual."

"I don't think Lucifer is aware that Tyler is able to communicate with us, or the angels, I think we need to utilize that, but feel free to use your fingernails to dig into this concrete, I am in serious need of entertainment," Azazel said.

--



Jonathan wondered if time had slowed down on him. Abby and Gabriel had left his head and he was still sitting on the long flight from Greece to San Francisco. He had always wondered, if his faith in religion was the reason he seemed to be in the places he needed to be, when he needed to be there. Tonight he was sure of it. The only flight he could get from Athens to the United States happened to be landing in San Francisco before heading to Los Angeles, which was where he was intending to go. The fact that San Francisco was exactly where he needed to be did not go unnoticed to him.

--

Tyler continued to watch Lucifer prepare the ritual items and hum the same tune which Tyler still could not identify. "So, you summoned me here, alone, to watch you light candles. I am flattered by the gesture but I already have a boyfriend."

Lucifer ignored his sarcastic remarks. "I find it amusing, Omphalos, that you are still so confident you are going to win, as I have already explained, you have lost, I have taken the Queen," he went with the chess analogy again.

"As you've said," Tyler leaned on the gate of the altar, attempting to get a better look at exactly what Lucifer was doing. "And I am still not sure you understand the game of chess. But seeing as I don't either, I am going to just let that analogy go."

"Did you help in the finding of the ruler of Heaven?" Lucifer changed the subject.

"Was he missing?" Tyler fished to see what Lucifer knew.

Lucifer did not answer him. He lit the last candle and stepped back to admire his work. When he was satisfied with it being back in place, he nodded.

The ground shook, again, and toppled everything he had just put back in place.

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME?" Lucifer yelled to the sky.

Tyler swore he could hear laughter in the thunder that clapped just after the ground shook. He flashed back to kindergarten when kids would purposely knock over his towers of

chicken nuggets after watching him build them. He pictured Him and Lucifer as young boys taking away each other's toys, and realized that in their worlds this was a game. It would always be the same one. The almighty would take away the toy and send Lucifer pouting in his room. Hours later Lucifer would return and take something of His. Mankind. Mankind was their toy.

--

Another round of thunder and lightening made the airplane lurch and jump. The passengers screamed and held on to their seats, prayed to whatever beings they believed in and held their breath. Jonathan remained calm. Abby and Gabriel had promised he was going to land in San Francisco unharmed, as were his fellow passengers. He wondered if he should stand up and assure them that everything was going to be alright. But sermons were in his past. And telling them that angels spoke to him was a sure way to get the flight diverted to another city. Jonathan did not know a lot about geography, but he knew that being halfway into the flight meant he was nowhere near where he wanted to be, much less in the United States. He sat in his seat and silently thanked Abby and Gabriel for the warning, and the promise.

#

Tyler watched as Lucifer set up the blood ritual for the third time. He wondered how long this game would continue. He had always heard that the almighty and the devil were patient. He figured it was going to be time for him to find out. Lucifer paid him no attention. For a moment he wondered if he could pop in on Azazel and Chloe and attempt a rescue, but he decided not to take that chance. He was not in much of a hurry to rescue them anyway, despite the need to get Chloe as far away from this ritual as possible.

His thoughts turned to Jonathan. Gabriel would not tell him where Jonathan had gone. All he said was that he had left Greece on his own. Somewhere inside Tyler knew that Jonathan was on his way to San Francisco, which is where he was. "Abby," Tyler called out her name silently. She did not answer. He tried again. Still nothing. He checked on Lucifer's progress and then remembered he had left Azazel mid sentence.

"Sorry, sorry," Tyler was unsure why he was apologizing to the demon, but he felt compelled to. "So, in case you hadn't figured out, He has been returned to Heaven, frail but safe."

There was silence, Tyler thought maybe his powers had gone out.

"Is there some kind of plan to stop Lucifer, or is He just going to shake him to death?" Azazel finally answered.

Tyler felt slightly uneasy that he and Azazel were on the same wavelength. "It has occurred to me, as I sit here and watch Lucifer set up the ritual, again, that you are all children and this is a game you're all playing," he told Azazel.

"Believe me, this is no game of mine," Azazel told him.

Tyler could see in his mind, the small cell he had been locked in when Azazel had taken him into Hell. He spent countless hours wondering why he was stuck there. How the devil and his disciple could hold his soul down there like it was theirs. Everything he had read about Heaven and Hell spoke of souls, taken up or taken down. He had stared at cement walls and wondered if he belonged there after all. It all made sense now, without an anchor he was able to float between.

"Question," Tyler broke from his walk down memory lane. He

heard Azazel sigh deeply. "There is nothing I can do for you right now, so humor me."

"What is it?" the demon was definitely not in a good mood.

Tyler couldn't blame him, he would not want to be stuck in that small space with Chloe either. "How is it that Lucifer is holding Chloe in Hell?"

"What? That's your question?" Azazel huffed at him.

"Don't make faces at me," Tyler knew the demon was frowning. "That was not my original question but it just came to me that she's down there with you, how is that possible? I thought she was human or mortal or whatever it is you call souls that are not ready to be one place or the other."

"Lucifer owns Chloe's soul, it was part of her contract," Azazel told him. "Alive or dead, he can hold her where he chooses."

"Did she just not read the fine print? I thought she was a lawyer," Tyler was not sure why he was keeping this conversation

going, but it was helping the time pass.

"She was a lawyer, dying of brain cancer, and not ready to go, Lucifer saw her from a mile away. She would do anything to stay alive, I am still unsure why, she does not seem to have any family or friends that she is worrying about or looking for," Azazel humored him, probably for the same reason. To pass time.

Tyler knew how she felt. He had no family and no real friends to speak of, before the demon invasion anyway. Now he seemed to have friends of all sorts. But he was not ready to die. Not now, not before. There were very few things he was ever sure of. One was his sexuality, the other was his will to live.

"Tyler?" Azazel broke in to his revelry.

"What happens if this ritual is carried out, really?" Tyler asked him.

Azazel took a few minutes to answer. "I am really not sure," he admitted. "I tried to get in to Lucifer's library and find the texts, but he was always in there. Pouring over them. I know that he thinks it will give him the leverage he needs to

take over the middle plane, I know that he believes this with every part of his being, or he would not be going to such great lengths to carry it out."

"Great lengths?" Tyler asked. "He's lighting candles and placing bowls of, something, on the corners of a pentagram he drew."

"Yes, but how is he on the middle plane?" Azazel asked him. "If it were so easy for him to find the gate and walk through it, why have we been going through all of this?"

Azazel had a point. Lucifer was standing on the middle plane without consequence. He did not seem to be injured or even struggling. Not only was he on the middle plane, he was standing in a church, an old, sacred one, that had recently been re-consecrated by some very powerful angels.

"Are we still thinking he had help?" Tyler asked.

"Until today, I would have sworn he was working alone. But, I am beginning to wonder if your new friend Epimetheus is not involved," Azazel said.



"You know Gabriel, all business, I could not get much information, he just said Epimetheus let Him go without a fight, he said that He was in a weakened state but not mistreated, the weakness was His being away from home for so many years," Tyler told him. "When I asked what they were doing to stop Lucifer and this ritual business Gabriel would only say that He was angry."

"Tyler," Azazel's voice seemed to get softer.

"What's happening?" Tyler noticed the change in Azazel's voice and it unsettled him. He had never heard the demon sound, sincere. And he had spent a great deal of time with him.

"You might need to get comfortable with the fact that He may do absolutely nothing to stop Lucifer from carrying out this ritual," Azazel told him. "It is, and has always been, His way, to see how things play out."

"So He will sit back and watch the middle plane fall to the hands of Lucifer, just to see what happens next?" Tyler tried as hard as he could to sound angry. He wondered if it was coming through.

"I did not say it was going to happen, I just suggest that you prepare, if it does," Azazel said. "There is a reason they are keeping you, all of us, in the dark about things. You, of all people, understand the way this works. You can pray and wish and hope, and He may hear you, but just because He hears your pleas does not mean He will heed them."

"Gabriel and Michael put this in motion," Tyler remembered. "They came to me, to Jonathan and Abby. They put the pieces in place."

"When they had no one giving them orders," Azazel said. "Now that He has returned, I doubt they will disobey an order if He gives them one. I do not need to remind you that your kind, mankind, put this in motion. Heaven and Hell and beings of higher powers who grant wishes if you pray hard enough and are good people. Those are your ideals."

"Not mine," Tyler argued.

"Maybe not, but that is what sets you apart from this world," Azazel said. "You understand that it is man's free will

that gets things done. Look, I am not going to tell you that you should not count on higher beings coming to your rescue, because just as Lucifer and He were created by man, so were demons and monsters, like me. But I am telling you that you may be the only thing standing between Lucifer winning this war, or losing it."

"I am not ready to do battle with the devil," Tyler admitted. "I don't even know what I am capable of yet."

Azazel did not respond to that. It was just as well. Lucifer had finished setting everything in place and was staring up at the ceiling, waiting for Him to respond. The ground remained still. No rain or thunder, no lightening. Just, silence. Lucifer smiled.

"You know that I have to stop you, right?" Tyler said out loud. It was odd, hearing his voice echo through the church, rather than in his mind.

Lucifer laughed. It was an unsettling sound, as usual. "I know that you are going to try."

Tyler moved to stand in front Lucifer, to block his path.

When he stood up his head throbbed and he had to sit back down. At first he thought it was the telepathy that had taken a toll. A sharp pain struck him directly in the center of his head and he heard a booming voice. "You are going to let him carry out the ritual. You are going to let Lucifer win. We have not yet seen the potential of this unborn child. It is important that we allow the events to happen so that we may find out."

Tyler's head stopped throbbing. He looked around to see if Lucifer had gone, but it seemed time was still. Lucifer was standing at the gate opening, but he was not moving. "You cannot seriously want this?" Tyler yelled, out loud. "I am not going to watch my world fall apart because you're curious to see what happens. You may be the ruler of Heaven but I am a part of the middle plane and I have powers yet to be seen."

"Ah, I am flattered, that you would assume I am the almighty, ruler of Heaven and all that is good and light," the voice boomed again, this time it was not in his head. Tyler looked around. He saw a figure enter the church doors and blinked. Epimetheus came in to view. "You may have powers, my young friend, but you have no idea what I am capable of. I have the power of Pandora behind me. And she is very curious to see

what happens next."

#

"I know that it is hard to understand," His voice was weak, but He still commanded attention. The Archangels, and Abby, sat at His feet in His study. "But there are higher powers at work here. Higher than even we can imagine."

"I do not understand how we can just let them fend for themselves," Gabriel questioned Him. He was the only one who was brave enough to do so. After being on the middle plane and seeing the life, and the fight in mankind. He was not going to let them all die.

"We will not," He assured Gabriel. "We will do as we always have. We will give them the strength to continue to fight, we will be there for them because they believe we are. We will assure that prayers are answered and life continues to move forward."

"How? Lucifer's ritual will be carried out, he will gain control of the plane and he will destroy it, that is his plan, that is what he has always wanted," Gabriel continued to push Him.

He reached out and placed a frail hand on Gabriel's head. "My child, you know that these things do not work that way. The world will not end as Lucifer speaks the final word in his incantation. It will take time, to build an army, to watch the child grow, to put in place the things that he needs to take over the plane. Even Lucifer himself knows that this is only the beginning."

"Do you think the other Titans will step in?" Abby asked, finding her voice.

"I do not know," He admitted.

--

Tyler stood and stared at the titan. His voice was deceptive. It was now strong and hearty. In Greece, in his own home, he seemed more subdued. His body remained stout and pudgy. Whatever deal he had made with Pandora, it did not include a new vessel. If that was even how those things worked with them. He shook off the those thoughts and came back to reality. "Does your brother know you are here?"

Epimetheus smiled and continued to move toward Tyler. "You understand, that my brother's name means forethought, yes?"

Tyler remembered reading that when he did his research. "Are you trying to say that Prometheus is letting this happen?"

"Letting it? I would not go that far," the titan sat in a pew across from where Tyler was sitting. "Prometheus is blissfully unaware of the events as they are currently happening. As long as nothing we are doing affects his comfort, he will allow the world to turn. It is how he must live. It is the choice he was given. Remain tied to a rock with an eagle eating his flesh, or agree to never step in and interfere with events, no matter how good or bad they may be."

Time was still. Literally, nothing was moving. Lucifer was standing in the spot where Tyler knew the gate between purgatory and the middle plane was located.

"I am full of surprises," Epimetheus bragged.

"So am I," Tyler said. He closed his eyes and pictured the

dungeons of Hell, the hallways, the dankness. "Azazel!" He called out to the cell doors when he appeared exactly where he meant to. He almost laughed at himself when he realized what he had done. "Azazel," he said again, inside his mind.

--

Jonathan wondered if Tyler would be angry with him, or overjoyed to see him. Or somewhere in between. The pilot had come over the speaker and announced they were one hour from their destination. Jonathan only knew that he needed to be wherever Tyler was. At this point the consequences were insignificant. Abby and Gabriel had assured him that with Tyler was exactly where he was meant to be, and that was where he was going to go. He was lost in thought, wondering what they would say, how they would greet each other, when Abby broke in to his thoughts.

"I didn't have time to find a bell," she told him. Her voice was serious. Enough that Jonathan got over his shock and just listened. "I promised I would tell you if anything changed. And it has," she told him. "It is not good news. Please listen to everything I have said before you ask questions or yell at



me."

Jonathan nodded, like an idiot. "Okay," he said in his mind after looking around to see if anyone had noticed. The plane dark, his seat mates were asleep.

Jonathan listened as Abby told him everything she had heard since they had spoken last. About Pandora and Epimetheus, about Heaven having no choice but to let the events play out as they were going to. "We can never interfere when the Titans are involved," she said, a number of times.

Can never, or will never, Jonathan wondered. He always told his congregation that there were higher beings looking out for them. For mankind. Whatever they believed they looked like, that's what they were. He had seen them. He had met angels and demons. He had seen humanity work together to fight back against things out of their control. He saw faith restored when the world did not end, because angels were real.

"I wonder," Jonathan started. "How much more we need to be put through, before we are worthy of you," he was trying not to take this out on Abby. This was not her fault. "We have been

continuously tested, and we have continued to thrive. War and disease and floods and disasters. We have thrived. Is that the problem? We always come back, we never lose. You want to know how far you can push us before we break? Before we stop fighting back?" He felt tears roll down his cheeks.

"I could ask the same of you," Abby's voice was not unkind, but strong as always. "Mankind has a tendency to lay down and hope for the best, hope that we will be there to fix the hurt, to heal the sick, to rebuild the loss. And we have done it. Because that is what you created us for. Someone to rely on, someone to blame. If things go well, He listened. If things go wrong, that is His will. It is time you take responsibility for yourselves. Fight. Win. And stop relying on divine power to be there to fix it if you fail."

Jonathan did not know what to say. So he just didn't.

--

Tyler counted the cell doors and found the one he knew was his old cell, his home for six months down on this plane. He had counted the doors every time he and Azazel had walked this

corridor. Four on the left, three on the right, then his prison. Azazel had not answered when he called. Silently or audibly. He thought of Lucifer standing still as a statue and wondered if time had stopped on all planes. He stopped at the cell door and looked inside the small window that was carved into the steel. Azazel and Chloe sat still on the floor.

Keys. Tyler looked around to see if he could find keys to open the door. Then he remembered a conversation he had and Azazel had one of the many times they had walked back to the cell. Magic. There were no keys. He had no idea what he was doing. Even if he could get inside, could he unfreeze them? Move time? He might be completely unaware of his powers but he was pretty certain stopping time was more of a Pandora's evil box type of thing.

"Tyler," he heard Azazel's voice. Was it in his head or through the door. He couldn't tell. "Azazel," he said out loud, either way it he'd hear it. "How do I get this door open?"

"Put your hand on the door, repeat the words exactly as I say them," Azazel said. "Qui aperit vulvam rogatu."

Tyler said the words slowly. "Qui. Aperit. Vulvam. Regatta." The door swung open.

"What's happening?" Azazel asked him. "Where's Lucifer?"

"Funny thing that," Tyler told him. "Wait," he noticed that Azazel was moving, but Chloe had remained still.

"She just, froze like that," Azazel told him.

"Yeah, it's, Epimetheus," Tyler said.

Azazel did not seem to be surprised by this news. "Chloe and I have spent a lot of time together, speculating, we both felt that things were not adding up here. That Lucifer had to be working with someone, we figured Epimetheus."

"Right, well, let me lay some more news on you," Tyler said. "He's working with Pandora."

Azazel shook his head. "Mortals, gods, titans, man, animal, insect, no one ever learns," he seemed to be ready to laugh.

"His previous dealings with her were not enough of an indication

to never trust her. I cannot say that I am entirely surprised, although I did not see that part of the puzzle."

"They are allowing Lucifer to carry out his plans because they want to see what happens," Tyler told him. "They're curious."

Azazel sat back down on the cement. Tyler stared at him.

"There is nothing," Azazel looked at him. His demeanor had changed. "There is nothing we can do, if they are involved. Heaven and Hell are out of the picture now. Our hands are tied. As you answer to us, we answer to them."

"I am not sure if you've noticed, but I do not answer to anyone," Tyler reminded him.

"That is what they are counting on," Azazel told him.

Tyler raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"You wanted to know what you are capable of?" Azazel said. "What being an Omphalos means? So do they. This is all on you

now. Heaven will go quiet. So will Hell. Except Lucifer but that is how it has always been. You have always said that you were on your own. You were the only one you believed in. Today, that is true."

Tyler sat down on the hard cement next to Azazel and put his head in his hands. "I am not ready for this."

#

Azazel let Tyler have his meltdown. In a lot of ways he understood what he was going through. When Lucifer chose him to be at his side, Azazel was a young demon. He had been working up the ranks, spending all of his time underground guarding the dungeon. The very dungeon he found himself in currently. Back then Lucifer's biggest plan was to turn Hell into a well oiled machine. Everyone had their job to do, Azazel's was to keep the worst of the evil souls in line. That was probably why Lucifer chose him to be his partner. Azazel remembered Lucifer's former assistant coming to get him. He thought he had done something wrong. That was the only time Lucifer called demons into his office. He had his officers to do everything else. But when someone got out of line, Lucifer was there to lay down the punishment. Azazel was thinking of all the things he had done while he followed quietly behind Jonah, Lucifer's assistant. He

was the third demon Lucifer had appointed his sargeant that week. Jonah had been on the job one day.

Lucifer welcomed Azazel into his library. "Sit," he commended. Azazel sat down as he was instructed. Lucifer dismissed Jonah and turned his full attention on Azazel. He remembered feeling heat coming from the devil's eyes. To this day he wondered if he was imagining it. Lucifer told him he was looking for a new soldier to be at his side while he ruled Hell. Azazel had no idea what that meant, what the job entailed, what Lucifer could possibly need that warranted an assistant and a sargeant, but he knew that it scared him.

At first it was all about giving out orders and keeping demons in line. Essentially what Azazel had been doing down in the dungeons, just further up and with Lucifer's direct orders. About a hundred years into the job Lucifer began his quest to take over the middle plane. Again. Azazel went along with him. He had learned not to go against Lucifer's wishes. It was the reason he had kept his position so long. Lucifer said jump, Azazel asked how high, and jumped further. And truthfully Azazel had heard the stories. Lucifer's failed attempts at invasion were common knowledge throughout Hell. What was the worst that

could happen?

Azazel was wishing he had asked that question more deeply. He wished he had asked more questions about the missions he had been sent on. When Lucifer figured out that Azazel liked to be on the middle plane more than doing the menial jobs underground, he sent him on more missions above the surface. Taking messages to people like Phenex, checking on hospital patients who were on the verge of death. He realized now that he had been part of Lucifer's recruiting team, without even knowing it.

Azazel felt Chloe move next to him. Chloe. That was his fault too. Azazel tapped Tyler on the shoulder. "Something's happening," he pointed out that Chloe was moving. Epimetheus must have unfroze time.

"Someone's coming," Tyler saw the figure before he heard them. He scrambled to his feet and stepped inside the cell with Chloe and Azazel.

None of them were surprised when the figure stopped at their cell. "Lucifer," Tyler and Azazel mouthed to each other, they were so close they could feel each other's breath. It



unsettled Tyler that Azazel had breath.

--

Lucifer pulled open the already unlocked door. He was surprised to find Tyler crowded in the cell with Chloe and Azazel. He figured the Omphalos would go to the angels. Or his lover. Not to mention the fact that the door was unlocked and yet, they were standing uncomfortably inside the cell meant for one person. "Well, this is convenient," he pulled Tyler out by his arm. When he reached in to grab Azazel the demon scoffed and stepped forward on his own. Chloe stood as far against the back wall as she could. All of her strength and defiance was gone. She looked like she was trying to make herself invisible.

"Time to go," Lucifer spoke to her like she was a puppy. He expected her to snap out of her state of fear and lash out at him for that. She just quietly stepped out of the cell and let him guide her out of the dungeons. Tyler and Azazel followed him.

"It is nice to see that you have finally figured out that you have lost," Lucifer said as they walked up rocky stairs that

lead out of the lower levels of Hell and into purgatory. Lucifer had Chloe by the arm, in case she got any ideas, he could not have her running. He did not feel like running after her.

Tyler and Azazel continued to follow behind them silently. Lucifer wondered if they were silently planning something. Epimetheus had told him about their telepathic connection. "I hope whatever plan you are hashing it does not involve trying to stop me again."

--

Azazel and Tyler were speaking to each other but they were not planning anything. They were arguing. Tyler was still fighting the idea of letting Lucifer win this round. He had no love for Chloe, but using her as a vessel to grow a demon baby was not something he would wish on his worst enemy. At one time he might have considered Chloe such a person, but he was seeing that all of them, him, Chloe, Azazel, even the angels, were all pawns in a big game they didn't even know they were playing. He felt sorry for her, more than anything.

"I know that it is hard to understand, but this is not up

to us anymore. Forces beyond our control are at work now," Azazel was saying.

"Which line do you want me to listen to, the one where I have to use my free will and learn to be the Omphalos, or the one where forces outside the control of high powered supernatural beings cannot be stopped so we just have to lay down and take it because, that's how it is?" Tyler argued.

"Both," Azazel answered.

Lucifer lead them through purgatory and into the church like it was nothing. Yesterday it had been heavily warded by angelic power, today it was just another door.

"Higher power," Azazel reminded him. Apparently he had made the observation about the door out loud. Or at least loud enough in his head that the demon could hear him.

"You understand, that you are asking someone who did not even believe in higher powers a year ago, to forget everything he learned recently and replace it with new information about even higher powered beings. I have only just come to terms with

the fact that angels, demons, gods and devils exist. Now you're asking me to believe in new gods and monsters," Tyler continued to argue. He was watching Lucifer guide Chloe to the front of the church, at the altar, like he was about to marry her. He noted the irony that Lucifer was about to artificially inseminate a woman he had no intentions of marrying, in a church. In front of a statue of Jesus for good measure.

Tyler could feel eyes on him. He turned to see Epimetheus watching from a pew, close enough to see what was happening, far enough away to look like just another tourist praying in an old church. He had an immediate desire to sit next to the titan, but he suppressed it. Azazel was standing next to him. Tyler was pretty sure he was keeping a close eye on him in case Tyler decided to put a stop to this ridiculousness.

--

Abby stood at the observation bridge watching over the scene at the mission. She could see how tense Tyler was. How casually Epimetheus watched. How Azazel was torn between allowing Lucifer to continue and letting Tyler stop him. She knew the feeling. She wanted so badly to go against everything

she had been asked to do and stop this from happening. She had been through her share of unfair decisions. This one seemed particularly cruel. There was an entire plane of mortal beings who had no idea how much their world was about to change. Father had told them that even they do not know how this will change the future of mankind. But they had no choice but to allow it to continue. It was up to Prometheus and his fellow titans, or the Greek gods if they were still interested in the goings on down on the surface of Earth.

Gabriel stepped up beside her. They did not speak to each other, but they knew what the other was thinking. Gabriel had always been on the same wavelength when it came to the humans. The sadness they both felt was apparent enough, words did not need to be spoken.

--

Chloe had lost her will to fight back. Her spirit had been broken. She stood still and let Lucifer recite words she did not understand from a book she could not read. She wondered what being pregnant with a demon baby would feel like. She had not ever wanted to have kids as a mortal. She asked herself again,

why she had fought so hard to stay alive. Why she had let her ego and her desire to be in charge of something guide her into this mess. She supposed this was her punishment for having such an ego. For thinking that she could outsmart the devil. They must have seen her coming a mile away. She played right into their hands.

Lucifer pulled her closer to the pentagram, closer to the flames of the candles. Chloe could smell pungent scents of whatever was mixed into the bowls sitting on the corners of the star inside the circle. Lucifer picked up one of the bowls and held it to her mouth. She gagged but drank the liquid without force, she did not want to know what Lucifer would do to force her to drink it. Lucifer continued to speak in some ancient language that sounded evil, and Chloe drank from each bowl he forced in front of her mouth.

When the last of the liquids had been consumed Lucifer set the book down on the lectern.

Every eye in the room, and even ones that were not, watched to see what would happen.

#

The ground shook so strongly under his feet Prometheus thought his mountain was coming down. Dust fell from the walls and ceiling, he thought he could hear and see cracks forming in the rock walls. The lights flickered, his television and computer screens blinked on and off. Greece was not known to have earthquakes. Then he heard the thunder and crack of lightning and he knew what was happening. Order was being restored on the upper plane. The almighty was back in his rightful place. Instinctively the titan looked up toward the sky and nodded in approval. When the earth shook and sky opened up a second time, Prometheus knew the ruler of Heaven was unhappy. By the time the third round struck he knew for a fact He was angrier than he had ever been. Prometheus wondered what it had taken to get him back there. Epimetheus might not be much of a thinker, but he knew how to fight. It pained him that he could only speculate and hope his visions gave him answers once he went to rest. Not knowing whether or not the earth would be shaking again was preventing him from settling down.

It had been at least an hour since anything shook or went boom. Prometheus decided it was safe to close his eyes and relax. The titans never slept. None of them. Some spent their time wrecking havoc on the world while it slept. But the night

hours were when Prometheus experienced the most vivid visions. His eyes had only been closed a short time when he saw the scene begin behind them. It played like a movie.

A young woman was asleep on a large bed, red silk sheets and large pillows surrounded her. She opened her eyes and Prometheus could swear she was looking right at him. Her eyes were red, deep red. Not the whole eye, just the irises. She screamed out in pain and the room was immediately filled with people. Prometheus realized the woman was pregnant. The people in the room were not doctors or nurses. At least not any that he had seen in modern day. He tried to concentrate on them, to see them. As his mind allowed him a closer look he realized they were not human. They were most definitely of the demon variety. He heard the smokey voice of Lucifer behind them, commanding them to be careful, that the child was the most important thing.

Prometheus grasped the side of his chair, the woman's screams were primal. They cut into him like knives. The words of the devil were equally cutting. Lucifer was adamant that the child was important, that the mother could bleed to death for all he cared. Save the child, he said over and over again.



The cries of an infant filled the room. Lucifer sprung forward and grabbed the newborn out of one of the demon's hands. The demon stared at him and then turned his attention back to the woman. Prometheus could hear beeping sounds mixed in with the cries of a newborn and the sounds of chaotic demons attempting to help the screaming woman. He realized that the sounds were heart monitors. A makeshift hospital room in the underground.

The scene shifted to Lucifer, cradling the newborn in his arms like a proud father. Prometheus knew what he was looking at. He had been keeping close watch on the events, it was not news to him when the angels explained Lucifer's plan. His visions were cloudy though. Something had changed. He only ever saw Lucifer planning the birth, never the end result. He thought that meant the Omphalos and his friends would stop him. Had they tried and failed?

Once again Prometheus's mind switched the channel. Now he was with Heaven. A scene he rarely got a glimpse at. His visions never took him past the middle plane. Sometimes he saw what Lucifer and the demons were up to, but never Him and his angels. Tonight he was getting the full story. The Archangel Gabriel and

Abby, the young angel who had been with him in the titan's living room were standing on what looked like an observation deck, looking down on the middle plane. Abby's eyes were wet with tears. Gabriel's temples were throbbing with obvious stress. "Never again will I be unsympathetic when a mortal looks up at the sky, at us, and complains that things are not fair," Abby said. "We just let Lucifer deliver a Hell spawn."

"We had no choice," Gabriel's voice was angry. Prometheus remembered when Gabriel's emotions were either nonexistent or even keeled. This Gabriel was different. He had been since he came to visit. Was that just yesterday? Prometheus was losing the scene, his thoughts invading. He tried to go back, but he could not find them again. Everything went blank. Just as he was about to open his eyes he saw the stern face of his mother. He had not seen her in hundreds of years. Gaea had retired to a life of luxury on an island far from civilization. "Prometheus," he heard her soft voice. "Your brother has gotten himself into trouble again. I fear that he has done something irreversible. The Earth has spoken to me, she is scared."

Nothing else. Prometheus kept his eyes closed tight. He called out for his mother, asked her what she had meant.

Epimetheus was always in trouble, but she had said irreversible. The last time she had used that word his brother had gotten himself mixed up with Pandora.

Pandora. The name rattled around in his mind. Someone, maybe his mother, was trying to keep it stuck there. Prometheus stood and went to his desk. He knew the rules of his release by Heracles by heart. But he pulled out the scroll anyway. Read through it, and tried to find words that allowed him to do something with the information he had been given by his visions. He knew he was going to have to contact the god and beg him to release his restraints. Heracles had a tendency to want to help everyone. That usually did not include mortals, and almost never included Prometheus who he had cut ties with after releasing him from his prison. Prometheus knew this was the time. He could feel the urgency in his mother's voice, he could see the sadness in the angels faces.

He took out a piece of parchment paper and an old fountain pen. Heracles was still old school. He did not have any modern technology. You could not just address an email to heracles at mount olympus dot com. Prometheus took his time writing out the words. Explaining the things he had seen. Making sure to add

that his mother had come to him. When he was satisfied that he had said everything he needed to say the titan reached in to his desk drawer and searched for the wax and seal stamp he had stored there, for ages. It was buried under years of more modern means of communication. It reminded Prometheus that the god would have to be convinced in person as well.

Prometheus opened his front door and stepped into the cold night. He whistled and it echoed through the sky. Within minutes an eagle rounded the side of the mountain. The titan held out his arm and let the large bird land on it. "Heracles." He said to the creature. It did not move. "I know, but this is important, you really think I want to be contacting him?" The eagle spread his wings, hitting Prometheus in the head, and shook out his feathers in a huff. But he took that scroll in his talons and flew off anyway.

The titan watched the bird fly away, holding the parchment tightly in his talon. He wondered if Heracles would recognize the bird, the one that had been eating away at Prometheus's liver for eternity. Prometheus never blamed the creature, he was doing what came naturally to him. He had befriended the eagle, and was glad to know that the bird remained a loyal companion.

Prometheus stood outside his door watching the skies, though he knew that the eagle would not return any time soon.

#

Jonathan took his time walking through the San Francisco airport. He had just spent eighteen hours on an airplane wishing it could fly faster. Now he was not so sure he wanted to hurry after all. In fact he wondered if he should have just stayed on the plane and continued to Los Angeles. He could just go home and wait for the world to end there. At least he would be comfortable. He thought of Tyler, and that motivated him. Jonathan wondered if Tyler was handling this new development well. No, he definitely was not. If Jonathan had learned anything in the year he had known him, it was that Tyler did not handle being told he had to do things with anything other than contempt. It was one of the things that Jonathan was attracted to from the beginning. Their first days had been contentious if not disastrous, but he knew why Tyler had been chosen. He hated everything about what he was doing, and did it anyway.

The car rental counter was empty when Jonathan finally found it. He greeted the attendant with a smile that he did not feel, and asked for whatever they had available. The woman

behind the counter, having all the time in the world, asked him where he had come from, where he was headed, and ten other questions Jonathan answered without emotion. When he mentioned that he was visiting the mission at Solano she gave him a history of the site, which he had already read about in the brochure he found on the desk he was standing in front of. Patience had always been one of Jonathan's strongest suits. It was what made him a good pastor. As thin as it was at this point, he stood there and allowed her to chat away. He heard about every third word.

When he finally turned the key in the ignition of his generic rental sedan and pulled out of the airport parking lot Jonathan started to feel the urgency of getting to his destination. He pushed on the gas pedal and willed the car to go as fast as it could. If anything, he would get to see Tyler, and be with him when all Hell broke loose. Literally.

--

Tyler watched as Lucifer guided Chloe through the blood ritual. He could hear the words of the incantation but did not understand any of them. He wondered if Lucifer had drugged Chloe

or put her in some sort of trance. She was subdued, following his directions and putting up no fight at all. It was nothing like what he had seen when he met her. Strong and defiant, just like him. She was a woman who had decided she was going to take on the devil and win. She had failed. They had all failed, Tyler thought.

Chloe had finished consuming the last of the bowls of blood and herbs, Lucifer had told him the ingredients in one of the many rants he had gone on when setting up this whole thing. Tyler could not remember the names of them now. Nothing happened. The ground didn't move. There wasn't any thunder or lightning. There was not even a strong wind making the flames of the candles flare. Tyler wondered if the ritual had not worked. He glanced around at Epimetheus and Azazel. Epimetheus sat in his pew, a row ahead of Tyler, unmoved. Azazel, who's hands had been bound by Lucifer so as to not "interfere with my work," Lucifer's tone had indicated he felt Azazel a nuisance, looked back at him and shrugged.

The church remained quiet, Lucifer stood next to Chloe, holding her by the arm to make sure she did not try run. She did not look like she was going to do much of anything. She did not

even seem to be standing too well. So it came as no surprise when she crumpled to the ground. Tyler's instinct told him to help her. His knowledge of the situation told him to sit still. The anger he felt having to watch as the scene unfolded in front of him boiled his blood. He tried to be calm, one of the many things Prometheus had told him was that his unknown powers would show up in times of stress. This definitely counted as one of those times.

--

Lucifer grabbed the vessel's wrist and felt for a pulse. There was none. He felt for a heartbeat. There was nothing there either. Had the ritual not worked? Had he simply killed her? Nothing in the text about this ritual had said the vessel would die. He knew he had done everything right. Or maybe he hadn't. Maybe he screwed something up when he had to redo it three times. No way. He was careful. This was important. He stared down at the body that he was hoping had his future living in it. He almost prayed. That was how desperate he had become. Stopping himself just short of asking for a miracle, Lucifer heard a moan. The vessel. He turned her over on her back and felt for a pulse again. Still nothing. Had he imagined the sound? She



opened her eyes. Deep red irises stared back at him.

--

Abby watched as Chloe fell to the floor. She watched as Lucifer checked for signs of life. She felt guilty hoping he would not find any. The devil continued to seek any sign that the ritual had worked. Abby continued to hope it hadn't. Her strong angelic hearing let her know that Chloe was alive. Abby nearly screamed when she opened her eyes and they were red and vacant. Evil. There was evil in them, more than there ever had been. Chloe was never the most peaceful woman Abby had ever met, but all signs of humanity she had had at one time were now gone. Abby could feel Gabriel tense next to her. "It worked," he sounded as surprised as she had felt.

--

The cheap tires screeched and the brakes moaned as Jonathan pulled the rental car into the parking lot at the mission in Solano. He threw the gear into park and jumped out of the driver's seat. He wasn't sure why he was suddenly in such a hurry. There was nothing he was going to be able to do to stop

the events from occurring. He ran up the steps two by two and pulled open the large wood doors. Tyler and Epimetheus were sitting in separate pews on opposite sides staring straight forward at the altar, where Jonathan could see Lucifer sitting over a body. Chloe, he thought. No one heard him enter. He moved forward slowly. He wondered if any sudden movement would somehow cause chaos. He slid into the pew where Tyler was sitting and touched him on the arm. Tyler jumped. Jonathan's heart swelled at least a thousand times its size when he felt the happiness in Tyler's smile, seeing him there. Jonathan wrapped his hand around Tyler's, letting their fingers intertwine.

"I'm sorry," Tyler whispered under his breath.

--

Tyler felt guilty. Guilty for feeling love and happiness in such a dire situation. Guilty for finally finding this moment to listen to someone who told him no. And just guilty for everything in the world all at once. He felt the immediate need to apologize. So he said it. "I'm sorry." He was talking to anyone who was listening. He was sorry.

He felt Jonathan squeeze his hand in response. It was one of the things he liked about their relationship. Jonathan knew better than to preach at him with things like "it will be okay." He knew when to be silent and simply present.

They both sat forward when they heard Chloe's moan. Tyler stood up and nearly ran toward the altar when Azazel looked back at him and his face showed terror. Tyler looked closer and saw what Azazel was seeing. All signs of humanity had left Chloe's features. Her face had turned white, her eyes were bright red. Tyler wondered if all that blood had turned her into a vampire or werewolf. It did not bother him that those were possibilities now. Deep down he knew, it was much worse. The ritual had worked, and she was now simply a demon vessel.

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Prometheus stood in the doorway of his house inside the mountain and waited for the eagle to return. He heard the sound of wings on the wind nearby and saw his animal friend round the mountain swiftly. The eagle was carrying something in his talons. Was he not able to deliver the message? Was this his reply so soon? If it was, the news was not good. Heracles never

made a decision like this so swiftly. The bird dropped the parchment into Prometheus's outstretched hand and quickly untied the string. He unrolled it.

The words made Prometheus shudder. They were simple, in bold letters, and written in a way that indicated Heracles had taken very little time to write them. "I, Heracles, God of Olympus, hereby release you from your contract."

Prometheus fell to his knees. He reveled in the happiness and relief he felt. Hundreds of years he had been watching his creation implode on itself, and he could do nothing to stop them. He would not sit back and be an observer any longer. He felt tears stream down his face. He looked to the sky "Thank You."

"Do not think that I took my decision lightly," Heracles's voice thundered through the clouds. "If what you say is true, and your brother Epimetheus has joined with Pandora once again, they must be stopped. We both know what happened the last time they worked together. We must not let this world suffer the way the others did. You must trust in the power of the mortals you created. Do not allow yourself to interfere in fates and

predictions already set in stone. You know of which I speak. I wish you luck. You are on your own."

#

#### EPILOGUE

#

Tyler was beginning to wonder if he would ever get used to hearing voices in his head. Having the ability to speak to Azazel, the angels, and Prometheus, was one of the powers he wished he could control better. He had been working on honing his skills for six weeks now. Phenex, or Mr. Chow as he asked to be called, was teaching him how to control his emotions and his body. Nathaniel, the dragon, who did not much care which name you called him as long as you brought him something fun to put in his collection, was working on strength both mental and physical. Prometheus was helping him understand everything else.

He was currently sitting across from Mr. Chow on the floor of his large office. There were people dining in the restaurant below them. Tyler could smell the scents of Pan Asian influenced

dishes. His stomach growled. Phenex had assured him that this was all part of the training. Tyler was going to need to control his emotions and his body movements in all types of situations. He tried to concentrate on anything but what was going on around him.

"Begin," Mr. Chow said out loud.

Voices began speaking in Tyler's mind. Prometheus, Abby, Azazel, Gabriel. They took turns talking, then they would speak all at once. They had the privilege of being in the same room together, while Tyler was sequestered to an office over a restaurant filled with loud patrons and karaoke. Did he forget to mention the karaoke? This would happen in thirty second bursts. Phenex would have them speak to Tyler in short sentences, give commands, sometimes overstate the urgent nature of whatever nonsense they were speaking. Tyler had to listen to everything, and give them summaries of what they had said. And respond accordingly.

The control part came into play most in these sessions. It was by far the hardest part of his training. Everything inside of his mind wanted to answer with biting sarcasm or jokes.

Working with the dragon on mental toughness was a cake walk. The physical stuff came naturally. The urgency and need for better communication took extreme strength and will. During their first session Mr. Chow told Prometheus he would not help train Tyler around ten times. In ten minutes. Prometheus assured Phenex it would get better.

A week into his training Mr. Chow was at his wits end. He told Prometheus Tyler was a lost cause, he could not be trained. The titan reminded him that Tyler's sarcasm and lame jokes were defense mechanisms and there were deeper words hiding behind them, Phenex would have to learn to look under the surface and retrain Tyler to do the same. After a particularly frustrating session Tyler asked Phenex why he was helping if it frustrated him so much.

As it turned out, Phenex and Nathaniel were born out of the fire given to Prometheus as a gift by mankind shortly after he had created them. Tyler was not sure if he should be offended by the idea that they were helping him out of obligation to Prometheus, or flattered that they had enough faith in him to try. Tyler vowed to try harder, Mr. Chow, never one to be careful with words, assured him he would be shocked if he did.

It was now six weeks into the training and he had vastly improved. The one thing they forgot to tell Phenex was Tyler's need to prove people wrong. All it took was Mr. Chow's doubt and Tyler was ready to show him that he was not the sarcastic jokester who could not be serious if the world was ending. Which it was. That they were sure of. They just did not know when.

Tyler recited the words he had heard in his mind, summed up what needed to be shortened, answered the questions asked, and gave a direct order for action in reaction to a poorly acted scenario Abby had created about the demon spawn going on a soul eating spree.

On the plus side, being inside the Esesa Jane Karaoke Bar and Pan Asian Restaurant meant he had a great meal after every session. His team assembled around him, he enjoyed the flavors of the asian dishes he had been smelling all afternoon. His team. The angels, Gabriel, of the high ranking Archangels and Abby, who was working on becoming a messenger, the rank just below Gabriel's. Azazel, a demon who had been working side by side with Lucifer for centuries, now fighting on the other for the light. And Jonathan. The only mortal, and his partner?



Lover? They had not discussed their status, there had not been a lot of time for it. Then there was Prometheus. Titan and creator of mankind who only recently was let out of a binding contract that would not allow him to help in situations such as the one they found themselves in.

Those were his warriors. The ones that would fight by his side if and when the time came to do so. There are others, Phenex and Nathaniel were his trainers, and spies. Being part of the demon world had its benefits. With Azazel cut off from the underground completely, it was nice to have people on the inside to keep an eye on Lucifer's activities. Which at the moment consisted of watching over Chloe who was carrying his child.

Chloe spent most of her time in bed. All signs of humanity had been burned out of her. All but the desire to see this child born. She had become a mother as soon as the blood ritual took. She was protective, and proud. Proud to be carrying the spawn of satan. Her stomach was growing at a high rate. A demon pregnancy lasted only half the time as a mortal one. Tyler supposed it took much less time to create evil as it did to breed goodness. That was another thing he had been working on, and Jonathan's number one job other than being his boyfriend. That was the word

for him. Probably. Jonathan's job was to bring faith back to Tyler's world. Not necessarily faith in higher powers, though Tyler had seen plenty of them with his own eyes, and for the most part they were all fairly decent beings. But his faith in humanity, his faith that there was good in the world. His faith in himself.

That was the thing that scared Tyler most about this exercise. Finding the faith in himself. He wondered if there was any point at which he was going to be asked to speak to his parents, find it in himself to forgive their actions. In many ways Tyler knew that they had set in motion his current life, and he wanted to believe that was the best thing they could have done. But he was never going to get over the anger he felt for their absolute lack of compassion. For how they handled his coming out, for their blind faith in ancient texts that actually never mention homosexuality. Of all the things he had faced, and was about to face, that scared him most, facing his family. It would only prove to them that He exists, and that they were not wrong to follow His teachings.

He knew that there was no way to explain the difference between the existence of higher beings, and the believe that

these beings would pass judgement on them if they did not act a certain way. If they did not love a certain way, if they did not tell others that this was the only way. From what Tyler had seen over the past year, everything he had heard through church and through his parents and their bible toting friends were lies they told themselves to make up for the judgement they passed on the others who were not exactly like them.

Tyler had met angels, like Abby, who did the opposite of everything every bible taught him angels were, and Gabriel, who was nothing like what the book described him as. And wouldn't it blow their simple minds to know that He was not the creator of the universe after all? That was almost enough of a motivation to go tell his story to them. But not enough to actually consider it.

Then there was Jonathan. A gay pastor. And his first real love. That would freak them out, maybe even more than the fact that angles and demons and gods exist and are listening. Tyler was beginning to wonder if it would be fun to take Jonathan home to meet mom and dad. No, that was mean. To Jonathan. Taking him home just to spite the people who told him he would never find love, that he would never find peace if he did not find faith.

That he was going to Hell.

Another point in the for column. Telling them he had been to Hell, and he did not belong there, any more than he belonged in Heaven. No, he would have to stop this way of thinking. There was nothing in the world that could compel him to revisit his past life. They had been sure to tell him he was not ever welcome there when he left anyway. Tyler could not figure out why he had never gone against that command. He had spent his life doing the opposite of what people told him to, why was staying out of his family's life the one he obeyed? Probably because it was the only thing he felt was good advice.

The thought of not being able to introduce Jonathan to his home town made Tyler think of their relationship, again. It was nice, that he felt the desire to let Jonathan in on everything in his life, including the one he had left behind. It might not even been so traumatic for them, going to Minnesota, after the year they had been through. His heart raced when he thought of Jonathan. Tyler was unsure what that reaction meant. Was it fear? Was it love? He had heard somewhere that relationships that begin out of crisis situations never last. But Tyler knew, despite it all, that Jonathan was not going anywhere any time

soon. That was the one thing he was sure of when he thought of their relationship. He had no idea if Jonathan loved him, but he was certain the man would be there till the end.

Faith in himself. This was all part of the process. He had no sense that anyone could love him, let alone someone like Jonathan, who's never-ending belief in Tyler, despite their difficult beginnings, was what made Tyler continue the fight. For some unknown reason Jonathan had faith in him. Tyler was going to find out that reason, that was his goal, that was why he was training hard and being a good soldier. He would let Phenex and Nathaniel take his mind and body further than they had ever been. He would allow Abby and Gabriel to pick apart his thoughts, he would listen to the words his creator had spoken in his library when they had met. You were created because I saw something in you that did not exist in anyone else.

#

Returning to the church should not be this hard, Jonathan thought as he prepared his sermon. He was hesitant to go back to his congregation. But he wanted to make a difference in people's lives, and this was the one way he could. He had been around too

many people with supernatural powers over the last month, it made him feel inadequate. Jonathan smiled thinking of the conversation he had with Tyler. It was a strange thing, being encouraged to go back to preaching, to go back to teaching a religion they both knew was not entirely true, and having someone like Tyler be the one pushing him toward it, made things even stranger.

Jonathan decided to focus his sermon on positivity, spirituality and acceptance. Those were always themes in his teachings, but he had decided to leave the word "God" out of the conversation. While it was easy to believe there was someone in a position of high power up in Heaven or wherever the parishioners thought He came from, Jonathan felt there was more than one being that should be worshiped. Mostly he felt that it was humanity that needed a boost, Heaven and the Almighty had plenty to go around.

He stood in front of the church and looked out at the faces of his congregation. Some of them he recognized. He had been at some of their weddings. Others were stragglers, people who came in to feel better about themselves by sitting in a holy place. It used to make Jonathan wonder why. If they were not

particularly religious, why sit in a church where you could not get away from it. But he was beginning to understand. People need something to hold on to. And if this was what they were doing instead of anything else at that moment, then more power to them. Jonathan spoke to the people their strength. He asked them to look to one another for guidance, and to live good lives. Whatever that word meant to them.

After their final amen Jonathan greeted several of the parishioners who asked where he had been and if he was well. He must have looked awful, the amount of people who looked at him like he had been out sick with some disease was numerous. He assured everyone that he had gone on vacation. And that he was doing just fine. In that moment he was thankful for Mr. Chow and Tyler's training with him. At least he knew where he would be getting several giant meals, he would be sure to eat more.

When the church had emptied for the evening Jonathan went to his office to take care of paperwork. He never imagined there would be so much in his line of work. But there were piles on his desk, which he had not been near in quite a while. He sifted through them, signed off on the things that could be taken care of quick, made a pile for things that would take longer, and

sighed when he saw that the time consuming pile was much larger than the easy one. He might have to skip a few of Tyler's training sessions to get caught up. He hated the thought. Being there for him was important, to both of them.

Tyler. Thinking of him made Jonathan smile, and frown, in the same motion. They were still struggling with what to call their relationship. They were definitely a couple, but how does one define a relationship built on whirlwind travel, life changing events, and almost zero alone time? Jonathan was never one to put rules and titles on his companions. And in all his time as a pastor he never once spoke of marriages or relationships, he would never want to be asked to defend his own, he would not ask anyone else to defend theirs. The other pastors commented on how young Jonathan's congregation was. Jonathan tried to explain that his sermons were popular because they changed with the times. They did not understand.

Jonathan knew a longer, more elaborate conversation was needed between himself and Tyler. He did not want to overcomplicate things, but he felt like they were losing footing on real life, spending so much time with Tyler's Omphalos training and worrying about whether or not the world was going



to end as soon as Chloe gave birth. If they had little time left, it was important to live too. He would have to remember to bring that up. Whenever he had any time with Tyler they were both too tired to talk, there had been a lot of sleeping between them. Jonathan wondered if Tyler was under the impression that he wanted to wait for marriage before they had sex. Then again, Jonathan wasn't sure Tyler even considered them anywhere near that involved. Their physical contact had consisted of cuddling and mild kissing. That was going to have to change too.

Thinking about Tyler reminded Jonathan that he was supposed to be meeting him and the others at Esesa Jane's. He thought about calling Tyler to tell him he had too much work to do, but his stomach growled and he saw the many faces of sadness looking at his skinny frame, and decided it was important to go. The paperwork would be there tomorrow. And the next day. He sighed again. If he ever developed a superpower he wanted it to be excellent administrative skills. For a moment he wondered if Abby had heard him make that wish, but they had taken away his telepathic ability until they needed him to have it again. Giving him the ability tingled, taking it away gave him a headache for a week. And the aftermath was frightening. He had been watching his thoughts, worried that Abby and Gabriel would

hear too much of the stuff they didn't need to know. As soon as they were no longer listening everything got loud. All of his thoughts came rushing back at once. And he could not shut them up for days.

Esesa Jane's was fairly crowded for a Wednesday night, Jonathan noted as he entered through the large red door. He could hear the karaoke version of Hit Me Baby One More Time coming from the front of the restaurant. For a moment he contemplated waiting outside for it to be over. But Tyler caught his eye and gave him the biggest smile. It propelled Jonathan toward him like a gust of wind had hit him. There were two places Jonathan felt more comfortable today than ever before. One was during his sermon, standing lectern, and the other was sitting among this rag tag group of beings. And for just a moment he allowed himself to believe that the world was not going to end.

#

The morning crowd was finally beginning to die down. Azazel smelled like bacon and flour and toast. He had no idea flour even had a smell. Granted he knew very little about cooking. When he had returned to Los Angeles after Lucifer's successful

blood ritual and subsequent release of his binds, Azazel visited Phenex. He was the only demon Azazel knew who could help him with a new life. Azazel knew nothing but being a mortal, let alone a mortal who still had demonic powers. He had spent years on the middle plane, observing. But seeing and doing are two different things, and Azazel did not know what to do with this new life. He may have left his life underground behind, but he was still a demon. He did not sleep, or eat. For the first week he wandered the city, seeing what it was like at all hours. He decided he liked the morning most. Seeing the debauchery folks got up to in this city late at night made even the worst parts of him shudder.

Boredom set in pretty quickly, and soon Azazel was asking Phenex for a job. Mr. Chow gave him a choice. Cook Asian food or cook breakfast. Azazel begged Phenex to let him be a doorman, a waiter, a host, he would even entertain the idea of hosting the karaoke portions of the night time crowds at Esesa Jane's. But Mr. Chow needed cooks. Azazel asked, several times, if Phenex understood that being a demon meant he knew nothing about what tastes good and what doesn't. Phenex looked at him sideways and told him he could make bacon, pancakes and eggs without screwing it up.

As it turned out, Mr. Chow had been right. Azazel was perfectly capable of making breakfast. And he enjoyed it, to a point. He worked mornings, early. The patrons most consisted of cops either on their way to their beats or just coming off of them. At first, the demon in him made that situation uncomfortable, but Azazel found that they came in handy. There were several mornings in the past six weeks when a rowdy group of young mortals came in after a night of clubbing, drunk, hungry, and inconceivably rude. Having cops present helped cool down tempers and keep the customers from harassing the servers.

He was making friends. With the wait staff, with the dishwashers, and even with a few of the officers. It was not in his plans to make friends, but it was happening anyway. Knowing that things were about to go south made him want to keep to himself. Phenex reminded him that he could not share that information with anyone outside their newly formed army. The little rag tag group of creatures and mortals who were going to attempt to stop Lucifer from laying waste to the middle plane. The only thing Azazel felt positive about in that regard was the titan. Prometheus had a vibe about him that put Azazel at ease. Tyler was making progress, slowly. Abby and Gabriel were the

upper plane's representatives, and Jonathan was the lone mortal. Azazel wondered if his only job was to remind Tyler of what he was fighting for.

At least they had three strong demons on their side. Phenex and Nathaniel, the dragon, had finally chosen to pick a team, and they went with the one that had the most chance of losing. Azazel had been in a lot of sports bars in his time on the middle plane. He knew what it looked like to root for teams that always lose. And yet they had fans, who continued to hope for a win. He supposed that was what they were doing. Training, working together, hoping for a win.

Azazel wondered which part of the team he was. He knew he was not the quarterback, if he was considering football terms. As he understood it, that was the most important guy on the field. Being that he was no longer welcome in Hell, Azazel wondered why they kept him on the team anyway. Maybe he was the aging player who just would not retire. No. He refused to believe that. Yes, Lucifer had cast him out of Hell, but he had not taken away his demon powers. He was still strong, he could manipulate thought, he still had an army underground. Granted they were of no use to him because he could not get down there,

but once the gates of Hell opened more permanently, they would be there for him.

Thinking in such human terms made Azazel wonder if he had already spent too much time being one of them. It had only been a few weeks. He would have to get used to this life, if he was going to manage to survive it. Survival. Whenever he thought of the word he wondered if anyone was going to survive what was to come. This team was most definitely the underdogs. He hoped that if it ever came to be known to the mortal world that they were what stood between them and destruction, they would still be willing to root for the obvious loser.

Azazel shook off the thought and made his way out of the diner, toward his new home.

Phenex insisted that Azazel be paid mortal money, and insisted that Azazel use that money to pay rent, to buy things he needed, to be as mortal as possible, and not use his previous powers of influence method to get everything he wanted. If he was going to live on the middle plane he was going to have to live like someone who belonged there. He had rented a small one bedroom apartment just up the street from the Sakali Cafe and

Esesa Jane's, which were next to each other, conveniently. They had decided to conduct all "army" business at Esesa Jane's so that Mr. Chow was available to his patrons, which they had come to rely on. Azazel took the short walk to his apartment to change out of his greasy clothes. It was a small space. The living room and kitchen were one connected room. He was glad that he could afford the one bedroom. He had looked at several that had the living and sleeping quarters as one big room. Azazel was used to having the run of an entire suite down below. He could fit six of his new apartment in his bedroom at home. It was all ridiculous anyway. He did not sleep, having a bedroom on Hell was just a luxury he had learned by watching the mortal world, mostly those television shows that toured celebrity mansions. All he really needed anywhere was a place to store stuff.

Clothing changed and grease washed off, Azazel headed to Esesa Jane's to wait for Tyler's latest session. Today they were going to sit in a room and yell at Tyler in his mind. That was something he would do without being asked. Phenex and Nathaniel were convinced that training Tyler to be the Omphalos was the most important mission right now, while they waited for Lucifer's spawn to be born. Four and a half months was not

enough time to prepare, Azazel was convinced of this, but he went along with their plan anyway, because really, he had nothing better to do.

Nathaniel was waiting in Mr. Chow's office when Azazel arrived. They exchanged head nods. Azazel sat in one of the purple leather chairs. He was always fascinated seeing the dragon in his human form. He was a large man, tall and muscular. He wondered if they had found a wrestler, a basketball player or a giant to use as his vessel. Nathaniel noticed Azazel looking at him and raised a hairy eyebrow at him. Azazel shrugged. They waited in silence, Azazel watched Mr. Chow, Phenex, shaking hands and laughing at what Azazel could only imagine were bad jokes. Phenex considered it mandatory to keep his clientele happy. Azazel watched him bound up the stairs, his stout body jiggling, he wondered how a demon who cannot process food got fat. He was not going to ask.

"Gentlemen," Phenex greeted them. Azazel found the sentiment funny. Neither he nor Nathaniel were gentlemen. "Any news?" Phenex addressed Nathaniel.

"Same," Nathaniel's voice was as big as his presence. "The



woman's stomach continues to grow rapidly, Lucifer continues to hover over her, it is still a big waiting game."

Phenex nodded at him. Azazel did his best to not be jealous.

#

Abby had spent most of her time either on the observation bridge watching the mortal world, or being a part of it. She was well versed in the ways of humankind. It was the world of angels she had little experience with. Mostly because she did not believe many of the practices they had in place up on the higher plane. For one thing, she was tired of watching the world fall apart without being able to do anything about it. That was what got her sentenced to life on the middle plane years ago. She had stepped in to help someone in need, and though her actions did not have consequences that anyone was aware of, it was an offense that the elder angels who ruled the upper plane were strict in enforcing punishment for. And while Abby was thrilled to be among the people she had spend so much time observing, it was her diminished angelic powers that was the actual punishment.

When the demon invasion had begun, Abby was not surprised

to find that Gabriel had been her biggest supporter during the Archangel's choosing committee meetings. Gabriel was the most understanding of her need to help humans through crisis situations. He was their representative in Heaven, though no one on the middle plane knew that. It was Gabriel who passed messages back and forth between the planes, to the people who needed to get them. Abby had great respect for the Archangel. He did his job without question, and without anyone knowing how much he was doing for them. So it was both thrilling and intimidating that he had been given the task of training Abby to be a stronger angel.

Discipline was the most challenging of the training exercises. Abby had never been one to believe in it. Which explained why she was always in trouble. Gabriel had observed her over the past few months, watching as she took orders from both himself and the Omphalos, and he had passed on his impressions to the almighty, once again standing up for her against the people who still believed she was a lost cause. The training consisted of standing on the observation bridge, watching the worst of the atrocities humans did to one another, without comment and without movement. In earlier days, before her sentence to the middle plane, she would pace the marble

deck, complaining of how unfair it was that the angels were asked to witness such things, knowing they have the powers to stop them, and not use them.

It was a cruel exercise, and Abby often found herself unable to stand still for longer than a few minutes. Gabriel was not unsympathetic. When Abby would fall to her knees, feeling the pain of humankind's cruelties toward each other, Gabriel would sit down with her in silence, allowing her to feel what she needed. And then he would tell her stories of the past. Times when the angels stepped in and tried to make the world a better place. Times when the world fell apart anyway. Abby's faith in humans never faltered, despite what she had seen, and heard about from Gabriel's stories. Gabriel once told her that was why he fought hard for her to be a part of this effort, to stop Lucifer's destruction however they could. Her unending faith in humankind was both a virtue and a curse. She still had hope that they would become something better.

Abby never asked to stop training, despite the pain it caused her. She got joy out of parts of it. Gabriel was also teaching her to listen in a way she had never been able to before. Gabriel was a master at hearing the words spoken, in

prayer and in conversation, that precisely described what a person was feeling or wanted most. Abby had a habit of picking out certain words and assuming the person's mood based on those, they were always wrong. Like any good teacher, Gabriel gave Abby homework every night. Listening, hearing, interpreting. She would report back to him every morning. They would compare notes, and he would give her a grade.

After Lucifer was successful in impregnating Chloe with his spawn, Abby and Gabriel were allowed to travel from the upper plane to the middle plane freely. With the recent revelation that the titans were involved in the strange events occurring, including kidnapping the ruler of Heaven and teaming with Lucifer to take over the middle plane, it was ruled that no angel was to leave Heaven. Not that it was all that safe, Abby thought when the meetings were being held. Their father had been taken right from his office. To that end, warrior angels were posted at every Archangel's living quarters. The strongest of which were tasked to guard Him around the clock. Abby had no memory of the warriors, they had not been used in Heaven for centuries, but she had read about them in her studies. Angels who were trained in combat. She knew they existed. She could not figure out why there were not used more practically.

Every day Abby would ask Gabriel if he would get His permission to train her as a warrior too. She wanted to be well-rounded. Gabriel would only go so far in his support of the angel. He told her that they had already been bending the rules far past the breaking point, in training her, in allowing her sentence to be extinguished. He was not going to push any farther.

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What Abby did not know was that Gabriel had already asked, and been given permission. This was a part of his plan. Part of the training. If Abby listened to him, she would get her warrior training as she desired. Gabriel had many ways of teaching Abby, some she was not even aware were happening. Right now, sitting at a table with three demons, a mortal, a titan and the Omphalos, for example, he was training her to listen to the conversation happening at the table, as well as pick out certain words in the air from other diners. He knew she could hear them, every now and then she would cock her head to the side, the way angels did when they were confused at something they heard.

Observation was Gabriel's favorite part of being on the middle plane. Especially in this setting. His table mates, for example, were where he was getting his greatest joy these days. Watching this group attempt to get along, despite their vast differences, and hearing their varying thoughts on one another, was cause for great entertainment for the Archangel.

Azazel's inner dialogue straddled the line between disdain for his situation, and admiration for his companions. The demon had been cast out of Hell permanently and was now relegated to cooking breakfast for mortals on the middle plane, living as one of them to the best of his ability. He had particularly negative thoughts regarding Phenix and Nathaniel, mainly because they were still able to travel between planes, and Lucifer was still not aware of their involvement in the training of the Omphalos. That did give Azazel joy. And he did admire the demons despite the jealousy.

Phenix was still unsure he wanted to be a part of the fight. He told himself, often, that allowing the group to meeting in his place of business, and helping train the Omphalos, were as far as he was going to allow himself to go in this war. But Gabriel often heard him reveling in the upcoming

battle, wanting badly to see the ruler of Hell fall to his knees in defeat. He had great hatred for Lucifer, who seemed to regard the demon as a plaything rather than a being of great power.

Nathaniel was just elated to be given the opportunity to teach the Omphalos the histories of, everything really. As dragons go, Gabriel had never met one as, happy, as Nathaniel was. He just enjoyed being a part of something important. He had spent so much time down in the depths of the lower plane with his trinkets and books and his own thoughts, that being on the middle plane was his most favorite part of every day. He also very much enjoyed teaching Tyler hand to hand combat. His mortal body was perfectly chosen for his demeanor. Gentle giant. That was how he viewed himself.

Jonathan was conflicted, always. Whether it was about his faith or about his relationship with Tyler. He was still confused as to the part he was playing in the upcoming war, and most days he figured it was just to be there as a reminder to Tyler that this was what he was fighting for. His faith in humanity and religion had cracked beyond repair, but despite this, he had returned to teaching humankind about both faith and religion. Listening to Jonathan and Tyler question their status

as a couple was the toughest part of being a silent observer, for Gabriel. If they only knew what they actually thought of each other. It was the only time Gabriel ever thought 'what's the worst that could happen?'

Tyler was still defiant, inside. He was making great strides in his training, but he was still unsure. Despite everything he had seen, demons tearing apart his city, titans holding the ruler of Heaven hostage, angels and devils and everything in between, he fought it. He was damaged beyond what Gabriel had observed in the time he spent watching Tyler before the demon invasion began. It was Gabriel's mission to make amends for that. He had vowed, to himself, and to Tyler many years ago, that he would look out for him. But he had failed in that, and he was never going to do it again. His love for Jonathan seemed to be the only thing fueling him to continue his training and be the Omphalos as Prometheus had created him.

Prometheus. Gabriel could not read the titan at all. His thoughts were silent to the angel, and observing his movements and moods gave no information. It unnerved Gabriel only in the sense that he had not met anyone he could not hear or observe. He knew there was a reason for it, he just wished he knew what



that reason was.

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Their meetings always started with an argument. They was great debate about whether they needed a name for their little army, or if that was just too much of a mortal virtue and therefore unnecessary. It never ended in a decision. More times than not it ended in arms folded over chests in anger.

Next came a progress report. Nathaniel was gathering information on past wars between the Heaven and Hell, looking through his collection of treasure to find any weapons that may have been used, and training Tyler to fight with both his mind and his body. Nathaniel told them that it was proving much easier to find the stories of past wars as it was finding the weapons.

Azazel was in charge of finding demons on the mortal plane who were willing to join the fight. He had noticed that there were an abundance of them, but most did not believe that there was any danger in Lucifer's recent movements. Azazel noted that their ignorance was going to be the death of him. But he would

continue to work on them.

Everyone else was training. Tyler's was going slower than he had hoped, but he was assured that it was going at the right pace and he needed to relax. Abby was struggling with discipline, Gabriel told them, which resulted in Tyler teaching her what a fist bump was.

There was not further progress in Chloe's condition, Phenex told them, repeating what Nathaniel had noted in his office. She was still with child, she was still a demon, Lucifer was still watching over her like a lion protects its pride.

Prometheus brought them the only piece of news that had any real change in their current situation. The Greek gods and titans would not help in the war. That news made the table nervous. "I am choosing to see that as good news," Prometheus told them. "If we had to do things their way, we would not get anything done, for centuries," he noted. "The better news, is that they are absolutely in agreement that once we are able to find Epimetheus and Pandora, they will be punished under the laws set out by the gods, our gods," he pointed to himself.

Tyler wondered if anyone else was finding this task daunting. Fighting Epimetheus, Pandora and Lucifer. Tyler never imagined that would be his life's goal. But there it was.

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