The Road Less Traveled
by Aedemiel

Summary

Alternative S12. After rescuing Sam from the clutches of the British Men of Letters, the Winchesters investigate a werewolf case that turns out very strange indeed and they run into an old friend... Case fic with romance, angst and strange monsters galore!
Chapter One

Sam padded sleepily into the kitchen to see his mom pouring over a newspaper and Dean leaning back in his chair, one hand over his eyes. His brother had hit the bottle hard last night, which was ironic seeing as it was Sam who'd been through the wringer. But he was honestly too glad to be free of Lady Toni Bevell and her cronies from across the Atlantic to complain too much about Dean's drinking habits today.

He located a clean cup and helped himself to coffee from the pot. As he did so, Mary thumped one hand onto the newspaper she was reading and grinned as her boys jumped in surprise. She spun it around on the kitchen table and tapped at it vehemently.

"Anyone fancy a werewolf hunt?"

Dean's gaze immediately shot to Sam, who pulled a face at his brother's scrutiny. "I'm fine," he insisted. "Cas healed me up."

"Dean's more worried about the psychological effects," Mary said gently. "That bitch did quite a number on you."

Sam couldn't help but roll his eyes at her. "I said I'm fine."

"All right," she said, holding her hands up in surrender. "So, werewolf. In Oberlin." She shoved the newspaper forwards and pointed at the story again.

Sam skimmed the article and then passed it to Dean. "Three bodies, heart's missing, it's pretty textbook."

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "And it's less than two hours drive. Works for me."

In retrospect, Sam thought, it was kind of like the plot of a bad sitcom, him and Dean, their mom and their resident angel all in one car driving to Oberlin. Cas and Mary seemed to have found a kind of understanding and even a shared sense of humor to some degree. Sam was glad for it. Dean seemed to find it a little weird but for the life of him, Sam couldn't figure out why. He let the miles whizz by, only half listening to an amusing conversation in the back about the annoyances of modern technology.

"OK, we can't all go piling in there," Dean said when they crossed over the city limits. "Sam and I will hit up law enforcement. Why don't you and Cas go talk to the families?"

"Sure," Mary said. "We can handle that."

Dean dropped Mary and Cas at the home of the first victim and then drove over to the police department, an Art Deco brick building with green colored windows on the upper floor and Masonic symbols everywhere.

"That some weird-ass architecture right there," Dean said, climbing out of the car and eying the strange building curiously. "All right, let's do this."

The desk sergeant was a rotund woman in her mid-forties with close cropped blonde hair and a permanent sneer. She scrutinized their FBI credentials with a jaundiced eye.
"Feebies, huh?" she said. "Russell's not gonna like it."

"Russell doesn't get a say when the feds show up," a man with a bushy red beard said as he emerged from a room behind her. He held out his hand.

"Brady Russell, Police Chief of Oberlin. I understand why you're here."

"I'm Agent Lynott, this is Agent Downey," Dean said, flashing the badge once more. "We're here about the murders."

"Of course you are. Come on in," Russell waved them through to his office and closed the door behind them. "Honestly, I'm just as glad. Don't mind Viv, she's territorial."

"Glad?" Dean asked.

"Look, Oberlin's a quiet town. Not much happens here. DUIs, the odd assault, mostly domestic disturbances and now and again we pick up a kid for pot. These murders have upset the whole town and we just don't have the experience or the manpower to work the case properly. Especially since we found Marie. Three means it's a serial killer, don't it?"

"Maybe," Dean hedged. "So what can you tell us?"

"Not much," Russell frowned. "The first victim, Jenna Walker, was actually the second body found. She'd been missing for about a week when she was found in a dumpster outside a pizza joint. She was just seventeen, for Christ's sake, still in high school. The second victim, Boris Karpov, was a Russian immigrant who moved here in the late nineties. He was sixty-three and was working as a landscape gardener." He stopped and took a deep breath.

"And the third victim," Dean prompted.

"Yeah," Russell said heavily. "Marie van Sant. My sister-in-law. She was a nurse practitioner at Decatur Health Systems. Last night she didn't come home from work. My niece called me at 11pm when she couldn't get a hold of her."

"And her spouse?" Dean asked. He wondered why Sam was so uncharacteristically silent.

"Denny? He passed away last year. Anyway, we found Marie in her car outside a gas station on West Frontier Parkway. It's not even nearly on her way home, so we figure the perp drove her body there." Chief Russell pulled some manilla folders from a pile on his desk and passed them over to Sam. "Everything we know, which isn't much, is in there. I've called Katie down at the morgue, so let me know if there's anything else I can do."

"Thanks," Sam said, breaking his weird silence. They stood and shook hands with the weary looking police chief and then headed back to the car.

"You OK?" Dean asked when they pulled away.

"Yeah," Sam said, rubbing a hand over his face. "Just tired. I didn't sleep well last night."

"OK," Dean replied. He let the matter drop for now but resolved to keep a closer eye on his brother.

Cas knocked smartly on a pale blue door as Mary straightened her shirt and fussed with her hair. The faded red door cracked open and a middle aged woman with chestnut hair and soft brown eyes peered out.
"What do you want?" she demanded. Her face was pale and her eyes were reddened.

"Mrs Walker?" Mary said, flashing her brand new fake badge Dean had presented her with that morning.

"FBI?" the woman said suspiciously. "Is this about Jenna?"

"Yes," Mary said gently. "Can we come in?"

The door opened and Louise Walker showed them into a small living room stuffed with heavy ornate furniture. Cas sat gingerly on the edge of a loveseat and Mary perched on an armchair. Louise didn't sit but instead began adjusting the pictures and ornaments on the mantelpiece.

"I just wanted Jenna to be a normal girl, you know," Louise said shakily. "But she wasn't interested in being a cheerleader or boyfriends or any of those normal teenage girl things."

"So what did she like to do?" Mary asked.

"Hiking. Swimming. Rock climbing. Said she wanted to be a volcanologist," Louise told them. "She was really bright. I know all parents say that about their kids, but she really was. And it wasn't like her not to call if she was staying late at school. So when it got to 7pm and she hadn't called and we couldn't reach her, I called the police. I don't think they took me too seriously. The officer who called at the house thought she was probably out with a boyfriend. I told them she didn't have a boyfriend but he just dismissed me."

All the energy seemed to drain out of her body and she slumped down on the loveseat next to Cas. Mary exchanged a glance with him. She didn't think there was much they could learn here.

"Do you know if she knew either of the other two victims?" Cas asked.

"Sure," Louise said. "Boris used to do most of the landscaping around the school. All the kids knew him. He's a nice man, very jolly. Was a nice man, I should say." She drew in a shuddering breath. "And Marie's kid is in Jenna's class at school. They're not close friends or anything, Suzanne likes ballet and is a very girly-girl if you know what I mean. They just had nothing in common."

Louise covered her face with her hands and her shoulders shook as she sobbed silently. Cas patted her awkwardly on the arm and made a face at Mary, who shrugged. She was no more use with weeping women than he was.

"Thank you, Mrs Walker," she said. Louise looked up, her ravaged face making a lump in Mary's throat.

"Promise me you'll find whoever did this to my girl," she demanded.

"We're doing everything we can," Mary promised evasively.

Outside, the quiet town seemed almost oppressive. Mary sighed and walked down the street away from the Walker house and Cas followed her, not speaking.

"It's the hardest part of the job, you know," she remarked. "Not just for hunters, I mean. Anyone who has to deal with death and the like. Doctors, police, Hell even insurance adjusters. The ones left behind… You never seem to be able to say the right thing."

"There is no right thing," Cas said gently. "Nothing you can say can lessen the pain of loss." It seemed a very human statement to Mary and she said so. Cas smiled at her, a bitter smile that made
her heart hurt. "I've learned a lot since I came to walk the earth with Dean."

"It's not all about pain I hope," she said, aiming for a lighter tone but failing miserably.

"No," Cas agreed. "Friendship, loyalty, trust, love. I never truly understood those things until I came here."

Mary opened her mouth to speak when her phone rang. She pulled it from her pocket with a grimace and answered it.

"Mom? We're done at the station, do you want us to pick you up before we go to the morgue?" Dean said without preamble.

"We still have the daughter of the third victim to talk to," Mary told. "I don't suppose Boris Karpov had any family here?"

"No," Dean replied. "OK, well call us when you're done talking to Denise van Sant. Is Cas there?"

"Sure," Mary said, handing the phone over.

"Hello, Dean," Cas said. She couldn't hear what her son was saying so she concentrated on watching the angel's expression.

"No," Cas was saying, his expression concerned. "What do you mean?"

She frowned, wishing she could hear what Dean was saying.

"That is odd," Cas agreed. "I'll look out for anything unusual." He hung up and handed the phone to Mary, who cocked an eyebrow at him. "Dean thinks somebody is watching him and Sam. He asked if there were any other angels in town. I told him I had not detected the presence of any of my brothers and sisters."

"Hmm," Mary said. "Well, let's get this over with."

Dr Katie Wenceslas was an older woman of average height and slight build. Her iron gray hair was neatly tucked into a bun and her lab coat flapped over a well-tailored suit. She spoke with a slight accent that Dean couldn't quite place.

"Agent Lynott, Agent Downey. Chief told me you would want to see bodies." She turned and strode briskly over to three bodies on portable trolleys. Pulling disposable gloves from a box on a shelf, she shoved her hands into them and then offered the box to Dean.

"Yeah," Dean said, blinking at her brusque manner. He grabbed two pairs of gloves and handed some to Sam. Dr Wenceslas pulled back the sheet on the first body and flipped through the papers on her clipboard.

"Here is Boris Karpov. Russian immigrant, male, five feet nine inches tall, one hundred forty five pounds. Cause of death is exsanguination."

"What?" Dean said sharply. "Not having his heart ripped out?" He indicated the gaping wound in the man's chest.

"No. Heart was removed after death," Dr Wenceslas insisted. She pointed to a large, rough incision on the man's neck with her pen. "Not just blood loss from wound. Body was completely drained. Probably deliberate."
Puzzled, Dean exchanged a look with Sam, who shrugged his own confusion.

"All three are the same," the medical examiner said. She pulled back the sheets of the other two bodies to demonstrate.

"Weird," Dean blurted out.

"Weird is right," Dr Wenceslas said. "I've never seen anything like it." She took off her gloves and tossed them in a trashcan. "I'll leave you to examine."

When the door had closed behind her with an audible click, Dean turned to Sam. "What the Hell?"

"I know," Sam said. He peered at the wound on Jenna Walker's neck. "Does this look like a vamp to you?"

"Yeah," Dean said, looking at where Sam was pointing. "If it wasn't for the gaping hole where her heart should be."

"Could it be a vamp and a werewolf working together?"

"Sure," Dean said. "I mean, anything's possible. But why?" Sam shook his head and walked over to the third victim.

"I don't know," he said heavily. "Maybe it's like whales and sharks?"

"What?"

"Some whales, like pilot whales, are messy eaters. They discard bits of fish as they swim along. Sharks follow the whales and eat what the whales discard," Sam explained.

"So you think some werewolf is following a vampire around and eating the hearts of the vamp's victims?" Dean said, looking thoughtful.

"Have you got a better theory?" Sam challenged.

"No," Dean said. He shivered and turned around suddenly. "Dammit."

"What is it?"

"I swear to God Sam, someone is spying on us." Dean said, looking around.

"Maybe it's the vamp?"

"Maybe," Dean replied but he didn't sound convinced. "We're done here. Let's go pick up mom and Cas."

The small diner was packed with the lunchtime crowd and the waitress was too harried to respond to Dean's almost reflexive flirting.

"Does he ever turn it off?" Mary asked Sam wryly when she'd left to place their order.

"Not if he's conscious," Sam grinned.

"OK, so what have we got?" Dean said, grumpily changing the subject.

"Not much," Mary told him. "I can't find anything much on the victims. They all knew each other, at
least a little. But it's a small town, it might not mean anything. Jenna Walker was a good student. Boris Karpov was a nice man everyone liked. Bit of a loner but not in a suspicious way. And Marie van Sant was a reliable employee and well-liked. Her daughter was a sweet kid, and she's holding up well considering. What about the bodies? Any clues?"

Sam described the state of the bodies they'd examined and then outlined his theory. Mary gave him a considering look.

"What you're suggesting is pretty unusual," she said finally. "Wolves don't typically eat carrion unless they're desperate."

"Well maybe this one is desperate," Sam countered. "Maybe it's injured in some way it can't heal easily."

"Maybe," Mary said skeptically. The waitress arrived with their food and slammed it down unceremoniously and disappeared without a word. Dean fell on his food like he was half-starved. Mary watched him, an amused smile hovering around her mouth.

"You'd think we never fed you," she laughed.

"Hey, I skipped breakfast," Dean mumbled through a mouthful of cheeseburger.

"No, you didn't," Sam objected. "You had that muffin in the car."

"Doesn't count," Dean dismissed.

Cas had been very quiet through their entire discussion. In fact, Sam wasn't sure the angel was paying attention to anything they'd said. Instead, he'd been staring out of the window.

"Hey Cas," Sam said after a few mouthfuls of his salad. "You OK?"

"Dean said he thought you were being followed. Watched," Cas said. "I've also detected something."

"The werewolf we're tracking? Or vamp. Or whatever?"

"I don't think so. It seems… familiar," the angel rumbled.

Mary exchanged a look with her sons. "What does that mean? Another angel?"

"I'm not sure," the angel said.

Gabriel wiped his hands over his face and then raked them through his hair. This was not going to be easy, and the worst of it was, he had no idea how Sam- no, how both Winchesters were going to react. After all, it had been more than five years and he'd basically bailed on them after offering to help. Yes, Dean had bullied him into it somewhat, but he'd been right. Gabriel was a coward at heart, he was honest enough with himself to admit that. Someone needed to stand up to Lucifer. But that person had been Sam, not Gabriel. He'd known before the fight started that he couldn't beat his brother, because fundamentally he wasn't ruthless enough to kill him even after everything he'd done.

So he'd found a way to trick Lucifer, trick everyone into thinking he really was dead. He'd spent some time tooling around the universe, trying not to think about the responsibilities he'd left behind. Why was doing this to himself? He was trying not to think about that too. So he was back on earth and in trouble and his very first instinct had been to find Sam. He definitely was not going to
examine that too hard.

He'd observed the Impala rolling into town that morning. Sam and Dean were doing what they did best, hunting a monster that was killing people. It was clear that they thought they were tracking a werewolf. Gabriel knew better. So that was a good reason to show up, right? Put them on the track of the creature that was unlike anything they'd ever encountered. He took a deep breath, not that he actually needed to breathe, but it did make him feel a little better.

The Impala was parked in the lot of a small diner on the outskirts of a town in the middle of nowhere in Kansas. He peered in the windows for a moment, caught by an old memory of a young Sam climbing out of this very vehicle.

"There's nothing worth stealing in there, buddy," Dean's voice growled behind him and Gabriel spun around in consternation. All the breath left Dean's body at once.

"Son of a bitch," he hissed.

Gabriel looked around for the tall figure of Sam but he was nowhere to be seen. Castiel was here though, looking like he'd swallowed a lemon. And a woman he didn't recognize with long blond hair and a steely look in her eye.

"Hey," he said lamely. "Fancy meeting you here."

Dean rolled his eyes. "You're supposed to be dead. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you right now."

"Woah," Gabriel said, alarmed. "That's not a very nice way to greet an old friend."

"An old friend, is it?" Dean said acidly. "Cas, what do you think?"

"I think faking your own death and leaving others to deal with the fallout is not the definition of friendship," Castiel replied, his voice cold.

"Dean, who is this guy?" the woman said.

"Now, just wait a minute," Gabriel said. "I did what I could. I put you on the path to stopping the Apocalypse, obviously."

"Oh, yeah, you did that," Dean said. "I mean, Sam had to go to Hell, but what's a little damnation between friends."

Gabriel faltered. Sam had gone to Hell? That wasn't the plan he'd outlined in his admittedly silly DVD.

"Look, you're alive, good for you," Dean said, sounding tired. "Now, fuck off before Sam sees you."

"Why?" Gabriel demanded. "Why don't you want Sam to know I'm alive?"

Dean looked at him like he was an idiot. "Like I say, because you ditched us, Sam spent time in Hell. In the Cage with Lucifer and Michael."

Gabriel winced at the thought. That did not sound like fun. But Sam was strong…

"We're lucky he survived," Castiel observed. His brother looked ill, Gabriel thought. There was more to this story than met the eye, that was for sure.
"Dean?" Sam's voice floated over from the diner. "You forgot your pie."

"Shit," Dean swore. "Get the fuck outta here, Gabriel. I mean it."

"No," the archangel said firmly. He could hear the crunch of gravel as Sam approached and he swallowed nervously.

"What's going on?" Sam asked. "Why are you-" He broke off as Gabriel stepped out from behind Dean. Sam inhaled sharply and his face paled in recognition.

"Hey, Sam," Gabriel said weakly. He looked different. Less young, less innocent. Harder, somehow. Gabriel wanted to weep for the sweet-faced boy he'd met all those years ago.

"Gabriel," Sam said. He sounded… horrified. This was not going at all as planned. OK, he'd hardly expected them to throw him a party, but he hadn't banked on being quite so unwelcome. The blonde woman took Sam's arm and looked at the tall hunter with concern.

"Brother, could we talk privately?" Castiel said suddenly. Gabriel turned his attention to the seraph, whose face could have soured milk.

"Yeah, sure," he agreed. He followed Castiel until they were out of earshot. "What's up?"

"Don't be facetious," Castiel said sternly. "I know for a fact you understand how unwelcome your appearance is. What do you want with us?"

"Nothing," Gabriel denied. Castiel leveled a look at him. "I swear. I decided to come back and I was curious to know what you guys were up to. That's it."

"I see," Castiel said coolly. "Well, we're hunting a werewolf. So, now you're up to date. Good to see you, brother. Maybe we'll see you again sometime." He turned to walk away and Gabriel grabbed the sleeve of his trench coat.

"Wait," he said. "Is that all you've got to say to me?"

"No," Castiel rumbled. "But for Dean's sake, and Sam's, I'm holding my tongue."

Gabriel stared at him in astonishment. "You've learned a lot about humanity in the past few years," he marveled.

"You have no idea," Castiel said bitterly. "Farewell, Gabriel." This time he did start walking away and Gabriel watched him leave. No, this had not gone as well as he had hoped. But who was he kidding? He was the black sheep, the fuckup. Nobody wanted him around. Been that way for millennia. He watched Castiel return to the car and bend his head toward Dean as he spoke to the group. Still riding that horse, Castiel, he thought peevishly. And then they all got in the car and drove away.

Gabriel kicked an unoffending trash can in frustration. What the Hell was he going to do now? He should just leave, he supposed. But he needed to straighten things out with Sam. If the kid had gone to Hell, and it had been even partially his fault, he needed to find out what happened. It wasn't the sort of thing you could apologize for. But that didn't mean he couldn't seek some kind of forgiveness. He pulled out his phone and called up Sam's number. Maybe if he gave them a tip, they could wrap up this case and Sam would see he wasn't the enemy here.

You're not tracking a werewolf exactly. Check out Max Schmidt.
Chapter 2

Sam looked at the text message on his phone and bit his lip. It was almost certainly from Gabriel although how the archangel had his current number he had no idea. There could be some kind of trick or scam here, but Sam couldn’t see how there was any kind of angle Gabriel could work. Maybe he really was trying to help. The look on the archangel's face as they'd berated him and then walked away was seared into his brain. He felt like an asshole. Would it really have killed them to be a bit more polite?

"So, I had an idea," Sam said hesitantly. Dean flicked a look at him. "Maybe I should look at the missing persons cases in the area. Who knows, maybe there are more victims or maybe one of those missing people is actually our guy?"

Dean nodded in agreement. "Good idea. I'm going to talk to this guy Boris used to hire on a casual basis when he needed help with big jobs. Mom?"

"Castiel and I are going to the high school," she said. "There's a tenuous link there. Jenna was a student, Boris worked on the grounds and Marie's daughter also attends the school."

"OK. We have a plan," Dean said. He parked in front of the police station and Sam got out. Mary and Cas followed, since the school was only a few blocks away. Once Dean had driven away, Mary turned her gaze on her younger son.

"Is that Gabriel guy going to cause trouble?"

"No," Cas said firmly.

"Who is he?" Mary demanded.

"My brother," Cas said shortly.

Mary gaped at him as the pieces fell into place. "He's that Gabriel? As in the archangel? He's not exactly what I pictured."

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "He was masquerading as a Trickster when we first met him. And I think he impersonates Loki sometimes."

"He doesn't impersonate Loki," Cas said indignantly. Sam wondered why this got the angel so animated. "He is Loki. Or rather, Loki is his vessel."

"What?" Sam said in astonishment. "His vessel is a god?"

"It happens, sometimes," Cas told him. "It's probably how he was able to mask his Grace and hide out on earth so well. Why Loki agreed to host him is another question."

"Huh," Sam said. He had a sense that some puzzle piece that had never quite fit suddenly had slotted neatly into place.

"Well, I want to get to the school before they close for the day," Mary said, her eyes narrowing at Cas. "We'll meet you here in an hour."

Back inside the police department, Viv had almost snarled at Sam when he asked if he could look at
their missing persons reports. But she'd gotten up and pulled a small pile of folders out from a filing cabinet and dumped them sullenly on the counter.

"Thanks," Sam said, flashing her a fake smile. He took the folders and sat down in one of the cheap plastic chairs that passed for a waiting area. He found Max Schmidt's file quickly and began to read. The man was a farmer and he lived just outside town with his wife, two kids and three dogs. About a year ago, Max had vanished one morning after breakfast and hadn't been seen since. Oddly, just two days after he disappeared, his wife had taken the kids and dogs and gone to stay with her sister in New Orleans.

Sam noticed immediately that the interview transcripts with Susan Schmidt painted a picture of a woman who was utterly terrified by something. The officer's official report noted that she had been strangely vague about her husband's movements in the days before his disappearance and although she had been insistent that he hadn't just upped and left, she provided no concrete evidence of this, other than the fact he had not taken his car or his wallet. And then there was the curious story she'd recounted about a visitor to the house the day before Max had vanished.

She described a tall, cadaverous man who'd knocked at the door claiming his car had broken down nearby. She'd been sure the man was Denny van Sant but Max had denied it, said the man was a stranger. Max had gone with the man to try and help and had been gone for a couple of hours. When he returned he had told her it was a dead battery and he'd taken the stranger into town to buy a new one. But he'd seemed pale and listless that evening and had barely spoken to her or the kids. Sam wondered if the mysterious stranger had been van Sant and if he was connected to Schmidt's disappearance. Chief Russell had said van Sant had passed away last year but not exactly when.

For the sake of appearances, he flipped through the other files but most were either years old or just didn't seem very mysterious. Only one other case from eighteen months ago caught his eye, because of the name of the person reporting. Marie van Sant. Sam frowned and stood up, catching Viv's attention.

"What is it now?" she grumbled.

"This missing person's report on Denny van Sant," Sam said, opening the folder and laying it on the counter. "What happened?"

"Oh, that," Viv said. Her eyes sparkled with malicious glee. "Van Sant was a drunk and a lowlife. He drove up to Swanson lake in Nevada, supposedly to fish but actually to drink in peace away from his wife. He got liquored up, climbed behind the wheel of his car to head home and drove straight into a tree. He hit his head so hard he got amnesia and he hadn't taken his wallet with him so the Nevada police had no way of knowing who he was. Eventually his memory came back and he came home. I don't know Marie was all that pleased to be honest. I think she thought she was rid of him for good."

"Why wasn't the report closed?" Sam asked.

Viv shrugged disinterestedly. "Probably just an oversight."

Sam quirked another smile at her. "Thanks for your help."

"I dunno, Sam," Dean said, eying the neatly kept farmhouse with a brand new Jeep parked out front. "It doesn't exactly scream vamp or werewolf lair."

"Well, nobody's seen Max Schmidt in a year. So maybe he's another victim or maybe he's involved."
"All right," Dean said, pulling out his gun and checking the chamber before tossing syringes of dead man's blood to Sam and his mom. Then he handed out the machetes.

"Vamp or were, we shoot the son of a bitch full of silver, and chop off it's head," he declared.

"Mom and I will take the front, you and Cas go round the back," Sam said. Dean nodded and moved swiftly towards the rear of the building, Cas following close behind. Sam approached the front door cautiously and opened the screen door. It squealed a little as it moved and he winced but nobody came to investigate. He tried the door and wasn't sure whether to be happy or disturbed that it was unlocked. He pushed it open carefully and crept inside. Mary was like a ghost behind him.

The smell in the house made it immediately apparent something was wrong. He wrinkled his nose at his mom.

"Blood," she confirmed in a whisper. "Old blood."

The living room was a riot of flowered wallpaper and clashing furniture. There was a large blood stain on the floor near the fire, dried and brown. Other than that, the room was uninteresting. Down the hall was a kitchen that was decorated with the same taste, this time in cream and brown. Dirty dishes were piled in the sink, and a few flies buzzed lazily near the overfilled trashcan. Sam shrugged and moved on to a room that was probably designed as a dining room but had been converted into some kind of art studio. Canvases covered every surface, with strange swirling abstract paintings that had a haunting quality.

"Wow," Mary breathed.

"Yeah," Sam said in agreement. "Those are… intense."

"It's more than that," Mary replied. "These paintings have power. It's not natural."

"Witch?" Sam suggested.

Mary shook her head. "No idea."

Sam padded softly over to the stairs. Where the Hell was Dean? He climbed the stairs slowly, checking constantly for any sound or sign of movement.

There were three bedrooms and all of them told a tragic story. Blood spattered across walls and floors. In a room that clearly belonged to a young child, broken toys scattered across the blood soaked carpet. But there was nobody here.

"Dean and Cas must have found something outside," Sam decided. "We better go find them."

As they moved through some bushes to the rear of the house, Cas suddenly froze, his gaze riveted on a barn a hundred feet away.

"Dean," he hissed. "There's something… in there."

"Monster?" Dean asked shortly. Cas nodded. "What is it?"

The angel's nostrils flared. "I don't know." Dean gave him an alarmed look. "I'm sorry, I've never sensed anything like it before. It's not quite like a werewolf, and not quite like a vampire."

"But it's definitely one monster?"
"Yes," Cas said. He looked a little embarrassed. "Probably."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Great. OK, let's go check it out."

Unfortunately, the land between the house and the barn was wide open, which meant they'd be sitting ducks if anyone was watching. But as they hurried over to the barn door, there was no sign of life. Pushing open the rickety door with his toe, Dean blinked rapidly as his eyes adjusted to the dim light inside. There was a pile of hay, a few tools and a generator in one corner. And huddled in another corner was a large pile of rags.

Cas hissed and dashed across the barn towards the rag pile. It exploded into movement, letting out an unearthly screech. Cas shoved it roughly backwards but the thing was unbelievably strong and it barely took more than two steps back. Dean took aim and fired three shots directly at it. They all hit the creature solidly in the chest and it turned on Dean with a snarl.

The thing was hideous. Ragged remnants of clothing covered a cadaverous body that was twisted and distorted beyond all recognition. Motley patches of matted hair, over-long limbs and a mouth full of sharp teeth completed the vision of something unlike anything Dean had ever seen or even heard of before.

"What the Hell is that thing?" he exclaimed as he fired again. It definitely didn't seem to like the gunshots but they weren't slowing it down significantly. Dean discarded his pistol and switched to the large blade. Not many monsters could survive having their heads chopped off. He darted forward and Cas, who'd been watching him intently, made a feint to the other side of the creature. Confused, it howled a weird ululating noise and lunged at the angel, sinking it's teeth into his neck.

Dean swung the machete and the head flew off and hit the wall with a solid thunk. Cas heaved the twitching body away from him and then touched his hand to the wound on his neck with astonishment.

"Why would it try to feed from me?" he wondered. "Angel blood is poison to vampires."

"That wasn't exactly a regular vamp," Dean pointed out. "I don't know what the Hell it was." The barn door was yanked open and he saw his brother and his mom standing there, staring at Cas.

"What happened?" Sam asked.

Cas frowned as he inspected himself. "That," he said, pointing at the remains of the creature they'd just fought. Sam and Mary went to investigate.

Dean clapped Cas on the back. "You OK?"

"Yes," Cas told him. "Are you hurt?"

"Nah," Dean said. "It never touched me."

"Dean, come over here," Sam insisted. Squeezing the angel's shoulder, Dean loped over to where Sam and Mary were puzzling over the corpse of the monster.

"What is it?"

"No idea. It has features of both vamps and weres," Sam said. "But it's so grotesquely mutated, I'd be surprised if it could have survived very long."

"Could some poor bastard have been bitten by a were and somehow fed vamp blood at the same
"time?" Dean asked.

"Possibly," Sam allowed. "But what are the odds? And I'd have thought the two states were incompatible."

"Obviously not," Dean said unnecessarily. "Well, whoever he was, we better light him up and hit the road."

Mary leaned forward and pulled something from the pocket of what had once been a coat. "Looks like this was Max Schmidt," Mary said, the tattered remains of a drivers license in her hands. "Something happened to the poor man."

"Yeah," Dean said. "Something weird."

Sam looked down at the burning remains of the monster that had been Max Schmidt.

"What the Hell, man," Dean said, shaking his head and taking a swallow from a hipflask he then offered it to Sam.

Sam took it and gulped down a mouthful. He choked at the harshness of the liquor he'd swallowed. "What the Hell is in that thing?"

"Moonshine," Dean laughed. "Got it from a liquor store on the outskirts of town. Under the counter, y'know." He offered it to their mom who refused with a shake of her head.

"Jesus, Dean," Sam gasped through ruined vocal chords. "It's like turpentine."

Dean just rolled his eyes at him and took another drink. "It's not that bad." He poked the body with one toe. "All right, let's bury this son of a bitch and get the Hell out of Dodge."

"Where did Cas go?" Sam asked as he picked up a shovel.

"Dunno," Dean said, tensing. "He said he had something he had to do."

"That's it? He didn't say where he was going?" Sam said in surprise.

"No," Dean replied. He shrugged and began to dig. "I figured he went after Gabriel."

Sam bit his lip and tried to look casual but apparently failed miserably.

"Don't freak out on me, Sam," Dean told him. His tone was light and easy but his eyes were serious.

"I'm not," Sam said defensively. And he wasn't. It was just Gabriel not being dead made him feel things he'd thought dead and buried. He didn't think Dean would understand. "Look, we were pretty unfriendly, y'know. I doubt we'll see him again."

Dean's gaze sharpened but he didn't voice whatever was on his mind. Sam looked away uncomfortably and focused his attention on digging. After a moment, Dean joined him and they finished the job in silence.

Cas held himself perfectly motionless, still capable of that kind of angelic stillness even if much of his power had deserted him over the years. Hidden by trees in a small park in the center of town, he observed Gabriel sitting on a bench, quietly watching dog walkers and joggers go by. It seemed out of character, but then Gabriel had always been the most complex of the archangels. He was horribly
conflicted about his brother's sudden return and much as he loved him, it was hard to accept the pain and horror his 'death' had inflicted on his friends. And it was very much in character for Gabriel to just show up out of the blue and expect to be welcomed with open arms.

"I know you're there, Castiel," Gabriel spoke up and Cas stepped forward out of the shadows. "What do you want?"

"Nothing," the seraph rumbled. "I just wondered what you were up to."

"Chilling, that's all," Gabriel said, leaning back and gracing him with a grin that didn't reach his eyes.

Cas gave him a skeptical look. "Really?" The relaxed demeanor disappeared and Gabriel stood up, irritation making his wings quiver. "I didn't come here to fight with you."

"No?" Gabriel said challengingly. "Then why are you here?"

Cas took a deep unnecessary breath through his nose. "Leave Sam and Dean alone. They've been through enough."

"I don't appreciate your tone," Gabriel said warningly. He crossed his arms defensively across his chest.

"Please, brother. Whatever mischief you've got planned, I'm begging you. Don't do it."

Gabriel sighed, brushing imaginary lint from his sleeves. "I don't suppose you would believe me if I told you I wasn't planning anything?" Cas shook his head. "OK, fine. I know where I'm not wanted."

"Do you?" Cas said wonderingly. "We already gave you the brush off, and yet you're still here."

"I'll figure something out," Gabriel said opaquely. "Be well, Castiel." He shoved his hands into his pockets and began to trudge out of the park.

"Wait. What are you going to do?" Cas called out. Gabriel laughed at him, a broken, hollow sound, but he didn't stop moving and soon he'd disappeared around a corner. By the time Cas got there, his brother had gone.

When the Winchesters got back to the Impala, dirty, sweaty, tired and sore, it was to find Cas sat on the hood, his head in his hands.

"Cas?" Dean said. He dashed over to the angel and Sam observed them quietly.

"Dean," Cas replied. His head came up and he met the hunter's gaze. "Is it done?"

"Yeah. What happened with Gabriel?"

Cas slid off the hood, maintaining eye contact with Dean. "He's gone. I don't think he'll be back."

Dean nodded in satisfaction. Sam felt a twisting disappointment that surprised him. He'd expected the ex-Trickster to be a bit more persistent and although it made no sense, he was sorry Cas had been so successful in persuading Gabriel to leave them alone. Kicking himself for being stupid he shuffled over to the car and slumped into the passenger seat.

Dean and Cas were still standing there, staring at each other in that way that they did. Sam was used to it by now, but every so often it would increase in intensity to the point that it was impossible to
ignore. This was one of those times. Sam noticed their mom watching them, her face lined with concern.

"We should hit the road," Sam said and Dean jerked as he was abruptly pulled out of whatever weird reverie he and the angel had fallen into.

"Yeah," Dean said, his cheeks flushing. "Cas, are you coming?"

The angel squeezed his shoulder and nodded, and then silently climbed into the backseat. Mary frowned and Sam offered her his seat before climbing in next to Cas.
Chapter 3

The sound of the ticking library clock was an occasional source of irritation for Dean, who was constantly threatening to shoot it, hit it with a hammer or other acts of violence. Sam on the other hand, rather liked the rhythm of it. It was late and he'd gotten up after tossing and turning in bed for over an hour. The events that had taken place in Oberlin, not just the hunt but the bizarre encounter with Gabriel was spinning in his head.

The rush of anger when he'd recognized the archangel's familiar vessel had been something of a surprise. He'd felt at least partially responsible for Gabriel's death at the hands of Lucifer, and when he'd been possessed by the devil, Lucifer had milked that guilt for all he was worth. Learning that it was all a trick had infuriated him. He shook his head ruefully, he should have known Gabriel would have one last trick up his sleeve and if he'd taken that opportunity to get off the Apocalypse train, that was not exactly unprecedented behavior from the archangel.

But something about the whole encounter just felt off. Gabriel had been brittle and nervous, which was just downright peculiar when Sam started to think about it. There'd been little time to puzzle over it because Cas had dragged his brother away for a private conversation. Even so, it seemed odd to Sam that Gabriel had just stood and watched them drive away.

"Sam, you're up late," Cas said from the doorway.

"Can't sleep," Sam sighed. "Come and sit down, Cas. I gotta ask you something." The angel sat and looked at him expectantly.

"When you spoke to Gabriel, did he say why he came back?"

"He claimed to just be curious about what we were doing," Cas said, his expression distant.

"But you don't believe him," Sam surmised.

Cas nodded in agreement. "Something is wrong. When I followed him to the park in the center of town, he was sitting there doing nothing. All the millennia I've known Gabriel, I've never known him to just sit still. It's not in his nature."

"What could be wrong that he couldn't take care of with a click of his fingers?" Sam pressed and Cas shook his head mournfully.

"I don't know," he admitted.

"Maybe it's a trick or a game," Sam suggested.

"I don't think so," Cas said. "This is a human term but I can't think of a better word. He seemed depressed."

"Depressed?" Sam said in alarm.

"Yes. But I don't think you should worry about it," the angel said reassuringly. "I don't think he's going to make trouble." He stood up and walked towards the door. "You really should try and get some sleep."

"Yeah," Sam said. "OK." He got to his feet and shuffled back to his room, even though he felt even worse now than he had before.
Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, he wondered if they'd been too harsh towards Gabriel. Some of that could be blamed on shock of course, but it felt like a pathetic excuse. And Cas's description of Gabriel as depressed had made his stomach twist itself into knots. He was all too familiar with the yawning black pit of depression himself not to feel pity and sympathy for the only archangel who wasn't a complete douchebag.

And there it was. The complexity of his feelings about Gabriel had been pushed aside when the archangel had died. He'd had a grudging respect for him when they'd first encountered the Trickster all those years ago. And then, for reasons that remained entirely inexplicable to Sam, Gabriel had decided to try and deflect Sam's destiny at the Broward County Mystery Spot. The inherent cruelty in the act of trapping him in that time loop was counterbalanced by the fact that his intentions really did seem good. After all, if Sam had listened to him and heeded his warning, perhaps things wouldn't have turned out the way they had.

After he'd spiraled down into the horror of demon blood addiction and betrayed everyone who loved him by killing Lilith and releasing Lucifer from the Cage, he'd thought there was no way back for him. He'd stared into the abyss and realized Nietzsche was wrong. The abyss hadn't stared into him, instead he had stared into a nothingness so complete that his soul had seemed to shrivel and die.

Dean and Bobby had pulled him back from the brink, but it had left its mark. And Cas, whose own descent into madness weirdly paralleled his own, had left further scars when he'd ripped down the walls in Sam's mind. He wondered vaguely what kind of ragged patchwork his soul must be. He inhaled sharply, he'd learned long ago this kind of navel-gazing was unhealthy and led nowhere good. He focused his mind back on Gabriel, but that was not much better. He had the uncomfortable sensation that they had rather mistreated the archangel. It even seemed possible Gabriel had come to them for help, although what kind of trouble an archangel could get into and they could fix, Sam couldn't imagine. They had turned him away and that was what left a sour taste in his mouth.

Before he'd even fully registered what he was doing, he pulled the charging cable from his phone and scrolled through to find the unsigned text message he was certain Gabriel had sent. He had no idea if the archangel would respond but he decided he ought to try and at least apologize. He tapped out a short message and pressed send. As soon as he'd done so, he felt a sense of relief and exhaustion washed over him in a wave. Perhaps his conscience had been keeping him awake after all, he thought vaguely as he lay back and slipped into sleep.

It wasn't often that Dean was up before Sam, but lately it was getting to be a habit. He'd slept late after being up half the night and he was groggy when he stumbled into the kitchen in search of coffee and something to eat.

"Morning, sleepyhead," Dean greeted him through a mouthful of toast.

"Morning," Sam said sleepily.

"Rough night?" Dean asked. He didn't sound concerned but Sam could see the line between his brows that meant Dean was feeling paternal this morning.

"Yeah," he admitted. "Took me ages to fall asleep."

"Gabriel upset you that much, huh?"

Sam spun around so fast he almost dropped the container of creamer. "What?" he yelped.
"Come on, Sam," Dean said easily, although Sam could now see the tension in his brother's body. "Gabriel shows up out of the blue, and you're telling me you're not upset?"

"We were pretty horrible to him," Sam said, giving in.

"He had it coming," Dean said, leaning back in his chair. When Sam opened his mouth to object, he held up one hand. "Yeah, he helped us with the Apocalypse. Barely. After we gave him no choice. And when he died fighting Lucifer, to give us a chance to escape, well OK, I felt bad about that. But I needn't have bothered because apparently he is alive and well. He left us in the lurch, Sam. Think how differently things might have gone if he'd stuck around."

Sam rubbed the back of his neck in distress. "Look, I didn't say I wasn't mad," he said. "But what's done is done and maybe he thought he'd done all he could. You can't blame him for not wanting to kill his brother." He gave Dean a pointed look and to his credit, his brother looked away.

"Yeah, well. What do you want me to do about it now?" Dean growled.

"Nothing," Sam sighed. "You asked, remember."

Mary walked into the kitchen and stopped suddenly. "Everything OK?" she asked.

"Yeah," Sam said and Dean shrugged at her. She frowned at Sam's back and then helped herself to coffee.

"So, any thoughts about the monster we killed yesterday?" she said brightly.

"Like what?" Dean replied, his eyebrows diving over his nose.

"Well, like what the Hell was that thing?" she said tartly.

"I dunno," Dean said, waving one hand idly. "What difference does it make? It's dead."

"We hope," Cas said from the door.

"You too?" Dean said, sounding betrayed. The angel flinched but didn't back down.

"I think they're right," Sam added. "Aren't you the tiniest bit curious that even Cas doesn't know what this thing was?"

"I am not omniscient," the angel said reprovingly.

"No, I get that," Sam replied. "But I've never known you to be completely in the dark." When the angel's mouth turned downwards and his shoulders hunched, Sam cursed internally. "Hey, it wasn't a criticism. I'm saying it's a mystery and I think we should try to solve it. What if we didn't actually manage to kill it? What if there are more of them?"

"Could there be anything in the archives here?" Mary suggested.

"Maybe," Sam said, nodding thoughtfully. "We can take a look at least."

"OK, you're probably right," Dean said churlishly.

"Why don't you post something on the hunters forums online?" Sam proposed. "I know you hate digging through the books."

Dean brightened considerably. "I can do that," he said.
Gabriel slouched against a tree, trying not to think about how badly he'd bungled the meeting with the Winchesters but wasn't having much success. Clearly he needed a new plan, but his brain wasn't cooperating right now. It was too busy obsessing over the look on Sam's face when he'd recognized the archangel. He'd expected surprise, shock, maybe even anger. But Sam had looked appalled. He honestly didn't think he'd earned that response.

His pocket buzzed and he jumped in surprise. He'd almost forgotten about it. Gabriel pulled it out of his pocket and stared down at the message.

*We should talk. Sam.*

Hope suddenly burst within him. Sam wanted to talk? Surely that was good news.

*Sure, Sam. Just name a time and place.*

He hesitated for a moment before pressing send. And then almost regretted it once he'd sent it. Maybe Castiel was right. Maybe he should leave well enough alone.

*I'll be in touch.*

That Sam was wary was understandable but he was reaching out. Gabriel wanted to sing and weep all at once, which was a very curious sensation. Giddily, he tapped out a quick response.

*I'll be waiting.*

There was no reply.

A few hours later, Sam wondered if his brother hadn't had the right idea. Nothing in the archives spoke about anything like the creature they'd fought and although there were a few monsters that had some features that were similar to werewolves and vampires, they weren't similar enough. Sam huffed in frustration.

If he was honest, he was also stewing over the messages he'd exchanged with Gabriel. The archangel had responded so quickly to Sam's missives it had been more than a little startling. There was a tinge of desperation to it that did odd things to Sam's gut.

"Sam," Cas said and he jerked in surprise.

"Yeah?"

"I think I might have something," the angel said diffidently. He produced a small book and placed it on the table, carefully leafing through the delicate pages to find what he was searching for. Mary stepped out from behind a shelf and came to stand behind her son.

"How old is this book, Cas?" she breathed, her eyes widening.

"It was printed with a Gutenberg press," Cas told them. "Around 1480 or so."

"Wow."

"Here," Cas said. "Read this."

Sam squinted at the heavy, archaic text and blinked rapidly as he tried to decipher it. After several minutes, he'd gotten no further than a few words.
"Cas, I can't read this," Sam said in defeat. "I mean, it's English and yet it's like a foreign language."

The angel's lips pursed. "I'll read the relevant passage to you and translate some of the more archaic terms," he said. "The man was transformed, and crawled along the surface of the earth as a beast. His mouth was full of fearful teeth, like the vampire, but his transformation was linked to the moon like the werewolf. Silver did not slay him, nor the stake nor the blessed light of the sun."

"Holy shit," Sam said fervently. "Does it say anything else? Like how this happened or what it was or even if beheading and burning was sufficient?"

"It's not clear," the angel said unhappily. "The man they describe was burned at the stake and the killings stopped. But there's nothing on how he came by his affliction."

"Where was this?" Mary asked.

"A tiny village in England called Frinstead," Cas told them.

"Well, I suppose it's helpful to know that this has happened before. But it doesn't really tell us much else," Sam said.

Dean appeared in the doorway looking triumphant, his laptop under his arm. "I've got something," he declared.

"Yeah?" Sam said hopefully. "What is it?"

Dean placed his computer on the table and flipped it open. Sam stood up and leaned over his brother from behind to read his screen. Mary took his seat and watched them both with interest.

"So I just posted something short," Dean explained. "'Has anyone seen any weird monsters that seem to half one thing and half another?'"

"It's a bit vague," Sam griped but Cas was staring at Dean like he was a genius. Dean shifted uncomfortably.

"So what happened?" Mary said impatiently.

"A hunter in Kentucky came across a creature he describes as half-vampire, half-wraith," Sam said as he read the post on the hunters forum. A line formed between his eyebrows. "Wait, that sounds awfully familiar."

"Jefferson Starship," Dean said, slapping one hand on the table in emphasis.

Mary blinked in puzzlement. "What, the band?"

Sam laughed at her bewilderment. "Sorry, mom. Dean called them that, the last time we encountered them. They're a kind of hybrid monster created by Eve, the Mother of All. She's the one who created most of the monsters we fight."

"What on earth possessed you to give them such a ridiculous name?" Mary demanded laughingly.

"Because they're horrible and hard to kill," both brothers recited and giggled. Cas gave them a stern look.

"Stupid name or not," the angel said. "This is not good news."
"Well, no," Sam agreed, sobering in the face of what the angel was suggesting. "Eve was the only one who knew how to create these things, or so we thought. But she's dead and we were sure we'd wiped out all of her experimental creations. If someone's started up again, we've got a major problem."

"Maybe we just missed a couple," Dean suggested optimistically.

"If it was just the Jefferson Starship, I'd agree with you," Sam said. "But the thing we fought in Oberlin was totally new. If Eve created them, why haven't we met one before. And if she didn't then someone else did, which means someone else has figured out how she created her hybrids. We assumed it was some kind of inherent power specific to Eve. But what if it wasn't?"

They stared at each other in silence as Sam's words sank in.

"Wait a second," Dean said, holding up his hands. "Aren't we getting ahead of ourselves here? We've no evidence anyone's creating new hybrids. All we have is one report of one Jefferson Starship, which we totally could have missed if it had gotten smart enough to lay low. And this thing in Oberlin? Could just be something rare."

Mary inhaled deeply. "OK. You're right. There's no need to freak out just yet. Did your friend manage to kill this… uh… Jefferson Starship?"

"He thinks so," Dean said. "He cut the head off with a silver blade. That always worked for us."

"And there really wasn't much left of that… Hell, we need a name for that Oberlin monster," Sam said. When Dean opened his mouth, Sam held up his hand. "No. No way, Dean."

"Were-vamp," Dean said.

Sam looked disappointed. "I thought it was going to be something dumb and hilarious," he complained. "That's actually kinda dull."

"We'll probably never meet another one," Dean said sententiously. "It wasn't worth the effort of coming up with a cool name."

"Fine," Sam said. "Well, what now?"

Dean's phone began to play 'Back in Black' and he snatched it off the table and answered.

"Hello? Mel? Wait, slow down, I'm putting you on speaker." Dean said.

"Dean!" a woman said tinnily. "You gotta help me out!"

"Mel, it's OK, it's Sam. Just tell us what's going on," Sam said, recognizing the voice of a hunter they'd met last year while clearing out a poltergeist in Cape Cod.

"I don't know what's going on," Mel said breathlessly. "People are being crushed to death and I'm going in circles."

"Crushed to death?" Dean said sharply. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know how else to describe it. There's been six victims so far, all of them with crushed skulls. The medical examiner described the bruising pattern as like fingers, but I can't figure out what monster would do this."

"Lots of things are strong enough," Dean objected.
"Yes, but that doesn't explain why," Sam pointed out. "Mel, where are you?"

"Houston," Mel said. She gave them the name and address of her motel. "Please, guys. I need help here." She hung up and Sam exchanged a look with Dean.

"I guess we're going to Houston," he said.

"I think I should stay here," Cas said. "I'm not convinced these hybrids are the one-off occurrences you seem to think. I'd like to do some more research."

"Sure," Dean said easily, masking his disappointment rather poorly, Sam thought.

"I'm coming," Mary said. "Unless Castiel needs me here." The angel shook his head with a smile. "Then I'm in."

When he'd received no further communications from Sam, Gabriel had started to convince himself that Sam had decided against meeting him after all. Chagrin was as unfamiliar as guilt and he hated himself for feeling it. Sam must have detected the abominable neediness in his hurried replies and was disgusted by it. Father knew he was repelled by his own pathetic wretchedness. But as worthless as he felt, he wasn't too proud not to consider another angle. Maybe he could reach out to Castiel again. He was so deep into his pity party he almost dropped his phone when it buzzed to indicate a new message.

We're going to Houston. Any chance you could meet me there? Sam

Gabriel frowned to himself. Since the debacle of his meeting with the Winchesters in Oberlin, he'd drifted south and wasn't exactly sure where he was. Right now he was in some kind of small park, because he found humans were less suspicious of anyone just hanging around in such places. He spotted a trashcan with some kind of logo on it and walked over to get a closer look. Sultan Park, Walters, OK. He had no idea he'd gotten this far.

Getting to Houston would mean stealing a car and driving for hours, but he was willing to endure any amount of torment if he had a chance to talk to Sam properly. Following an instinct, he walked in the direction he thought most likely to be the town, tapping out his response to Sam as he went.

Sure. I'll be there tomorrow. Let me know where and when you want to meet. G.

He sent his reply and let out a sigh. He was determined this time not to screw this up. He played out scenarios in his head, but they weren't doing much for his self confidence. He pushed them out of his head and concentrated on the problem at hand.

Sam was silent in the car again and Dean found himself increasingly distracted by it. He responded to Dean and Mary's questions and comments with short, monosyllabic answers that sometimes didn't even make much sense. Finally, Mary had had enough.

"Sam," she said, touching his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"I'm fine," Sam said robotically, staring out of the window.

"No," she said firmly. "You're not."

"I have a headache," Sam said. "That's all."
"All right," Mary said, relenting. "All right, I'll leave you alone." She looked up to meet Dean's eyes in the rearview mirror, seeing her concern reflected there.

"It's about four more hours to Houston," Dean said, glancing at his watch. "Do you want to stop at a motel and head out in the morning?"

"No," Sam said. "Let's just keep going."

They arrived at Mel's motel around 1am, tired and cranky. Dean arranged two rooms for them, swaying on his feet with exhaustion. He offered a key to his mom and then helped Sam stagger to their room.

"You sure you're OK?" he asked as Sam stumbled through the motel room door and flopped onto the bed.

"It's just a migraine," Sam slurred.

"Since when do you get migraines?" Dean demanded.

"I don't get them very often," Sam said defensively, throwing one arm over his eyes. "I just need to sleep."

"Well, you can't sleep in your shoes," Dean said, trying not to sound too worried. "You need a hand?"

"No," Sam said, struggling to rise from the bed. He made it no more than halfway before slumping back. "Yes."

"No problem, Sammy," Dean told him. He quickly unlaced Sam's neatly tied shoelaces and pulled them off, tossing the shoes untidily into a corner. "Anything else you wanna take off?"

"Jeans," Sam whispered. He pawed ineffectively at his belt.

"It's fine, I've got it," Dean told him. He unbuckled Sam's belt, and unfastened his jeans, sliding them easily off his brother's lean frame. "Have you lost weight?" he said, noticing how loose the denim had been.

"Dunno," Sam muttered.

"OK, you're done," Dean said. Sam shuffled up the bed and rolled over onto his side. Pursing his lips with concern, Dean set his phone on silent and then sent a quick update text to their mom.

The morning dawned bright and warm, and Dean was relieved to see that Sam seemed to have shaken off the troubling headache from the day before. There was a knock at the door and he opened it to see Mary smiling hesitantly at him.

"How's Sam?" she said.

"I'm fine, mom," Sam said, sounding like a harried teenager. She pushed past Dean and glared at Sam, her hands on her hips.

"Don't give me that," she admonished. "You worried me."

"It was a migraine, not a brain tumor," Sam said, rolling his eyes. "It happens. No need to freak out."
Mary's face settled into the mulish expression Sam recognized from his brother. He'd always wondered how much he and Dean resembled their mom. Now he knew, Dean and their mother were like peas in a pod. Dean seemed to realize it too.

"Mom, he's OK. Let's just go meet Mel and get breakfast," he suggested. Mary gave Sam one final warning look and then nodded.

"Has she been in touch again?" Sam asked.

"She replied to my text last night," Dean said. "We're meeting at the Sunshine Diner across the street."

"OK," Sam said. "Lemme get cleaned up." He strode into the bathroom and Dean and Mary heard the lock snap into place.

"I'm worried about him," Mary said quietly so Sam wouldn't overhear.

"I know," Dean said. "I only realized last night but he's dropped about five pounds since we rescued him from Lady Bevell and friends."

"What the Hell did she do to him?" Mary snarled. "Did he talk about what happened at all?"

"Not to me," Dean said. "Cas was able to coax some of it out of him. Obviously there was the torture, but Sam's pretty tough. He's used to pain." Mary's mouth turned downwards and he rushed to reassure her. "Cas healed him up, Mom. Physically, he's fine. But Cas says she also used magic on him. To uh, make him think they'd slept together. She was trying to trick him into answering her questions."

Mary looked sick. "That's disgusting."

"Yeah," Dean said heavily. "Cas said Sam was angry about it and ashamed that he fell for it even for a moment. But he also said he didn't think Sam had told him the whole story."

"Maybe I should-"

"No," Dean said, interrupting her. He ignored her frustrated glare. "Look, Sam's not gonna open up to you until he's ready. If you push it, he'll just retreat. It's just how he is."

"So you're saying there's nothing I can do?" Mary snapped.

"No," Dean said. "I'm saying we have to give him more time. That's all."

Mary wasn't sure what she'd expected of Mel, since there were fewer women in the life than men, but this hippy chick sure didn't look like a hunter. Her bouncy strawberry blonde curls were held in place with a blue bandana and her floaty chiffon blouse and long gypsy skirt made her look more like a strip mall fortune teller. Golden bangles adorned both arms and jangled as she moved, and she was making short work of a stack of silver dollar pancakes.

"I'm tougher than I look," Mel said to Mary's skeptical expression. "I don't dress like this when I'm planning to fight." Mary held her tongue. It wasn't her place to criticize this young woman who claimed friendship with her boys.

"So, what have you got?" Sam asked. The waitress placed coffee cups in front of them and filled them from the carafe.
"The special today is chocolate-strawberry pancakes with whipped cream and your choice of bacon, sausage links or corned-beef hash," she said.

"Sounds good to me," Dean said. "With bacon."

"I'll just have some scrambled eggs and rye toast," Sam told her.

"I'll have the same," Mary said, nodding. The waitress scribbled on her notepad and walked away.

"So, I came here when I got a message from Murray Tiller," Mel said. "He was an antiques dealer who had some connections in the hunter community. He used to alert us when he comes across a cursed object or magical item."

"Tiller?" Sam said. "Isn't he the guy who specializes in Native American artifacts?"

"That's him. I heard on the grapevine that he'd come across a magical talisman and was looking for someone to identify it," Mel said. "It sounded like one of the Seminole mandalas that I've been collecting, so I came down here to take a look." She shook her head in distress and her earrings made a delicate tinkling sound. "I should have gone straight to his store, even though it was late when I got here. But I figured it could wait until morning."

"I take it something attacked him that night?" Sam surmised.

"Yeah," Mel replied. "When I got there, the police had already arrived. Something had crushed his head like a grape. I posed as a reporter and managed to get some information from one of the officers on the case." Her cheeks pinked a little and Sam hid a smile. "He made me a copy of the autopsy report and the case file." She produced a yellow folder from her voluminous purse and slid it across the table. Sam opened it and began to read, Mary peering over his shoulder.

"Gimme the headlines," Dean said.

"OK. The medical examiner said death was due to massive crushing trauma to the cervical spinal cord. His skull was in a million pieces and his brain was like pudding. The report had some photos, they're pretty graphic. He said there were bruising patterns that resembled large hands although the amount of force required to do this is way beyond anything any human could achieve." Mel took a large mouthful of coffee and fell silent.

"Any clues at the shop?" Dean said, directing his question to Sam.

"Not much. They're sure he let his attacker in, because the alarm was turned off and there was no sign of forced entry. So whatever this thing is, it's capable of appearing human, and unthreatening." Sam said. "There's a ton of forensics, but it's a store which means lots of irrelevant fingerprints and other trace evidence. The only blood is Tiller's."

"OK. What about the other deaths?" Dean said. "You said six on the phone."

"Right," Mel replied. "The next night, it was the lead detective on the case. Detective Stephen Wilson was found in his car outside Tiller's store. Nobody knows why he was there late at night, but maybe he thought the killer might return to the scene of the crime."

"Same cause of death," Sam commented, tapping the autopsy report.

"Right," Mel agreed. "But whatever did this ripped off the car door to get to him."

"How on earth did it manage that without attracting attention?" Mary said sharply. "That would
"That area's mostly commercial," Mel shrugged. "Not many people live there."

The waitress arrived with their food and Sam quickly flipped over the gruesome pictures. They all fell silent as they started to eat, except Sam who stared down at his eggs and toast with a look of distaste.

"After that, the next victim was Stephen's wife," Mel said. "She was at home with their young son, Marty. Again, same MO. Marty's OK, thankfully. The monster didn't seem interested in him at all. His screaming awoke the neighbours."

"Whatever this thing is, it's intelligent," Sam said. Mary nudged him and looked meaningfully at his food. He sighed and slowly forked up some of the eggs, placing them in his mouth and chewing slowly.

"And it's looking for something," Dean added.

"Did the talisman you were interested in turn up?" Mary asked and Mel flinched.

"No," she said. "The police didn't find it."

"Could this monster be after it?" Sam asked.

"I don't know," Mel said. "I suppose it's possible."

"What do they do?" Mary was tense and Sam flicked a look at her.

"Protection, mostly," Mel said casually, but Sam thought there was something off about it, like she was trying too hard.

"Protection from what?" Dean said.

"Well, all kinds of things," Mel hedged. "I've got ones for demons, werewolves, vampires, skinwalkers, you name it."

"And the one Tiller had?"

Mel took a deep breath. "No idea. Tiller said he'd never seen anything like it. None of the books on Seminole ritual practices showed mandalas that were remotely similar."

"But you're sure it was legit?" Sam pressed.

"Well, I never saw it in person," Mel told him. "I only saw the photos Murray sent me. But it looked authentic. I needed it so badly--" She broke off with a startled look.

"OK, what about the other victims?" Mary said. "You've only mentioned the first three."

"Murray's business partner was next," Mel said. "Logan Crabtree. I didn't even know he had one, apparently he was a sleeping partner or something. And his sister, Beth, who he lived with."

"It fits the pattern," Sam said. "If this creature is looking for something Murray owned. Maybe your mandala."

"The last one was the night before last," Mel said. "Beth Crabtree's best friend, Angela Liu."
"But nothing happened last night," Dean said. Mel shook her head. "If it's looking for something, maybe it's hit a dead end."

"So let's start with the talisman," Mary said. "I think that's the key to this mess."

Mel looked uncomfortable. "I've looked, believe me. If I didn't have the photos, I'd think Murray had been yanking my chain."

"Fresh eyes can't hurt," Sam interjected. He gathered up the file and handed it back to Mel. "Did Tiller keep a safe deposit box at a local bank?"

Her eyes flared wide with surprise. "I don't know," she said. "I never thought about it."

"Why don't you check it out?" Dean said. "I wanna take a look at the antiques store."

"I'll come with you," Mary said. Dean nodded in agreement and popped the last piece of bacon in his mouth. Sam shoved his plate away, aware that he'd barely touched the food. He avoided his mother's disapproving look and stood up.

"Do you want to help me check out the banks?" he said to Mel.

"Sure," she said eagerly.

"I'll pick up the check," Dean said. "Go on, I'll see you later."
Chapter 4

Dean unlocked the motel room door and opened it to the sight of Sam talking on the phone and Mel lounging on his bed looking excited.

"Nine am tomorrow," Sam was saying. "Thank you. That's very helpful." He hung up and gave Mel a thumbs up.

"Find something?" Dean asked.

"Yep," Sam said, grinning. "It took all day but we found it. Murray Tiller kept a safe deposit box at a Unity National Bank on Blodgett Street. He's meeting us there tomorrow to take a look inside."

"Tomorrow?" Mary said, peering over Dean's shoulder. "Not today."

"It's nearly 4pm," Sam pointed out. "They were just about to close. What, you think this monster is going to be able to phone all the banks in Houston to find this one?"

"I just have a bad feeling about all of this," Mary said.

"Well, I've had all the excitement I can stand for today," Mel said. "I need to go meditate and rebalance my chakras." She graced them all with a smile and floated out of the room.

"Rebalance her what?" Dean said, looking puzzled.

Sam rolled his eyes with a grin. "Don't ask."

"Well, I need beer and a cheeseburger," Dean announced.

"Sounds good to me," Mary agreed. She cast a look at Sam, who waved her off.

"I'll pass," he said. "I'll get something from the diner later."

"Well, if you're sure..." she said hesitantly.

"I'm sure," Sam said. "Go on. I'll see you later."

As soon as Dean and his mom had left, Sam picked up his phone again to send another message to Gabriel, giving him the address of the motel and his room number. He was taking a risk bringing the archangel here but he didn't know Houston well and he didn't have transportation. Gabriel could fly them somewhere else if he wanted.

*I'll be there in an hour. G.*

An hour? Sam puzzled over the message, wondering why it would take Gabriel so long when understanding dawned. The archangel was probably indulging himself somewhere, playing a trick on someone or partying with a bevy of conjured up beauties. Sam's stomach churned, which he told himself was anxiety that Dean and his mom would get back before Gabriel even arrived. He considered sending a snarky reply asking what would take him so long but he realized that Gabriel would probably not be able to resist telling him in excruciating detail and Sam really didn't want to know.

So when a knock on the door jerked him from his sullen browsing of Netflix's current offerings only twenty minutes later, he grabbed his gun and crept towards the door cautiously. There was no way
Dean was back yet and anyway he wouldn't knock. And Gabriel wasn't due for another forty minutes.

"If you shoot me, I'm not gonna be happy," Gabriel's voice floated through the door. Sam blinked in surprise and peered through the peephole to see the diminutive figure of the archangel standing outside, his hands tucked nonchalantly in his pockets. He opened the door and ushered Gabriel inside, laying the gun down on the table.

"You're early," Sam said.

"Yeah," he agreed. "I miscalculated how long it would take to get here." Sam gave him a puzzled look but let it lie. "So, you wanted to talk."

Sam rubbed the back of his neck and looked like he wished he was anywhere but here. Gabriel had to swallow against the lump in his throat.

"Why are you here?" he asked bluntly.

"You asked to meet me," Gabriel said defensively. Sam rolled his eyes at him. "Oh. You mean, why am I back on earth?" He shrugged, affecting a casual attitude he didn't feel. "I got bored."

"I see," Sam said tightly. He turned on his heel and began walking towards the door.

"Hey, wait!" Gabriel called out. "Where are you going?"

Sam turned to look at him, his face cold. "I don't know what I expected but…" He broke off and made an expressive gesture with his hands. "I suppose I was hoping you'd grown up. But this was a mistake. You should go."

Gabriel spluttered in indignation. "I've been on earth longer than your entire species," he snapped.

"And yet you're still like a petulant child, wanting rewards for what is basic human decency," Sam sighed.

"Well, I'm not human," Gabriel retorted. He felt his wings flex resentfully and glared at Sam. "In case you'd forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten," Sam said quietly. "Look, this is pointless. I don't know what you want from me, Gabriel."

"A friend," the archangel admitted in a strangled voice.

Sam gaped at him. "You're not serious."

"Why is that such a strange thing to want?" Gabriel asked him. "You think being one of the most powerful beings in creation is protection from loneliness?" Fuck, he hadn't meant to say that. He sounded pathetic.

"You're lonely?" Sam said. "Can't you just conjure up some friends to play with?" The hard sarcasm was back. Gabriel was reminded of Dean.

"Magicked up playmates aren't a substitute for the real thing," he said sadly. "But you're right. I shouldn't have come back. Of course you're angry with me. I get it. I'm sorry. I won't trouble you again."

He gave Sam one last look and then slowly walked to the door, opened it and left the room. Sam
watched him walk across the parking lot from the window with a frown of puzzlement. Why hadn't he just snapped his fingers and vanished? Making a decision, he yanked open the door.

"Wait!" he called out but Gabriel either didn't hear him or was ignoring him. Sam strode after him, his longer legs easily eating up the distance between them, and grabbed the archangel by the shoulder. He spun him around and Gabriel spluttered in affront.

"What's going on with you, Gabriel?" Sam demanded.

"Nothing," Gabriel retorted sullenly. He shook off Sam's hand and backed away.

"Nothing, is it?" Sam said, his eyes narrowing. "Nothing is why you're walking away instead of flying? Nothing is why I can manhandle you as if you were human?" He blinked as he said it, realization dawning. "Have you Fallen?"

"No," Gabriel snapped. "Although I might as well have." He kicked at a small stone on the ground, his arms crossed defensively across his body.

Sam laid a hand on his shoulder again, more gently this time. "Tell me what happened."

The corners of the archangel's mouth turned down. "I got into a little disagreement with someone. My Grace is… bound somehow. It's still there, I can feel it but I can't touch it."

"Who did this to you?" Sam gasped. "Who has the power to bind an archangel's grace?"

"Death." Gabriel slumped in defeat, hanging his head in shame. "Death and I had a disagreement. We had a deal, and I broke it. He didn't take kindly to that, and bound my Grace. I can still feel it, and I still have some residual celestial senses, but my wings are pinned and my powers are gone." He quivered under Sam's grasp and the hunter couldn't help but feel a wave of pity.

"What kind of deal?" he asked.

"It's not important," Gabriel said airily, waving one hand. Sam didn't believe him but wasn't willing to push the matter. "Point is, Death stranded me here. So I need to find him and convince him to undo whatever the Hell it is he did."

Sam stared at him, horror and sorrow clogging his throat. "Gabriel, I'm so sorry," he said softly.

"Eh, it's fine," Gabriel said easily. "As soon as I find Death, I know I can bring him around."

"That might be difficult," Sam managed, his voice sounding strangled and rusty. Gabriel peered at him curiously.

"Why?"

"Death is uh… dead," Sam confessed.

Gabriel shook his head, unable to understand what he was hearing. "What do you mean, Death is dead? Death is eternal, Sam. More eternal than Dad even."

"I don't know what to tell you," Sam said desolately. "He's dead. Killed by his own scythe."

Gabriel stiffened as the reality of what the hunter was telling him dawned. "Dean killed him." It was not a question.

Sam nodded. "Yes. It's a long story but Death was trying to goad him into killing me."

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Sam nodded. "Yes. It's a long story but Death was trying to goad him into killing me."
"Oh, spare me the details," Gabriel declared dramatically, spreading his arms wide. "The entire universe can go to Hell in a handcart, as long as Dean Winchester doesn't lose his brother!"

"Come on, Gabriel. You of all people should understand," Sam snarled.

"I do understand," Gabriel said, his shoulders slumping. "But killing Death?" He shook his head. "That's not possible."

"I don't know what to tell you," Sam said sadly. "I was there. Dean swung that big scythe of his and he just… crumbled into dust."

Gabriel's head came up and he fixed Sam with an intense stare. "And his ring?"

"I've got it," Sam said. "We figured having a horseman's ring lying around wasn't a good idea. It's safe. I was expecting a Reaper to come get it, but the only one we've met is Billie and she didn't mention it so we said nothing."

"Billie?" Gabriel repeated, his mouth curling in a smile. "I remember her. She's fun."

Sam gave him a disbelieving look. "She doesn't like us very much. Threatened to toss us into the Empty next time one of us dies."

"I never said she was nice," Gabriel replied. "So, if Death dies, then who or what takes his place?"

"I don't know," Sam mused. "I mean, people still die." Gabriel was still watching him closely. "How long have you been back on earth?"

Gabriel's gaze slid away. "A while."

"How long, Gabriel?" Sam pressed.

Gabriel threw up his hands dramatically. "When Dean took on the Mark of Cain, it sent a reverberation across the universe. I came to investigate."

"What?" Sam's mouth dropped open in shock. Whatever answer he'd been expecting, it certainly wasn't that. "So when did you run into Death and where?"

"Ohio, sometime in early 2015." Gabriel's face had settled into a mulish pout. "My deal with Death was that I'd stay away from Earth for a century. When I returned ahead of schedule, Death caught up with me. He was pissed and of course I just couldn't keep my mouth shut." He shook his head. "The trouble with being an archangel is so few things can truly threaten you it's easy to think you're completely invulnerable. Death decided I needed taught a lesson. He bound my Grace and dumped me in Cleveland."

"Cleveland?" Sam laughed. "I guess that counts as a punishment all by itself."

"Quite," Gabriel said acidly. "So I managed to get some money and started trying to track Death down. But I realized I was going to need help and I even tried reaching out to Dad, you know. Figured it was worth a shot."

"What did he say?" Sam had the most peculiar expression on his face.

"Are you kidding me? Nothing. Nada. Zero." Gabriel spun around and made a frustrated gesture. "So I decided to try and find you two instead. Figured if anyone could get in touch with him it would be Dean, since Death always did seem to have a soft spot for him."
"And that's it?" Sam asked skeptically.

"That's it," Gabriel said. "Of course I was monitoring the Amara situation, but I wouldn't have been much help."

"Is this why Chuck didn't want to try and resurrect you?" Sam said suddenly. "Because he knew you weren't dead?"

"Chuck?" Gabriel repeated.

"Uh, God," Sam said. "Who masqueraded as the prophet Chuck Shurley during the Apocalypse."

"Son of a bitch," Gabriel snarled. "Dad came back? And he didn't bother looking me up?"

"I guess not," Sam said apologetically. He rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment.

Gabriel took a couple of deep breaths. "Well, better late than never I guess. I don't suppose you know where he is now?"

Sam gestured upwards. "Gone. With Amara."

"Great," Gabriel sighed. "Dad is probably the only other being who could fix me."

"So what will you do now?" Sam asked gently.

"I don't know." Gabriel stepped away from Sam. "Dad's gone, Death's gone and I'm... alone."

Sam clenched his fists. "The whole loneliness schtick doesn't wash, Gabriel. You missed us so badly, you totally forgot about us until you needed something."

"Only you," Gabriel confessed in a low voice.

"What?" Sam asked, startled.

"I only missed you. I mean, it's nice to see Castiel again, he is my brother after all. And Dean's fun, I guess. But honestly, I was only thinking about you." Gabriel couldn't hold Sam's gaze any longer.

"What does that mean?" Sam said, sounding dazed. "What am I supposed to do with that?"

Gabriel gave another, half-hearted shrug. "Whatever you want. Did you... Was there anything else you wanted to say?" This had been a monumentally stupid idea. What had he been thinking?

"I... I think I need time to process it," Sam said. When Gabriel nodded and began walking away again, the hunter held up his hands. "Wait. Don't leave. Just... give me a moment, OK?"

Gabriel stopped and watched the riot of emotions that played out over Sam's face. After several minutes had passed, Sam pushed away from the lamppost he'd been leaning against and moved closer to Gabriel.

"So, what do you want?" he asked. "You want us to find a way to unbind your Grace?"

Gabriel shook his head, not in denial but more as a delaying tactic. "No. You can't help with that problem."

"Then what?" Sam's voice was hard and cold fear washed over Gabriel. If Sam rejected him now, he wasn't sure what he would do.
"I told you. Friendship," he muttered.

"That's all?" Sam pressed, sounding skeptical.

Gabriel raised his eyes to meet Sam's. "That's it. No tricks. No ulterior motives." He swallowed at the white lie, but there was no reason Sam had to know just how strong his feelings really were. Gabriel was pragmatic enough to realize that even asking for friendship was asking a lot.

"OK," Sam said. "And what does that mean, to you?"

Gabriel stared at him, confused. "I don't understand."

"Look, angels seems to have strange ideas about friendship," Sam said, not unkindly. "It's taken years for Cas to get the hang of it. You've been on earth longer, but I think it might be wise to set some boundaries and expectations."

"Boundaries and expectations?" Gabriel echoed.

"Yeah. Like, no mean tricks. Dean and I have had prank wars that have gotten way out of hand, and we're not archangels. So, no tricks."

Gabriel sulked. "Not even…"

Sam gave him a glare but relented. "Nothing that causes bodily injury or psychological pain. Nothing you can't fix. Don't paint the Impala pink or turn Dean into a squirrel. Not that I guess you can without your Grace."

Gabriel grinned at him. "OK, I can work with that."

"And no pranks when we're hunting. At all."

"Fair enough. Can I help?" Gabriel said diffidently.

"What, with hunting?" Sam said in surprise. "Sure. I mean, if you want."

Gabriel nodded. "I'd like that." He cracked a few knuckles in his hands. "I may not have access to my power, but I am very old and I know a lot."

"OK. One more thing, and then we're done." Gabriel opened his mouth to object and then saw the look on Sam's face. "Absolutely no talking to Cas or Dean about their relationship."

Gabriel's jaw dropped open. "Are you nuts?"

"I mean it, Gabriel," Sam said firmly. "If you can't agree to that, then the deal's off."

"Why?"

"Because they're big boys and they can manage on their own," Sam told him. And then he offered Gabriel a sheepish grin. "And it makes Dean cranky."

Gabriel considered it for a moment. "OK. Fine."

"So, how often will we see you anyway?" Sam said, his voice a study in affected calm. Gabriel peered at him.

"How often do you want to see me?" he hedged.
Sam looked uncomfortable. "Well, do you have anywhere to stay?" he asked.

Gabriel felt his face go blank. "Not really," he managed.

"Did you want to stay with us? At the bunker? It's not the most luxurious accommodations but it is safe. Not that safety's a consideration for you, but well, the offer's there. If you want," Sam was wringing his hands and Gabriel frowned at the gesture. "No pressure. It's up to you." Sam went on.

"I don't want to impose on you," Gabriel said carefully. "I'm not sure Dean would want me hanging around where you live."

"It's not up to him," Sam said sharply. "If he gets to have his-" he broke off and Gabriel wondered where that sentence had been going. "I'm just saying, I've as much right to ask you to stay as he had to ask Cas."

Gabriel's eyebrows headed skywards. "Why don't we play it by ear?" he suggested. "I'll pop in from time to time, let Dean and Castiel get used to me being around." Sam nodded and Gabriel was almost certain he seemed disappointed. "And then, later, you could ask me again?" he added hopefully. Sam smiled at him and it was like the sun coming up.

The motel room window was dark, which Dean took to mean that Sam was asleep. He whispered a goodnight to his mom and then carefully opened the door. Sam was sprawled out on his bed, a slight smile on his face. Dean spotted the remains of a salad, a can of soda and an apple core in the trashcan by the window and breathed a sigh of relief that Sam had actually eaten something.

He sat down on his bed and began unlacing his boots when his phone started buzzing. He answered in a low voice.

"Dean, are you watching TV?" Mary said urgently.

"No, mom, Sam's asleep," he whispered.

"Wake him up. The monster's struck again!" she hissed.

"Where?" Dean said, a sinking feeling in his gut.

"The bank we're supposed to visit tomorrow," his mom told him. He walked over to Sam's bed and shook his shoulder.

"Uh, whassup?" Sam mumbled.

"Our headcrusher's struck again," Dean told him. He picked up the remote and turned on the TV, flicking through the channels to find a local station.

"...according to police spokesmen, the manager was locking up when he was attacked. They're refusing to speculate as to whether this murder is related to the other killings that have gripped Houston in recent days but witnesses say Mr Solana's head had been crushed, which is consistent with the other murders." The reporter was standing in front of the bank, which was festooned with crime scene tape and illuminated with the flashing blue and red lights of the police cars parked around her.

"Dammit," Sam said. "How the Hell did this thing figure out where to look next?"

"I don't know," Dean said, grimacing. "The only people who even knew were you, me, mom, Mel
"And the manager. Unless you told anyone else."

"No," Sam said, knowing it wasn't really a serious question. "And I told Solana not to talk about it."

"Well, mom and I didn't talk," Dean said. "We didn't even discuss the case last night."

Sam sighed heavily. "You think Mel accidentally tipped off our monster."

"I don't know what else to think," Dean said. "But that would mean she knows him or her, but doesn't know it."

"She's not even from Texas, let alone Houston," Sam pointed out. "Who does she know here, other than Tiller, who's dead?"

"No idea. We'll have to ask her." Dean's mouth was tight with strain and unhappiness.

"Shit," Sam said with feeling. "This is bad, Dean."

There was a knock at the door and Dean got up to let Mary in.

"I think we should go talk to Mel," she said as soon as she entered.

"You think she's the leak too?" Sam asked.

Mary exchanged a look with Dean. "There's something about her that strikes me as off."

"Fine," Sam said. "I mean, it's 1am but fine. Let's go talk to her."

But Mel wasn't in her room and her car was gone. The desk clerk said she hadn't checked out but he also hadn't seen her since she'd asked for more towels earlier in the evening, before Dean and Mary had gone out.

"We should check out her room," Dean said darkly.

"What?" Sam exclaimed. "Come on, Dean. We can't go breaking into her room without some evidence she's done anything wrong."

"I agree with Dean," Mary said. "Something's wrong here, Sam. Can't you feel it?"

"Feel it?" Sam said in astonishment. "I'm not gonna accuse another hunter of betrayal based on a feeling."

"Fine," Dean said. "You go back to bed. Mom and I are gonna check this out."

"Don't do this, Dean," Sam begged.

"We have to," Dean told him.

"Fine," Sam said, giving in. "I'm coming with you."

The motel door locks were not sophisticated and it took Dean only a few seconds to open Mel's door. The first thing that crossed Sam's mind was that the room had been tossed. Clothes, shoes and books were scattered all over the floor, drawers from the dresser were pulled out and the wardrobe door was hanging off its hinges. A smear of blood on one wall and the broken TV set completed the picture.
"What the Hell happened in here?" Sam breathed. Dean gave him a knowing look. "All right, you were right. I'm glad we broke in. Happy now?"

"Not really," Dean said. "So, what do we think? Did the creature come and kidnap Mel?"

"That's the best I can come up with," Sam agreed.

"Or she is the monster," Mary said.

"What?" Dean and Sam said together.

"No way," Dean added. "Why would she call us for help if she was the one responsible?"

The door swung open to reveal Mel standing there, her clothes in shreds. Blood was smeared across her face and spattered across every visible inch of skin. She looked shell-shocked.

"Dean?" she said, sounding dazed. "Why are you in my room?"

"What's going on, Mel?" he demanded. "The news said that bank manager was killed tonight, you were AWOL and this place looks like a tornado hit it. Not to mention you look like you've been in a fight."

"I thought the monster might show up at the bank," she said faintly. "I went to stake the place out, just in case."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Sam asked impatiently. "We would have helped."

"I thought I was just being paranoid," she defended. "Turns out I wasn't."

"So did you get a good look at it?" Mary asked. "I take it you fought with it."

"No," Mel said. "I was in my car and the next thing I know, I'm lying in a parking garage ten blocks away. I don't know what happened." She was breathing rapidly and looked like she was going into shock.

"Hey, it's OK," Sam said, guiding her into a chair. "We'll figure it out, OK?"

Mary went and fetched a glass of water and they spent a few minutes calming Mel down. Dean paced back and forth until Sam gave him a look and he muttered about getting something from the car and left the room.

"Why don't I help you clean up and change clothes," Mary offered. Mel nodded and Sam went out onto the balcony to give the women some privacy. After a few minutes, Mary joined him outside and held up a strange talisman on a leather strap.

"Is that…" Sam didn't want to finish the question.

"The missing mandala Mel was searching for?" Mary said. "Yes. It was in a pocket of her jacket."

"Where the Hell… Shit, Mom. The bank." He closed his eyes in distress.

Mary disappeared back into Mel's room and then poked her head back out to say Mel was dressed. Sam sent a text to Dean explaining what was going on and then dragged himself back into the room.

"You found it," Mel said.
"What is it, Mel? Why was it so important to you?" Sam asked gently.

Tears pooled in her eyes. "It was made especially for me by a medicine man in the Everglades. It's the only thing that stops the transformation. And then, last month, it was stolen. Fucking Edgar Monroe and I worked a case together and he saw it and figured he could steal it to make a little cash. I couldn't believe it."

"Edgar Monroe's dead," Dean said from the door. "I heard about it three weeks ago. Everyone thought it was a demon. But it was you."

"Yes," Mel sobbed.

"I don't understand," Sam said. "What transformation are you talking about?"

"The Seminole word is hulwak-chatte. It means bad blood."

Mary inhaled sharply and Sam and Dean swiveled their heads to look at her. "You're a Hyde," she exclaimed.

"Some people call us that," Mel agreed.

"What's a Hyde?" Dean asked.

"Did you never read the novel, 'The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde'?" Sam said.

"No," Dean said. "I think I saw a movie once. So a Hyde is what, a kind of Incredible Hulk type creature? Did you get exposed to gamma rays, Mel?"

Sam's mouth thinned in irritation. "No, Dean. Real life Hyde's are under a curse. But it's such a difficult hex, there aren't many witches who can cast it successfully."

"What happens if you do it unsuccessfully?" Mary asked curiously.

"You turn the curse on yourself," Sam said. Mel flinched and his eyes widened.

"Dammit Mel," Dean said. "Since when did you start playing with witchcraft?"

"Not all witches are evil," she said with a toss of her head. "There are quite a few practitioners in the hunter community these days."

"Yeah, well, once you start tossing dangerous curses around, you're not on the side of the angels anymore," Mary said angrily.

"Look, it's not like that," Mel said. "I found this book, OK. And it had all these powerful spells in it. Including the Hyde curse and the anti-curse. So me and my friend, Constance McBride, decided to test it out."

Sam groaned and covered his face with his hands. "And something went wrong."

"It's a very complex spell," Mel said defensively. "I still don't know what I did wrong. But when Constance tried to cast the anti-curse, it didn't work."

"You don't mean the Constance McBride?" Mary said.

"Do you know her?" Mel asked.
"Yes," Mary said. "She's no hunter, Mel."

"You're wrong," Mel said defiantly. "She helped me take down a vamp nest in Brooklyn and a wendigo in Arkansas."

"Who is she?" Sam asked.

"A witch," Mary said, her mouth distorted with contempt. "A very old, very powerful and very evil witch."

"As old as Rowena?" Dean asked.

"I don't think so," Mary said. "But certainly centuries old."

"Maybe this is a different Constance McBride," Mel said desperately. "My Constance isn't centuries old, she's forty-five and from Boston."

"She lies like she breathes," Mary said. "Five feet tall, black hair, blue eyes, skin so white it's almost translucent and an Irish accent? Always wears white? A large burn mark on her left arm and a penchant for crows?"

"It still could be a coincidence," Mel said but she sounded like she was trying to convince herself more than them.

"I gave her that scar," Mary told her. "Set the bitch on fire but she still managed to get away. My family have been hunting her for years."

"So you think this Constance tricked Mel into cursing herself?" Sam asked. "Why?"

"Maybe for fun. Probably to make it easy to steal the book. She does have it now, doesn't she, Mel?" Mary's fists clenched with temper and Dean laid one hand on her shoulder.

"So what do we do?" Sam asked.

"You have to break the curse," Mel begged.

"You've killed seven people!" Mary cried. "What makes you think you deserve a break now?"

"The Seminole people helped me," Mel wept. "They were able to create that mandala, it holds the curse at bay. I thought it would be OK until I could find a friendly witch capable of reversing the curse."

"Why didn't you go to Alicia and Max?" Mary demanded. "They would have helped you!"

"The Banes twins?" Mel said, breaking into hysterical laughter. "No way. Asa Fox hates my guts. They'd never have agreed to help."

"You're wrong," Mary said. "They'd help. Not for you. But for the sake of the people you endanger."

"Who are the Banes twins?" Sam asked curiously.

"The kids of a friend of mine," Mary deflected. "Good witches. Right. Here's what we're going to do. Mel, I'm gonna take you to see Alicia and Max. Sam, Dean, I'll see you back at the bunker in a week or so."
"Wait, what?" Dean said.

"Hang on," Sam added. "You're just gonna go see these 'good witches' on your own? No, mom. We're coming with you."

"I appreciate the offer," Mary said. "But I can manage this on my own. I won't be gone long."

"OK," Sam said. "But you call us, every day."

Mary rolled her eyes at him, but nodded her agreement. She turned to Mel. "Pack your stuff. We leave in an hour."
"I don't like it," Dean complained as they drove away from Houston. His fingers were white on the
steering wheel.

"I don't think we get a say," Sam said, leaning his forehead against the cool glass of the window.

"That doesn't mean I have to like it," his brother snarled and turned on the radio.

Sam felt it best to let Dean work through his anger alone. He wasn't too thrilled with the turn of
events himself, but honestly he couldn't find fault with his mom's solution. Killing Mel, even despite
what she'd done, would have felt too close to outright murder to his mind. And although they'd
argued against Mary taking Mel away on her own, there was a fair amount of cleanup that had to
happen in Houston and there was nobody else to take care of it.

Dean's phone buzzed and he wrestled it out of his pocket to answer it. "Yeah? Oh, hey Cas. What's
up?"

Sam suppressed a smile at how hearing from the angel brightened his brother's mood. One day,
maybe one of them would get a clue.

"Crowley? What does he want?" Dean sounded tense again and Sam couldn't blame him. "So what?
I don't see how it's our problem… I thought you said Lucifer was dead."

Sam sat bolt upright in shock. When Amara had almost killed Chuck, she'd ripped Lucifer from
Cas's body and they'd all assumed he'd been killed.

"No, Sam hasn't said anything," Dean was saying. "All right, I'll ask him, hang on." He pulled the
car over to the side of the road and looked Sam in the eye. "Cas wants to know if you've had any
contact from Lucifer. Or anything that might have been him trying to make contact. Like a dream or
something."

"No," Sam said. "I've been half afraid the other shoe would drop for weeks but so far there's been
nothing."

"Did you hear that?" Dean addressed the angel.

"Yes," Cas's voice sounded oddly distorted through the phone speaker. "Well, Crowley seems
convinced something's going on. I'll let him know about Sam."

"OK, man. We'll see you in… nine hours or so," Dean said.

"I miss you," Cas said and Dean went white.

"Uh, yeah, man. Bye," He hung up and Sam bit the inside of his cheek to prevent himself from
laughing. His brother glared at him. "Don't you say a word."

"Aw, come on, Dean. I think it's sweet," Sam chortled.

"I mean it, Sam," Dean warned.

"You're overreacting," Sam told him. "He's been all alone in that bunker. Of course he misses us."
He'd given Dean an out and his brother seized it like a lifeline.
"Well, yeah, of course," he said, mollified. "It probably gets pretty lonely, y'know."

"Right," Sam agreed. Dean shoved the car back into drive and accelerated away.

Cas was waiting for them when Dean parked the car in the bunker's garage, his face a complex mix of hesitancy and happiness. He pulled Dean into a hug, which made Sam's brother flail his arms wildly in panic.

"I'm glad you're back," the angel declared. Dean carefully disengaged himself and grabbed his duffel bag out of the trunk.

"I'm beat," he announced. "See you in the morning."

Cas watched him leave and then turned his head to stare intently at Sam. "You met up with Gabriel."

Sam didn't see much point in denying it. "Yes. I wanted to get the whole story out of him."

"And did you?" Cas said, his eyes wide.

"Not sure," Sam admitted. "But I got some info." He gave Cas an apologetic grin. "Promise me you won't tell Dean?"

The angel rolled his eyes at him but nodded in agreement. "All right. Now tell me what my brother said."

Sam gestured for Cas to follow him into the kitchen as he pulled a beer out of the fridge. He sat at the table and twisted off the cap, taking a large swallow before placing the bottle down. He recounted everything he and Gabriel had said to each other, except for the promise he'd extracted about Cas's relationship with Dean. The angel regarded him steadily.

"You offered to let him stay here?"

"Yes," Sam said defensively. "I mean, why not? He's got nowhere else to go."

"I'm not saying you should not have made the offer," Cas said mildly. "But he turned you down?"

"Yeah," Sam said, pushing his hair out of his face and taking another swallow of beer. "He said maybe we need to get used to having him around first."

"Why?" Cas said, and he was scrutinizing Sam like he was an interesting bug under a microscope.

"I don't know. I guess he thought he wasn't too welcome here. And I can't say I blame him, I mean, we were pretty hard on him when he first showed up."

"No," Cas said, still watching him intently. "I mean, why did you offer him a place to stay?"

Sam made a puzzled face. "Like I say, he's got nowhere else to go. What's your point?"

"I'm just surprised," Cas said. "I was under the impression you blamed him for how the Apocalypse turned out."

"I don't know how I feel about that," Sam confessed. "It might have been almost too little too late, but he did come down of the fence and try to help us. And OK, turns out he didn't quite sacrifice his life for us like we thought. But I don't know that we ever expected that."
"And now he wants to be your friend?" Cas asked.

"I don't think he meant just me," Sam said quickly but Cas looked skeptical. "Why? Do you think he's up to something?"

"No," Cas replied slowly. "But it was a strange thing to ask you for, don't you think?" His face was so carefully blank Sam couldn't get a read on what the angel was thinking.

"I don't know that it is," Sam said finally. "He sounded… kinda lonely. Do I think he would have sought us out if he hadn't lost access to his Grace? Probably not. And I'm sure he won't stick around if we find a solution." Sam gave a one-shouldered shrug. "I'm OK with that if it happens. And if it doesn't, I don't know if he'll hang around long term anyway, if that's what you're worried about."

"Not exactly," Cas said wryly. "I suppose I always look for the angle where Gabriel is concerned. I love my brother, but that means I know how much I can trust him."

"You were close once?" Sam asked.

"In Heaven? Yes, he was my mentor when I was a fledgling," Cas said tightly.

"He hurt you, when he left," Sam surmised.

"It was so sudden," Cas snarled. "He didn't even say goodbye."

Sam nodded. "Apparently that's a theme." He finished his beer and sighed. "We'll just have to see what he does next."

"Good morning, Dean," the angel greeted him as Dean shuffled into the kitchen in search of coffee.

"Hey Cas," he said. He realized that freshly brewed coffee was already sitting and waiting for him. "Is Sam up?"

"Not yet," Cas said.

"You made coffee?" the hunter said in surprise.

"I heard you moving around," Cas said diffidently. "I thought you would appreciate it."

Dean poured coffee into a cup and added creamer before sipping it and letting a slow smile spread across his face. "Oh yeah," he said happily. The delight on the angel's face was palpable. "I guess you really did miss us," he said. Cas's cheeks pined adorably. He blinked, did he just use the word adorably?

"Where is Mary?" Cas asked, changing the subject rather abruptly.

"Didn't Sam tell you?" Dean asked. "I thought he would have told you the story last night."

"No," Cas said. "We talked of other things."

Dean gave him a strange look. "OK." He related the story of their trip to Houston, with plenty of colorful commentary and sly jokes, deliberately designed to make Cas laugh. Watching the angel laugh was one of his favorite things although he'd never admit it to anyone. Perhaps it was the way he always looked so surprised, right before he threw his head back and let out a sound that you might not interpret as a laugh if he were human. But Dean had come to recognize the odd barking sound as the way Cas expressed his amusement and it gave him a warm, tingly feeling in his chest that made
him slightly breathless and dizzy.

"So mom and Mel are off to find these witch twins she knows and we came back here," Dean finished.

"I'm surprised you let her go alone," Cas said.

"I didn't want to, believe me," Dean said. "But someone had to do cleanup in Houston and I could hardly leave Sam alone to do that. And I got the impression these witches aren't too comfortable with strange hunters, which I get."

"How long will she be gone?"

"She said about a week. Maybe two." Dean finished his coffee and stood up to refill his cup. "So what did you get up to while we were gone? Throw any wild parties?"

"Hardly," the angel said drily, giving Dean a wry grin that made his stomach do flip-flops. "I looked for more information on the monster hybrids, but found nothing. I watched some Netflix." He looked rather embarrassed.

"Hey, all work and no play makes Cas a dull angel," Dean said, smiling at him as he sat down again. The angel flushed and Dean wondered what he'd been watching. His pupils had enlarged and his lips were parted and Dean felt a strange sensation, like he was standing on the edge of a cliff. He shoved himself away from the table and opened the fridge, ostensibly looking for something to eat.

"Morning," Sam said, yawning widely as he padded into the kitchen.

"Morning to you, lazybones," Dean said.

"Has Mom been in touch?" Sam asked, ignoring the dig.

"Yeah, she texted about an hour ago. Mel's fine, that talisman does seem to be keeping the Hyde curse at bay. They'll get to the Banes's tomorrow." Dean pulled out another cup and poured some coffee into it and offered it to his brother, who accepted with a smile.

"You wanna hear about a possible case?" Sam asked.

"Sure," Dean said.

"OK. Get this. A plane takes off from Peoria, Illinois, at about 9:45pm headed to Columbus, Ohio. It's a small plane, one of those little Cessna's, you know." Dean nodded, his face curious.

"So, the pilot signs off with the tower and they give him the radio frequency for the local air traffic control. You know the frequencies change as you fly about the country and you have to retune the radio, right?"

"Yeah, yeah," Dean said impatiently, make a get on with it gesture with his hands.

"So, he makes his check in and the next time he's due to check in is with the Columbus tower. But he never radios in. Nobody knows what happened. The plane's just gone."

"Well, small planes do crash. More than big ones even," Dean commented, his interest clearly fading.

"Sure. But that's not the weird part. There are a few things that put this in our wheelhouse. Firstly, the last radio communication with the ground isn't the last communication from this plane. An
American Airlines 737 was in the area, and it picked up a strange transmission from what investigators think is the missing plane. The second strange thing is that since this plane disappeared last month, the pilot's wife has been getting mysterious phone calls, alleging to be from her husband. And most interesting of all, is who the pilot was." Sam paused and Dean glared at him.

"Don't keep me in suspense," he growled.

"Ashton LaCroix," Sam said in a dramatic voice. Dean rolled his eyes.

"Ashton LaCroix, the TV medium?" he asked. "That nutcase that goes around doing seances in haunted houses. He claims ghosts are harmless and demons are just misunderstood? That Ashton LaCroix?"

"Yeah. Real name, Andrew Cross," Sam said, pulling a face.

"So, Ashton LaCroix, TV fraud extraordinaire and private pilot rents a plane to fly from Peoria to Columbus. Why?"

"It's his plane, and he lives in Peoria," Sam said mildly. "He was going to Columbus to film an episode of his TV show, the United States of the Occult."

"What was he investigating in Columbus?" Dean asked, making air-quotes around the word investigating.

"An old asylum," Sam said, smiling at his brother's disdain. "Yeah, it's hokey. But have you seen the show? It's pretty cheesy. Makes the Ghost Facers look positively competent and professional." Dean shuddered and Sam laughed at him.

"It's nothing more than the same bullshit the Victorians used to get up to," Dean complained. "Rigged tables with knockers, actors dressed up as ghosts, plus some twenty-first century technology to jazz things up. They use one of those infrasound machines, to give everyone the chills." Sam looked impressed. "It's crap. And it makes our lives harder."

"Anyway, haunted asylum or not, he never made it to Ohio. Nobody has reported a plane crash. So, maybe he landed somewhere. But if he's OK, why doesn't he just go home? And if he was hurt and lying in a hospital somewhere, why hasn't the accident made the news?" Sam said pointedly. Dean's bottom lip poked out as he considered it.

"Look, I'm not saying there's nothing going on. I'm just saying, where do we start looking? If we had a crash site or something, that would be a place to start. But right now, all we have is a missing dude and an abandoned wife. Maybe he staged his own disappearance. Maybe he got lost and crashed somewhere remote. And if he is a ghost, phoning up his wife from beyond the grave, what are we supposed to do about it." Dean's temper was beginning to simmer and Sam gave him a quelling glance.

"I want to go interview the wife. Just get some more information." Dean's mouth twisted.

"Go, check it out. But I'm staying here." Sam looked at him, but Dean's face was set into stubborn lines.

"Fine. I'll call you tomorrow from Peoria," he said finally.
impossibly long and winding driveway. Parking the car in front of the house, he paused and stared up at it's neoclassical lines. A movement at an upper window caught his eye. He'd been spotted. Squaring his shoulders, he walked up to the door and rang the bell.

The woman who answered the door was at least ten years younger than him, beautiful but strangely brittle looking, like she was made of glass.

"Hi," Sam said awkwardly. "Uh, are you Mrs. LaCroix?" She swayed slightly and Sam realized that she was drunk.

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "I'm Magenta LaCroix. Are you looking for Ashton? He's not here."

"Uh, yeah. I heard. My name's Sam, I'm a paranormal investigator. Not famous, like your husband, but I'm a great admirer of his work." Sam winced at the lies, somehow this was worse than claiming to be law enforcement. Magenta stared at him, fear widening her eyes.

"He said you might come," she whispered. Sam blinked in surprise.

"Who said I might come," he asked. "What do you mean?"

"Ashton. He said you and your brother might come to investigate his disappearance. Watch out for those Winchester boys, he said. Especially the big one, Sam." Sam stared at her, nonplussed.

"I, uh. When was this?"

"Last night, on the phone." Magenta gave a little hiccup. "You might as well come in."

Inside, the house screamed money but not taste, just as the outside had. There was a large portrait of Ashton and Magenta on the wall of the foyer, a painting not a photograph. Sam whistled under his breath. It must have cost a fortune.

Magenta showed him into a sitting room, which was sparsely filled with uncomfortable designer furniture. A tarot card was framed and hung above the mantel piece and Sam's eyebrows raised when he saw it. The ten of swords, from a deck Sam had never seen before. It had clearly been hand painted, in a photo-realistic style. A man lay face-down at the top of a flight of stairs, the top of his head facing the viewer and his face obscured by his long brown hair. Nine swords pierced his body, the tenth lay uselessly in his hand. Blood poured down the stairs and over his fingers. Sam shivered at the sight of it, he'd seen some creepy tarot cards in his time but this was the most disturbing image he'd ever seen. Magenta noticed his interest.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" she commented. "Ashton painted an entire deck himself. He copied a few for the walls throughout the house."

"It certainly is powerful," Sam allowed, swallowing past the lump in his throat. The painted figure looked far too much like him for comfort.

"Would you like to see the entire deck?" Magenta asked, a strange glint in her eyes. Sam took a deep breath.

"Well, I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble," he began and she gave a high-pitched laugh.

"It's no trouble, Sam," she said. "Ashton wants you to see them." Thoroughly weirded out Sam nodded in troubled acquiescence. Magenta picked up an ebony and ivory box from a small table and handed it to him with a reverent air. Sam opened the lid. Each card was thick and high-quality. They were, aesthetically speaking, beautifully painted. But the sense of unease only grew as he sorted
through them. Every card featured someone he recognized. Here was Metatron, surrounded by piles of books, as the Hermit. Ruby stood in front of a stained glass window as the High Priestess. Cas suspended from one ankle, his face patient and resigned as the Hanged Man. To his surprise, the Devil card depicted not Lucifer, but Crowley, sitting decadently on his throne with a wicked smile on his face. Lucifer, in his Nick guise, lounged insouciantly at the base of the crumbling Tower, eyes hooded and knowing. Death of course, riding his pale horse. What the fuck was up with these cards? He shoved them all back in the box as quickly as he dared and looked up at Magenta. Her gaze was steady.

"So," she said, all trace of her earlier inebriation gone. "He wants you to have them, Sam. He says they might help."

"I can't take this," Sam demurred. "They must be worth a fortune." Magenta smiled beatifically at him.

"But they're yours now anyway. Whether you want them or not." Cold dread coiled in Sam's stomach. Were the cards cursed?

"I uh. OK. I only really came to find out about your husband's disappearance," Sam said uncomfortably. Magenta nodded, as though expecting the sudden change of subject.

"Ashton's dead," she said in such a matter of fact tone that Sam blinked. "His plane must have crashed. I hated flying in that stupid little tin box. Why can't we just fly commercial? First class of course but in a nice big jet plane, with professional pilots and a much champagne as you can drink?"

"You seem very sure," Sam said warily.

"He seems very sure, you mean," Magenta said with a fragile smile. "He called soon after it happened. Said he'd been killed, smashed into the side of a mountain in Appalachia."

"Appalachia?" Sam said in surprise. "That means he was way off course."

"Yes. Ashton was so laid back about the paranormal, I suppose finding himself as a ghost wasn't really a shock. You know, he said most creatures were harmless and many were actually quite friendly. Claimed to have had a demon for a lover once, if you can believe it."

"Oh, I can believe that," Sam said fervently.

"Well, I've always been a sensitive of course, though not a full medium like Ashton. But some of the things he said were harmless, well I wasn't sure I agreed. They were only harmless to him. I don't know why. Years ago, he introduced me to a something that claimed to be a god. His name was something odd. Scandinavian-sounding, like one of those silly superhero movies."

"Loki?" Sam asked, holding his breath. She shook her head.

"No. I wish I could remember. I do remember he made my skin crawl. He looked at me as if I was food. The way vampires do, but, I don't know. More."

"You know vampires," Sam yelped.

"What? Oh, yes. There are a couple of large vampire families in Chicago. Ashton was a regular at their homes." Sam could barely believe what he was hearing. Ashton LaCroix wasn't a fraud, it seemed. But he had a very strange relationship with monsters. Dean was going to love this, he reflected.
"Well, whatever his name was, Ashton asked me to… spend time with him. I didn't want to, this guy was seriously creepy and who asks such a thing of their wife? I was so angry, I told him to go to Hell. He told me that if I didn't do what he asked, that might well happen. What was I supposed to do? So I said yes, and spent the next three years in therapy, trying to forget that night." Nausea cramped at Sam's stomach. Ashton LaCroix was a piece of work all right.

"Well, it's all water under the bridge," Magenta said sadly. "I don't have anything else for you, Sam."

Sam placed the box of tarot cards down on the table and held out one hand.

"Thanks for speaking with me," he said. Magenta took his hand and turned it over.

"Oh, my dear," she said softly. "I'm so sorry." Sam tugged his hand free, squirming at her sudden scrutiny. She looked him up and down and a look he recognized came into her eyes.

"You don't feel like cheering up a widow, now do you?" she said with a smile. Sam backed away, repelled.

"Uh, no. Thanks, but I uh, have to be getting back." He turned and fled as fast as his long legs would carry him. He yanked open the Impala's door and roared away from the house.

A few miles down the road, he pulled into a diner's parking lot and looked at the passenger seat in consternation. There sat the ebony and ivory tarot card box, as if he'd just placed it there himself. Perturbed, he picked it up and got out of the car.

Inside the diner, the lunchtime rush was over and Sam sat quietly in his booth, staring out of the window. The waitress had brought coffee and he was debating whether to order food but his stomach was still cramping with unease from his experience at the LaCroix house. The box of tarot cards sat on the table in front of him. Sam felt as though he was being mocked. His hand reached out for the lid and he snatched it back. But as soon as his attention wavered, his arm began to move of its own accord. Finally, tired of the game, Sam grabbed the box and opened it. On top was the Sun. Gabriel's warm golden gaze stared out at him from under an apple tree, the sun's rays lighting golden highlights in his hair. Somehow, LaCroix had managed to capture both Gabriel's easy joking manner and his terrifying power and menace. He swallowed, resisting the urge to touch the image's face and pulled the deck out. Under the Sun was the Moon. Dean stood on a desolate moor, a white wolf by his side. Fuck, these cards were creepy. He shoved the deck back in the box and slammed the lid shut. Someone slid into his booth and Sam started.

"Hey, Sammy," Gabriel said with a grin. "Whatcha got here?"

"Knock yourself out," Sam said acidly, pushing the box towards the archangel. Gabriel flicked through the cards, his eyes widening and he actually let out a whistle.

"Where the Hell did you get these, Sam?" Gabriel asked, his voice strained.

"Some weird widow of a man whose disappearance I was investigating. He painted them himself."

"It's impossible," Gabriel declared. "I've never seen anything like these cards before."

"Why impossible?" Sam asked. "You mean because your face is in some of them?"

He pulled out another card and his face fell. Sam snatched the card out of Gabriel's hand. It was his father, as the Emperor.
"Creepy." Sam said finally. He put the cards back in the box once more. "But what does it mean?"

"Nothing good," Gabriel said ominously. "Have you any idea how much power is needed to create something like this. No human should be able to do it." Sam gaped at him, his sense of unease turning into something more like fright.

"Is there any reason to believe Ashton LaCroix wasn't human?" Sam stuttered. Gabriel looked thoughtfully at him for a moment.

"I think he must have been possessed," Gabriel said after a long pause.

"Demon?" Sam suggested but Gabriel shook his head. "No. Angel. Really, archangel."

"Archangel." Sam said flatly, noting that Gabriel looked troubled. "There's not a lot of options on the table. I assume it wasn't you, and Raphael is dead. Michael's in the Cage and so was Lucifer until recently."

"It wasn't me," Gabriel reassured him. "And this isn't Raphael's style at all. Michael or Lucifer are the only possibilities I can think of."

"And you think it's Lucifer," Sam surmised. Gabriel shook his head.

"No. I think it's Michael. Always using a sledgehammer to crack a nut, Michael. Or in this case, aiding a human to create an absurdly powerful magical artifact that could be very dangerous in the wrong hands. Luckily, it's in yours." Sam tried not to feel warmed by the inherent praise in that statement.

"Why are they so dangerous?" he asked cautiously. "And why would Michael create such a thing?" Gabriel's face became even more drawn.

"I have no idea what Michael intended or what they're capable of," he said. Sam wasn't sure he was being totally honest.

"So what should I do with them?"

"Lock them away and never, ever use them for divination. Try not to look at any more cards. Try not to think about them. You'll need to put some serious warding on wherever you store them too."

The box began to vibrate and Sam noticed Gabriel's lips were bloodless and his face was pale.

"OK, I'll take care of it," Sam said. "Are you OK?"

"I think maybe I shouldn't have touched the cards," Gabriel confessed. Sam crinkled his brow at the archangel.

"Why not," he asked, alarmed.

"I think they might be sentient." Sam stared at Gabriel, horrified.

"Sentient? That does not sound good, Gabriel. Fine, I'll get rid of them."

"Not gonna be so easy. Best you can do is lock them away, like I told you. They seem to be attuned to you."

"Attuned to me?" Sam asked, unsure he wanted to know the answer.
"It's hard to explain. But they are responding to you in a way they didn't to me. So lock them away and never allow anyone else to touch them." Gabriel began looking around the diner, antsy and unsettled.

"OK," Sam said. "There's a warded box in the trunk. Hopefully that will hold them until I get back home."
Chapter 6

Dean wished he'd gone with Sam almost as soon as his brother had left. With Sam gone and his mom away too, there was just him and Cas and it felt like the air crackled with tension every time they were in the same room together. He'd gone into the basement hoping Cas wouldn't follow him here.

Browsing the shelves of old files, something caught his eye. A folder poking out from the others was a slightly darker color and he found himself reaching for it. On the front was a label.

*Case 120349-0348*

*Investigator: Henry Winchester*

A case his grandfather had investigated? How could he resist? He opened the file and began to read the faded, double-spaced typed report.

*December 3rd, 1949 Orlando, Florida*

*This is quite the most miserable city in Florida. I wonder why anyone chooses to live here, I cannot imagine anyone ever choosing to do so voluntarily. Of course, the newly designated air force base probably has much to do with the recent increase in population. Florida is such a depressing state for a serious paranormal researcher. The local native tribes will not engage with white men, and the rest of the population seems ill-tuned to supernatural activity. Nevertheless, my assignment was to investigate the population of zaebos in the area. The peculiar half-man, half-crocodile creatures are not uncommon in this swampy hellhole of a state, but they mostly keep to themselves and cause few problems. However, occasionally one goes mad and starts killing people and that's when the local park rangers have to intervene. According to Ranger Scott, whom I interviewed this morning, the number of incidents has begun to rise in the last six months. He attributes it to the continuing urban sprawl of cities like Miami, Orlando, Tampa and Jacksonville. The creatures habitats are getting squeezed and just like the mountain lions of California, the result is more and more conflicts with humans. The following pages included a necropsy of a zaebos, some black and white photographs of Henry with a dead zaebos he had apparently killed himself and a small waxen envelope containing some sharp-looking teeth.*

"Weird," Dean commented before replacing the file. A sudden sound, like something falling onto the floor attracted his attention and he followed it deeper into the basement. Nothing immediately struck him as out of place and he frowned. Had he imagined the noise?

"Dean," Cas said and Dean shrieked in surprise.

"Cas," he said, once he'd regained his composure. "I nearly had a heart attack."

"I'm sorry," Cas said. "I didn't mean to scare you. But there's something I think you should see upstairs."

Dean nodded and followed the angel up to the library. As soon as he entered, the lights began to flicker. He cast a look at Cas, who nodded.

"Every time I come in here, that happens," the angel said.
"Let me check the fuses, before we start jumping to conclusions," Dean suggested. Cas smiled at him.

"Of course," he said. Dean headed for the garage to grab a flashlight and some tools. Cas followed him, hovering over his shoulder as he headed down to the basement. His eyes peered at the old-fashioned fusebox and watched carefully Dean inspected the relevant fuses.

"How do you know which ones to check?" Cas asked.

Dean grinned at him and pointed to the diagram on the inside of the box. "See here, this tells me which circuit each fuse controls." He pulled out a fuse and shone the flashlight on it. "And then I pull the fuse and look to see that this wire is intact and there's no scorching or any sign of damage."

"I see," Cas said, sounding amazed.

"OK, all of these look good," Dean decided. "So, let's go back to the library and just check the bulbs."

"But it's all the lights, not just one," Cas objected.

"Sure, but a faulty bulb can cause odd spikes and dips in the power in the wires, especially in a place with old wiring like this," Dean explained patiently. They climbed the stairs and just as Dean turned his head to make another comment, they were plunged into darkness.

"Dammit," Dean swore. He fumbled with the flashlight and it tumbled out of his grasp. He heard rather than saw Cas catch it and turn it on. The light illuminated the angel's face in a peculiar way, making him look rather menacing. Dean's stomach lurched uncomfortably and he shook himself. It was just Cas, and he was being stupid.

"Thanks," he said. He scratched at the back of his head as he thought. "OK, let's go back down to the basement. Maybe I screwed something up."

"I doubt it," Cas said. "You are very competent."

Trying not to preen at the angel's praise, Dean just nodded at him and accepted the proffered flashlight. They went back down the basement stairs and Dean inspected the fusebox carefully.

"It all looks fine," he said in frustration. "There's no reason we shouldn't have power."

The flashlight beam flickered and Dean's eyes shot up to Cas's in alarm. "Cas, what the Hell is going on here?"

"I don't know," the angel replied. He placed his hand on Dean's arm. "If we lose the flashlight, hold onto me. I can see even in complete darkness."

"I think we should go back upstairs," Dean said. He hated the slight tremor in his voice, but he didn't like being down here in the basement with no lights and just a faulty flashlight.

"I agree," Cas said. But they'd taken no more than a couple of steps to stairs when a huge thump behind them made them jump.

"OK, I am officially over this," Dean growled. He grabbed at his waistband for his gun, but of course he didn't normally carry it around in the bunker. "Shit." He pointed the flashlight at the spot where the noise came from to see a large cardboard filing box lying on its side on the floor.
Dean approached it carefully and poked it with his foot. Nothing happened.

"Why don't we take it with us," Cas said. "Maybe it's the key to this."

"Fine," Dean said. He bent to pick it up, and grunted under the weight. "What's in this thing?" he complained.

The lights flickered on and off, once, twice and then remained on.

"Come on," Dean said, unwilling to admit even to himself how relieved he was.

Sam parked the car a little crookedly, but he didn't care, he just wanted to get these creepy tarot cards locked down. He grabbed the lockbox and yanked open the door, almost colliding with Dean.

"Woah," Dean said. "Slow down, Sam." At the stressed, slightly frantic look on his brother's face his expression hardened. "Don't tell me you did something to the car."

"What? No! Look, let me just get this into a more secure location and then I'll tell you and Cas all about it," Sam said hurriedly.

"OK," Dean said, looking concerned. "Come find us in the kitchen. I'll make you something to eat."

Sam dashed down to the basement, unlocked the special safe the Men of Letters had created to hold their most dangerous artifacts and carefully placed the box inside. He didn't dare open it even to put it in the safe.

Once he'd gotten the safe locked up again he breathed a sigh of relief and headed back upstairs to the kitchen. Cas was sat at the kitchen table, watching Dean in that intense way he did when he thought he was not being observed. Dean was puttering about the kitchen, molding something with his hands. A slight smile on his face made Sam feel rather wistful. He wished Dean looked as happy as he did right now more often.

"Hey, Cas," Sam said loudly, giving the angel time to look away.

"Sam," Cas rumbled. "How was Peoria?"

"Creepy," Sam said. Dean had finished what he was doing and was washing his hands.

"Beer?" he asked.

"Please," Sam said, accepting the icy cold bottle gratefully and twisting off the cap. He took a long slug before setting it down on the table.

"So what happened?" Dean asked.

Sam related everything that happened at the LaCroix house, omitting only the drunken pass LaCroix's widow had made at him. And then he paused.

"So, it was a bust," Dean concluded.

"No," Sam said, "Not really. Yeah, I didn't get very far with the plane crash, or whatever. But these cards, Dean. Honestly, it's hard to explain just how spooky they are."

Cas peered at him, studying him like a specimen. "There's more."
"Yeah," Sam said. He shifted in his seat, concerned about how Dean was going to react to Gabriel reappearance, especially since he didn't know they'd met up in Houston.

"So, uh, Gabriel showed up when I was on my way back," Sam said, speaking so quickly his words tumbled over each other.

Dean's face was resigned, not angry. "I figured he'd show up again, sooner or later. So what did he do to you this time?"

"Nothing," Sam said.

"Nothing? Come on, Sam. It's OK if it's embarrassing," Dean said in amusement.

"I'm serious. He can't. His Grace is uh, temporarily bound." At Dean's skeptical look, he added. "I felt the same way. But if it's a trick, he's going all in. He isn't using his power for anything. He had to steal a car to meet me in Houston."

Dean sat up straight. "You never mentioned that."

Shit. No, he hadn't and now the cat was out of the bag. "Yeah. I uh, I met with him at the motel the night you went out with mom."

"Son of a bitch! Don't you understand how dangerous that was? He helped us during the Apocalypse but that doesn't mean he's on our side any more!" Dean thumped a fist on the table to underline his point.

"Dean, I think Sam's telling the truth. When I spoke to him in Oberlin, he walked away from me. Not clicked his fingers and vanished. And if he had to steal a car to drive to Houston, then that suggests at a minimum that his wings are not functional," Cas said, a restraining hand on Dean's arm.

"So, he's what, Fallen?" Dean asked, his jaw jutting angrily.

"No. According to him his Grace is just locked away, out of reach." Sam explained.

"There can't be many entities capable of doing that to an archangel," Cas observed.

"According to Gabriel, it was Death," Sam said. "He's been searching for him to undo whatever he's done ever since."

"Good luck with that," Dean said sourly.

"Well, exactly. He was pretty distressed when I told him Death was dead," Sam told him. "Look, the point is, these cards spooked the Hell out of him."

"And anything that spooks my brother should be feared," Cas added.

"I've locked them in the safe in the basement," Sam said. "Hopefully that will be enough to hold them."

The nice thing about the middle of the night was the silence, Cas thought. The humans in his care were sleeping, and whereas he cherished every moment he spent in their company, or nearly every moment, he still appreciated a few hours of quiet and solitude to think and process the events of the day. His phone began to ring and he cursed, a bad habit he'd picked up from Dean. Who on earth would be calling him at this time of night? Of course, he knew it was Crowley, who else would it be?
"Castiel," the demon said expansively when he answered.

"Keep your voice down," the angel warned. "It's 3am here."

"Sorry," Crowley said, not sounding at all apologetic. "But I've got a bit of a mystery here."

"Is this to do with the hunt for Lucifer?" Cas asked.

"Not exactly," the demon admitted. "Well. I don't know. It might."

"You seem to be laboring under the illusion that we are some kind of team," Cas said acidly. "Like that cartoon that Dean likes with the dog that solves mysteries."

"Are you talking about Scooby Doo?" Crowley chortled.

"I don't remember the name," Cas told him. "Surely you didn't call me to discuss television programs."

"No," Crowley agreed soberly. "Look, some of my demons have gone missing."

"Surely demons go missing all the time," Cas said in a bored tone. "Hunters, you know."

"They're not dead," Crowley insisted. "They're missing. Look, Hell keeps track of its demons. If one bites the dust, we all know. They're alive, they're just not responding to their summons."

"There's got to be more to it than that if you're calling me," Cas realized.

"Well, not to put too fine a point on it, I have a contact in Heaven. He says some angels are missing too."

"Angels don't go missing," Cas corrected.

"I'm just telling you what my source told me," Crowley said. "Look, maybe it's nothing. But Lucifer is out there, somewhere. Maybe he's building a court. Or an army."

"To do what?" Cas said, perturbed.

"I don't know," Crowley snapped. "This is all speculation, but it's giving me the willies."

"I don't know what that is and I don't want to know," Cas retorted. "Do you want me to talk to Sam and Dean about it tomorrow?"

"Yeah. And see if you can confirm the Heaven rumor too if you can," Crowley said. "My source is a little unreliable sometimes."

"An informant you can't trust?" Cas snarked. "Sometimes I wonder how you manage to stay king of Hell."

Dean followed the smell of coffee and cooking bacon, and was surprised when he entered the kitchen to see Cas poking at a frying pan with a frustrated look on his face.

"Are you… cooking?" he asked, puzzled and secretly delighted.

"Yes," Cas said. "It's not as easy as it looks."

"OK, lemme take a look," Dean said. Cas handed him the spatula with evident relief. "It's fine, you
just had this too low." He turned the hob up and the bacon began to sizzle appealingly. Cas peered over his shoulder and made a rumbling sound of approval. Dean turned his head and started at how close the angel was.

"Uh, I can't cook with you on my shoulder, Cas," he said.

"Sorry," the angel said, stepping back. "I'll get you some coffee."

Dean turned his head to watch Cas pour coffee into a mug and add creamer before handing it to him.

"Cas, is something wrong?"

"No," the angel said quickly. "Why would there be anything wrong?"

"Well, you've made coffee and bacon. Which makes me think you've got something bad to tell me." Dean folded his arms and gave the angel a mock severe look. Cas quailed and Dean blinked.

"Out with it, Cas."

"I'd prefer to wait until Sam gets up," the angel hedged.

"I am up," Sam said, leaning against the door jam and looking amused.

"Oh," Cas hunched his shoulders and Dean's eyebrows dived over his nose. "Crowley called me last night. Some of his demons are missing."

"So?" Dean said, relaxing. "How is that our problem?"

"Because he thinks it's Lucifer and that he might be building an army."

You could have heard a pin drop in that kitchen, Dean thought. Sam had gone rigid and his face was white.

"Hey," Dean said. "Sam? You OK?"

Sam swallowed, swaying slightly. "Am I ever going to be free?" he asked quietly. Dean's heart squeezed painfully.

"I don't know," he admitted. Cas looked awful, guilt marking out the lines on his face. Dean reached out and squeezed his fingers briefly, earning him a startled look from the angel.

"Crowley also thinks some angels may have disappeared," Cas added hoarsely. "I'm not really welcome in Heaven, but there might be one or two angels who might be willing to talk to me."

"Don't put yourself out," Dean advised. "There's no reason to believe there's anything to worry about yet." Sam gave him a shocked glance. "Don't look at me like that," Dean deflected. "I'm just saying, we don't know this is anything yet."

"OK," Sam said. "You're right, it's too early to start jumping to conclusions." A muscle twitched in his jaw, a classic sign of distress Dean had learned long ago not to ignore.

"We'll figure this out," he assured his brother. "Don't worry about it."

Mary rapped sharply on the screen door of a small, single-storey rancher, noting that someone had upgraded the wards since she'd last been here to visit Tasha back before Sam was born. The woods
had encroached further onto the property since then too, and the sense of isolation was more than a little oppressive. Alicia opened the door, grinning widely and pulled Mary into a hug.

"Wow," she said. "It's so good to finally meet you. Mom told us so much about you."

"All of it good I hope," Mary laughed. She turned and pulled Mel forward. "This is Mel, who I told you about on the phone."

Alicia peered at her and nodded. "Of course. Mom said she's sorry she couldn't be here. Come in, come in, let's not do this on the doorstep." She led them into a homey living room filled with large overstuffed couches and an impressive audio-visual setup that included multiple games consoles. Max was slouched in front of the enormous TV, playing some first person shooter that seemed to involve a lot of shouting commands and trading insults into his headset.

"Max," Alicia admonished. "Our guests are here."

"Sure, sure," he said absently. "Just lemme finish up here."

Alicia rolled her eyes and turned to Mary and Mel. "Would you like coffee? Or tea, soda?"

"Coffee sounds great," Mary said. "We find caffeine a bit problematic for Mel, so if you have decaff?"

"We don't, but I've got some great herbal teas," Alicia said. She opened a cabinet to survey the contents. "Peppermint, lemon balm, chamomile, vanilla rooibos, something called creme caramel which I think has a rooibos base as well."

"The lemon balm sounds good," Mel said hesitantly.

"You got it," Alicia said. "Max! You want coffee?"

"No need to shout," her brother said from the doorway. "And yes." He opened another cabinet to pull out a packet of Oreos and sauntered back towards the living room.

"OK, go on through," Alicia said. "I'll bring the drinks in soon."

Mary followed Max back into the living room and he startled her by suddenly grabbing her and hugging her tightly. "Sorry I was distracted when you came in," he apologized. "We weren't expecting you until lunch time."

"Traffic was lighter than I expected," Mary said.

"Sit down," he instructed. Alicia entered with a tray of cups and placed it on the untidy coffee table, shoving magazines and unopened mail onto the floor. Mary pursed her lips at the mess but kept quiet. Mel was silent too, staring at the twins like they were ghosts.

"So," Alicia said, sipping at her coffee. "You said Mel was the victim of a Hyde curse?" She chewed on one fingernail. "You must have pissed off one hella powerful witch."

"Uh," Mel said. "You didn't tell them what happened?"

"I didn't want to go into details on the phone," Mary said. In truth, she'd been a little worried Max and Alicia might not have been willing to help if she'd explained exactly how Mel had come by her curse. But faced with her in their home, Mary hoped that would force their hand.

The Banes twins were exchanging concerned glances. "What did happen?"
"I found an old spell book, a real grimoire, in a thrift shop in St Louis while I was working a job with a friend of mine, Constance McBride" Mel said. "Constance and I have been friends for over four years, and I still don't believe she is the same Constance that Mary claims to know but she is a witch."

"Constance McBride?" Max repeated, his eyes alarmed.

"Yes," Mary said. "And Mel's wrong. It's her. I'm sure of it."

Alicia made an impatient gesture. "So you found a grimoire, and what? Started playing with it?"

"I guess," Mel said in a small voice. "Constance wasn't convinced it was a true grimoire. So, I said let's try out one of the spells. She chose the Hyde curse. Except I must have done something wrong."

"Ah," Max said, understanding and irritation warring for dominance on his face.

"Mary," Alicia said, narrowing her eyes. "You said something about a Seminole mandala that's keeping Mel's transformations under control."

"Yes," Mel said, pulling it out from under her shirt. "It's not perfect, as we've learned. Caffeine and alcohol seem to make the curse stronger."

Alicia leaned forward to inspect the talisman before giving out a whistle of surprise. "This is nice work. Clever. Max, take a look." Her brother came over and inspected it, nodding as he turned it over in his hands.

"You say you got this from the Seminoles?" he asked. "In Florida?"

"Yes," Mel said. "I've been a friend of their people a long time."

"Well, they certainly have some impressive skill. Suppressing a Hyde curse would tax the most powerful of witches."

"But it's not enough," Mary interjected. "We need to break the curse, once and for all."

"Of course," Alicia said. She sat back and gave Mel a considering look. "Such work is… expensive."

Mel's face fell. "I don't have much money."

Max laughed at her. "Not that kind of expensive. But you're good at finding artifacts, aren't you? So we'll have some work for you, once you're clean."

"OK," Mel agreed.

"I'll see what we need for the spell," Max said, standing up. "Mel, this ritual is going to take at least a week. So, you'll have to stay here, with us. Mary, are you planning to stick around?"

Mary shrugged. "If I'm useful, I'll stay. If I'm just underfoot, I'd prefer to go home to my boys."

"Why don't you stay for the first few days?" Max suggested. "Just until we're sure Mel isn't a danger anymore?"

"Sure," Mary said. "Lemme call them and let them know."
Chapter 7

Sam awoke with a gasp, as though from a bad dream. He rolled onto his back and tried to calm his breathing. He couldn't remember what he'd been dreaming about, but the adrenaline pumping through his veins and a creeping sense of dread suggested he might be better not knowing. He checked his phone. It was 4am. Great. After a few moments, he got up and pulled on a robe before heading to the kitchen. The Bunker was silent as he padded down the corridor, he couldn't even hear Dean snoring. In the silent kitchen, he opened a cabinet to get a glass and stopped. The cabinet was empty, except for one bizarre glass goblet. The glass was blown into a swirl of gold and amber and was so large Sam could barely wrap his hands around the bowl. He weighed it in his hands and frowned at it. Sam was pretty sure he'd never seen it before and just as sure he probably shouldn't use it to drink from.

He set it on the counter and it made a faint, bell-like ring. He returned his attention to the cabinets, searching for a water glass, but they were all empty. Sighing, he returned to the mysterious goblet. Water, clear and cool, now filled the glass. OK, that was definitely weird. He absolutely should not taste this water. But he was so thirsty and the water looked so appealing. He sniffed at it gingerly but could smell nothing. A tiny taste then. He sipped carefully at the glass, and then smiled. The water was delicious, like those expensive mineral waters served in fancy restaurants. He swallowed some more, and then placed the glass back on the counter. It was empty.

His eyelids drooped and he felt a curious lethargy overtake him, making his limbs heavy and his movements slow. He wandered back to his room, and almost collapsed onto the bed, drifting in a drowsily pleasurable haze. A delicate touch, like the tip of a finger, stroked along his arm and he shivered, smiling lazily. Then a light breath of air across his chest made him blink his eyes open, but the room was very dark and he couldn't see anything. He closed his eyes again and slipped quietly into sleep.

Dean poked at the coffee machine in irritation. He'd tried everything, but the damn thing was totally dead. He chewed at his lip, he could try taking it apart and figuring what was wrong with it or he could just go out and find a coffee shop. He checked his watch and his face twisted. It was after 9am, where was Sam? He abandoned the machine and headed off to Sam's room.

Dean knocked at Sam's door and listened. When there was no response, he tried the knob and it turned easily. Sam was lying on his back, his limbs flung outwards as though he had been thrown onto the bed.

"Sam?" Dean said loudly, poking his brother in the leg. "Sam!" His brother's eyes didn't even flicker. He grabbed Sam's arm and shook him, shouting his name, but still his brother was unresponsive. He turned on the lamp on Sam's nightstand. Golden light flooded the room and Dean could see that his brother was pale and there were dark circles under his eyes. He looked around for any sign Sam had taken sleeping pills or something else that could explain this almost coma-like state. But there was nothing.

Something by his brother's bed caught his eye. He leaned down to pick up a card from the floor. It was about 5 by 7 inches and on one side was an abstract painted design that reminded him of peacock feathers. On the other side was a painting of a glass goblet, with elaborate blue and silver curlicues on it. A male hand held the goblet, squarish and strong and vaguely familiar. The wrist had a light sprinkling of dark hair but no more of the arm could be seen. Dean frowned, flipping the card over and over. He started when he felt the card vibrating, almost like a cellphone and he dropped it
"What is that?" Cas said from the door, his eyes blazing.

"No idea," Dean said, staring at the card like it was a snake. "I found it on the floor. And Sam's out cold in here. When I picked it up, it started buzzing like a goddamn wasp."

"Sam's unconscious?" Cas said in alarm.

"Yeah," Dean said. The angel skirted the disturbing card and knelt down next to Sam's bed, placing a hand on his forehead. He went rigid, and turned back to Dean with an appalled look on his face.

"Sam's enchanted."

"Enchanted? What the Hell?" Dean exclaimed. "This bunker's meant to be impenetrable."

"From the outside," Cas said cryptically.

"What the Hell is that supposed to mean?" Dean demanded.

"What if this is something that's already in here?" Cas looked back down at the weird card on the floor. "It looks remarkably like a tarot card," he observed. "Could it be one of the set Sam brought from Peoria?"

"Well, what is it doing out here?" Dean growled. "Sam locked them away and I would swear he wouldn't have gone near them again. He seemed scared to death of them, you saw him."

"Gabriel was very concerned about just how powerful and dangerous they are," Cas agreed. "He told Sam he thought they might be sentient. It's seems he was right."

"Is there anything you can do for Sam?"

"I've tried everything I can," Cas said. "I think we should call Gabriel."

"Gabriel," Dean repeated, his face twisting. "If his Grace is bound the way he claims, what can he do?"

"My brother is very knowledgeable. Where did the card come from?"

Dean said impatiently. "I found it lying on its own on the floor."

"Indeed," Cas said. "How did it get here?"

"You think… What? That Sam got up in the night and pulled this one card out of the deck? Why?"

"I'm inclined to think it got here of its own accord," Cas said. "Remember what Sam said. The box appeared in his car even though he refused to take it from Magenta LaCroix."

"Holy shit, Cas," Dean breathed. "Are you saying these cards can move through warded safes and lockboxes."

"I believe that is what happened, yes." The angel looked solemnly down at Sam. "Gabriel may not be able to access his Grace, but he knows an awful lot. I don't know what else to do."

"OK, fine," Dean snapped. "But he better not mess with any of us. Is that clear?"
"He'll behave," the angel promised.

"Where's Mel?" Mary said as she emerged from the kitchen to collect the last of the dishes.

"She said she was tired and went to bed," Alicia said. She eyed Mary for a moment. "Constance McBride. There's a name I'd hoped never to hear again."

"Tell me about it," Mary said with feeling. She turned back to the kitchen and Alicia got up and followed her.

"Are these the last?" Max said from where he was stood by the sink.

"Yes," Mary told him. Alicia grabbed beers from the fridge and offered one to Mary, who placed the plates by Max and then accepted gratefully.

"And this grimoire Mel found," Alicia said. "Does Mel have any idea what she actually found?"

"I don't think so," Mary said. "But there aren't many that would contain a spell like the Hyde curse."

"Right," Max said, placing the last of the clean dishes on the drainer and grabbing a towel to dry his hands.

"Not the Book of the Damned," Mary added. "We know where that is."

"And it's probably not the Black Grimoire," Alicia said. "The Loughlins have that. They're unlikely to let it out of their sight."

"What about the Book of Fell Curses?" Max suggested. "Nobody knows where that is."

"The Book of Fell Curses doesn't have the Hyde curse in it," Alicia told him. "The curse was invented after it was written."

"Does it matter which book she found?" Mary asked, sipping at her beer.

"Oh, it matters," Alicia assured her. "There aren't that many grimoires out there and most are in the hands of witches who guard them very carefully. How the Hell does a powerful book like that end up in a thrift shop?"

"Fair enough," Mary relented. "That's a good question."

"St Louis," Max said suddenly.

"What?"

"Mel said she found it in St Louis," he repeated. "St Louis, Alicia."

"You don't think..."

"I do."

"What!" Mary exclaimed, irritated.

Max took a deep breath. "When we were little kids, sometimes mom used to leave us with a psychic called Amanda Walters, in St Louis. She was murdered when we were in college. The police thought it was the work of the serial killer, the I-55 Strangler. But she really didn't fit the victim
profile. He liked young white women with red hair. Amanda was in her fifties and had brown hair, not to mention the fact that he used to pick up his victims in bars and Amanda didn't drink or go to bars."

"Jesus," Mary breathed. "So why does this relate to a grimoire?"

"Amanda had four," Max said. "The Book of Winter, the Book of Shadows, the Path of the Dead and the Codex Retorta."

"You've got to be kidding me," Mary said. "Who the Hell was this woman?"

"Just a psychic as far as we knew. But how someone like that got her hands on books like the Path of the Dead, I've no idea. Whoever killed Amanda, took the books. And every photo of us that Amanda had." Alicia shuddered.

"We've been terrified for years that her killer was looking for us," Max added. "But we've never heard anything about the grimoires since and although we keep a close ear to the ground, there's no hint anyone's searching for us."

"Do you know if the Hyde curse was in any of those books?" Mary asked tiredly.

"Not for sure," Max said. "We were never allowed to touch those books. But the Book of Shadows is rumored to contain many powerful curses."

"And the Book of Winter was supposed to have been written by the witch credited with inventing the Hyde curse," Alicia pointed out.

"Who was that?"

"Fanny Vandergrift Osbourne," Max told her. "Wife of Robert Louis Stevenson. She was reputedly a very powerful witch. She was also an American and when Stevenson died, she returned to California."

"Wait, are you saying the inventor of the Hyde curse was married to the man who wrote Jekyll and Hyde?" Mary said in astonishment.

"We are," Alicia said. "Nobody really knows what happened but Max and I think she must have been experimenting with the curse and Stevenson wrote his book based on her early experiments."

Mary shook her head to clear it. This was insane. "So somehow this Book of Winter ends up in a thrift store?"

"Yeah, that's the part I can't figure out," Alicia admitted. "It shouldn't have happened. Most rare book and antique dealers know not to handle grimoires, but a thrift store probably had no idea what they had. I can only think it was a donation from someone's estate and nobody picked up on the incredibly powerful artifact in among the knick-knacks."

"And now Constance McBride has it," Mary sighed.

"Mel has a gift," Max said. "She probably isn't even really aware of it, but I've never met such a powerful Finder."

"Finder?"

"Someone who can sniff out magical items," Alicia explained. "Most Finders aren't consciously
aware of their talent but they tend to gravitate to working in private art collection, museums, that kind of thing. Mel's gift is unusually strong."

"And yet she had real trouble finding the talisman when it was stolen," Mary said, her mouth thinning.

"The curse could be clouding her ability," Max suggested. "And if she's been playing around with witchcraft, that could mask it too. Being a Finder is like being a psychic, it's mostly a passive ability and also like psychic ability, it's something you're born with. Magic on the other hand is something you have to learn. Although innate talent is part of it, you can't accidentally become a witch."

"So you think McBride was using her to find powerful objects?" Mary surmised.

"It's the only thing that makes sense," Alicia said reasonably. "Constance hates hunters. Why would she team up with one unless there's something in it for her? She must have met Mel, probably by chance, and realized her ability could be manipulated for her own ends."

"And the Hyde curse? She killed the goose the lays the golden eggs," Max objected.

"I wonder if Mel is telling the whole truth about how she got cursed," Alicia mused. "It's true that miscasting the curse causes it to rebound on the caster. Many curses are like that. But Constance took one Hell of a risk that she wasn't caught in the backwash too. You don't get to be as old as her by taking stupid risks."

"Let's press her on it in the morning," Mary suggested, finishing the last of her beer. "I'm beat."

Alicia and Max exchanged a glance and then nodded. "Sure."

"I told him to lock those cards away," a voice said from the door. Dean looked up in surprise and relief to see the archangel, with Cas hovering nervously behind him.

"Gabriel?" he said. "You got here quick." Gabriel gave him an unfathomable look and then his attention focused on the strange card Dean had dropped on the floor.

"What do you see, on that card?" he asked, pinning Dean with a sharp look.

"Uh, some kind of fancy glass. It's blue and silver, fancy looking. All swirly and delicate." Gabriel was suppressing a smile rather poorly. "Why?"

"You're adorable," Gabriel told him. "Everyone sees something different when they look at those cards."

"Oh yeah? What do you see?"

"That's not important. Where did you find it?" Gabriel said, his humor draining away as he looked at Sam.

"In here," Dean replied. "It was on the floor."

"Has Sam touched it?" Gabriel said urgently. "Did he leave it there?"

"I don't know," Dean told him. "He was like this when I got here." Gabriel looked really unhappy. He moved over to Sam's bed and perched on the edge, laying one hand on Sam's cheek. His face was all intense concentration, and then Sam groaned and his eyes fluttered. He turned his head into Gabriel's touch and a slight smile spread across his face.
"Sam," Gabriel prompted. "Wake up, Sam." Sam mumbled something unintelligible. Gabriel withdrew his hand and Sam pouted. His eyes opened and he stared at Gabriel.

"Uh. Hi," he turned to look at Dean and then back at the archangel. "Uh, what's going on?" Gabriel was still watching Sam intently and Dean waited a moment before interjecting. "You were out cold. And I found this weird-ass card near your bed that started vibrating when I picked it up." Sam frowned but didn't look away from Gabriel.

"I told you to lock those cards away, Sam," the archangel said sternly. His hand stroked along Sam's jaw and behind his ear. Sam tilted his head back slightly and closed his eyes. Gabriel tugged at his hair and his eyes popped open again.

"Hmm. What did you do, Sam?"

"Nothing," Sam said, his voice dazed. "I locked the cards away in the basement. In the most heavily warded safe we have."

"What the Hell are these cards?" Dean demanded. "Sam said you told him Michael made them?"

"I think so," Gabriel replied. "They're sentient and that means they're very dangerous."

"They were Ashton LaCroix's," Dean exclaimed. "Dude was a total fraud!"

"Not on this occasion," Gabriel said. He was leaning towards Sam, and sounded distracted.

"Uh, Gabriel?" Dean said uncomfortably. "What are you doing?"

"Thinking about your brother," Gabriel said absently. Dean looked down at the card on the floor. Acting on instinct, he reached out with a toe and slid it away from Sam's bed and then out into the hall. Gabriel blinked and sat back. He looked over at Dean and he was angry. Dean gulped and shuffled backwards.

"What did you do?" Gabriel snapped. Dean pointed at the card now lying in the hallway. Gabriel looked back towards Sam, whose eyes had closed again and he was breathing evenly. He hummed to himself and patted Sam's cheek. This time, Sam's eyes popped open and he looked alarmed when he saw Gabriel sitting on his bed.

"Gabriel? What's going on?" he cried. The archangel ignored him.

"Dean, go find a warded box. Best one you've got." Dean nodded and left the room. Sam poked Gabriel in the arm.

"Why are you here, Gabriel?" Sam demanded. Gabriel nodded towards the card.

"That card. And you." Which was no kind of explanation as far as Sam was concerned. Dean had returned with a lead-lined box engraved with warding symbols. Gabriel nodded in satisfaction, got up and walked out into the hall, picking up the card gingerly between thumb and forefinger. He dropped the card into the open box with a grimace and Dean slammed it shut.

"Will somebody please tell me what's happening?" Sam yelled. Gabriel gave him a strange look.

"In a moment. First tell me what happened last night." Sam glared at him.

"Nothing happened. We did some research, ate pizza. I went to bed."

"No dreams?" Gabriel pressed. Sam looked startled.
"Uh, yeah. Actually, I woke up from a nightmare around 4am. Got up for a drink… of… water…" He trailed off and looked puzzled. "There was this strange goblet in the cabinet. Blown glass, with these spirals of amber and gold. It's was… beautiful. I didn't want to drink out of it but I couldn't find another glass. The water was so delicious, it was incredible. Then I came back to bed."

"Hmm," Gabriel said, glowering. "What about the card? Where did it come from?" Sam shook his head.

"I never saw it until now, but the goblet on it looked exactly like the one in the kitchen."

"That goblet's blue and silver," Dean objected.

"To you," Gabriel said dismissively. "That's because of Castiel."

"Cas?" Dean yelped. "What's he got to do with this?"

"Nothing. Now, Sam. Concentrate on what I'm saying." Sam nodded. "What happened after you came back to bed?" Sam's face went red and Dean wondered if he should be here to listen to this.

"I felt tired, utterly exhausted. And then, this… touch," he breathed. "It was unlike anything I've ever felt before. And I've never wanted anything so badly as to keep feeling it. Then I guess I fell asleep." Gabriel frowned and walked back to Sam's bed. He thrust one hand into Sam's hair and pulled his head back, exposing his neck. Sam went willingly and Gabriel frowned even harder. He tugged at Sam's hair, and Sam winced but didn't resist. He looked back at Dean.

"Your brother's enchanted," he said sourly.

"That's what I said," Cas rumbled. "But I don't understand how it happened."

"I told you the cards are sentient. And I have no idea what they want, or what their creator intended for them."

"Can you fix it?" Dean asked urgently. Gabriel pursed his lips.

"Not without my Grace. But I can tell Castiel how to dim its effects." He waved his brother over and placed Sam's face in his hands. He muttered something in Enochian at Cas, who nodded his understanding and then concentrated. Sam's face went slack and then he began to topple sideways. Gabriel grabbed him and shoved Cas out of the way. Sam's eyes flickered and then they popped open.

"Hey," he complained. "Let me go!" Gabriel released him and gave a lopsided smile.

"That ought to do it. For now, at least. Once we get the cards locked down again, the enchantment should fade."

"So Ashton made these tarot cards?" Dean asked. Gabriel rolled his eyes in disgust.

"Yes with Michael's help. I already told you that."

"Michael's in the Cage," Dean pointed out and Gabriel turned to look directly at him.

"He's been in the Cage, what, six years? These cards were made a long time ago. I'd say at least a quarter century but I suspect they are 33 years old." A line appeared between Sam's brows.

"I'm 33," he noted. Gabriel nodded at him.
"Yes. Yes, you are."

"Are you saying Michael helped LaCroix make these cards when Sam was born? To target Sam specifically?"

"Yes," Gabriel replied. He sounded really angry, Sam thought vaguely.

"Is this about the Apocalypse?" Dean asked and Gabriel gave a short nod.

"I expect so," he mused. "But for some reason, they never came into play."

"LaCroix was in prison," Dean said suddenly. "He was suspected of killing his first wife, I forget her name. She'd gone missing and Ashton helped the police find her body, supposedly with his psychic powers. The police figured he knew where the body was because he killed her."

"I remember that," Sam said. "He was arrested just before I killed Lilith. It was a total media circus and it was supposed to be an open and shut case. But it took a really long time to come to trial. And then the prosecution's case collapsed when they couldn't break his alibi because their key witness disappeared. All their other evidence was circumstantial and the jury acquitted him in record time. But that was only a day or two before-" He broke off suddenly and his stricken gaze flicked to Gabriel. The archangel looked unconcerned.

"Before I bought the big one at the Elysian Fields Motel?" he asked with a grin.

"Yes," Sam said quietly. "So, the cards didn't come into play because the man who created them was in jail? I don't understand why that would make a difference." Gabriel put his hands on his hips.

"I'm not sure because I don't know what Michael intended," Gabriel said. "Maybe they were meant to manipulate you into killing Lilith." Sam screwed up his face as he thought about it.

"But…" Sam objected. "Ruby was already manipulating me. Why would Michael need to interfere?"

"Not only does Michael always overdo everything, but he likes having a back-up plan. In case you proved resistant to being influenced by the demon he chose to steer you into killing Lilith." Sam looked crestfallen.

"Well, he wasted his time, didn't he?" he commented sadly. And then he leaned back, appalled. "What do you mean, he chose?"

"Michael engineered the whole thing. Including much of what Hell was up to." Gabriel said angrily. "There was a stream of messages going back and forth between Heaven and Hell so thick I'm astonished nobody noticed."

"We were a little busy," Dean said defensively.

"I don't mean you," Gabriel dismissed. He was gazing at Sam so intently it was beginning to make him uncomfortable. He shifted uneasily and tried to think of something to say.

"Thank you, for coming and helping me. Dean and I will find a way to deal with these tarot cards." Gabriel looked like he wanted to say something else but something in Sam's face seemed to stop him. He nodded, got up off the bed and walked out of the room. Cas gave Sam a look he couldn't interpret and followed his brother into the hallway.

Sam fell back on the bed, his breath huffing out of him.
"Are you OK?" Dean asked. Sam inhaled sharply.

"Yeah. I don't know what happened. But we need to find a way to lock these cards down for good."

"Why not just destroy them?" Dean suggested.

"I can only assume it's not possible. Otherwise surely Gabriel would have told me to do that, wouldn't he? Rather than just secure them in the safe." Sam rolled out of bed and pulled on his jeans. "Come on, let's get that thing locked away."
Chapter 8

Mary felt a little uncomfortable helping herself to coffee in the Banes's kitchen but she'd always been an early riser and once she was up, she needed caffeine.

"Morning," Alicia said, coming in through the back door.

"Oh," Mary said, coloring. Alicia was wearing a thin cotton robe and it would seem, very little else.

"Max and I always greet the dawn," she said at her expression. "Sky-clad."

"Don't the neighbors complain?" Mary asked. Then laughed at herself. "Oh yeah, what neighbors?"

"Why do you think we live all the way out here? No nosy neighbors to interfere with our faith." Alicia eyed the coffee and grabbed a mug from the drainer.

"Where's your brother then?" Mary asked.

"He's doing an additional purification ritual. Clearing out this Hyde curse is going to require absolute oneness of body and spirit."

"I see," Mary said, nodding like she understood.

"No, you don't," Alicia said mildly. "It's necessary, that's all you need to know."

"What about you?"

"I'm playing second fiddle," she admitted. "Max is the one with the talent for breaking curses. You and I will just have to entertain ourselves." Alicia winked at Mary and she felt her cheeks heat.

"I'm old enough to be your grandmother," she admonished.

Alicia shrugged, unconcerned. "You don't look it. And anyway, cougars are a thing now." She gave Mary a bold look and Mary waved her off, laughing again. "Or I could teach you how to play Call of Duty," she said slyly. "I think you'd rock."

"All right," Mary agreed. "If I have to cool my heels here, shooting a few pixels can't hurt to keep my hand in."

"Is my sister trying to tempt you?" Max said as she entered.

"Into playing video games with her," Mary told her. Max gave her a look that said he knew quite well Alicia had offered other entertainment as well. But he didn't press the issue, to Mary's relief.

"Well, I'm almost ready," Max told her. "Is Mel up?"

"No," Mary said. "At least, I haven't heard her moving around."

"I'll go get her," Max said. "Are you OK hanging out with Alicia today?"

"I'm standing right here," his sister said haughtily.

"It's fine," Mary assured her. "But I would like to call my sons."

"Sure," Alicia agreed. "Go ahead. Max will need some quiet later, but I'll let you know when."
"Gabriel, wait," Cas said, hurrying after his brother.

Gabriel stopped and turned around to look at him. "What is it?"

"What's going on with you and Sam?" Cas demanded. Gabriel's eyebrows rocketed skywards. "I have eyes, Gabriel."

"It was the card, that's all. Those damn things are hella powerful." His mouth turned down and he kicked at the ground. "What the fuck was Michael thinking?"

"I don't know," Cas said wearily. "The day he threw Lucifer into Hell, I think it broke something inside him. He was never the same after that. Those cards weren't the only overpowered object he created."

Gabriel pushed his hands through his hair with a sigh. "Well, the crisis is over for now. But I think we should come up with somewhere else to store them. I thought they'd be safe here, but it seems I was wrong."

"And they can't be destroyed?"

"Oh, we could probably destroy them," Gabriel confessed. "But something tells me we would regret it."

"I don't understand," Cas said.

"Sentient creatures will fight back against their own destruction," Gabriel said and Cas's eyes flared wide in alarm. "We have no idea exactly how powerful they are yet. This incident was just a tiny taste of their power, and there was no threat to their existence."

"So what should we do," Cas asked. "That card got out of the safe all by itself."

"Can I see the safe?" Gabriel asked. "I might be able to suggest some additional protections." He went rigid suddenly and Cas turned to see Sam coming down the hallway, bare-chested and barefoot, carrying the warded box Dean had provided to contain the Ace of Cups. Dean was hurrying after him, looking more than a little perturbed.

"You wanna see the safe?" Sam asked. Clearly he'd overheard Gabriel's last comments. "It's this way." He strode past and Gabriel cast a puzzled look at Dean before nodding and following him.

Sam took the stairs two at a time and was almost running by the time he reached the basement room where the safe was located. When he moved to open it, Gabriel stopped him with one splayed hand on his chest.

"Wait," he said. Sam looked down at the archangel's hand in outrage but Gabriel ignored him. "Castiel, come here."

"What is it," the seraph asked.

"I can feel some kind of aura around this safe but with my Grace locked down I can't detect the precise shape of it. What can you see?"

"Nothing," Cas said. He closed his eyes. "But I can feel it. It's like the aura on Michael's lance."

"Hell," Gabriel swore. "OK, Castiel, can you inscribe Joshua's restricting sigil on the door here with your Grace?"
"Of course," Cas said, his eyes popping open. His hands flickered in a complex movement Sam couldn't follow. "Oh. That's better."

"Right," Gabriel said. "Now, let's add Raphael's shielding rune and that should do it."

Cas was sweating as he concentrated, which was an unusual sight. "There."

"OK, Sam, open the safe very carefully, and try and sorta stay to one side. Just in case," Gabriel told him. Cas stepped out of Sam's way and he opened the door, wincing as he did so. But nothing happened.

"Do you just want me to put this in there inside this box?" Sam asked.

"I don't think opening that box again would be safe," Gabriel said.

"OK." Sam placed the box on the bottom shelf and then slammed the door shut. The sigils Cas had inscribed on the metal flared briefly into silvery life before fading.

"All right," Dean said. "I need a drink."

"Dude, it's barely past noon," Sam complained.

"It's been a long morning," his brother snarled and stomped off. Cas gave Sam a worried look and then dashed after Dean.

"How are you feeling, Sam?" Gabriel asked gently.

"OK. A bit weirded out," Sam told him. He gave the archangel an uncertain look. "Are you in a hurry to head out?"

"No," Gabriel said slowly. "What did you have in mind?"

"Coffee," Sam said. Gabriel felt his own answering smile. "Cas and Dean are going to fight and I don't wanna be anywhere near them."

"Fight?" Gabriel said curiously as he climbed the stairs behind Sam.

"About drinking," Sam said, sounding weary. "Cas worries Dean's drinking himself into an early grave."

"Isn't he though?" the archangel said pointedly.

"Of course," Sam answered. "But badgering him about it will just make him dig his heels in. I know my brother, Gabriel."

"What will change his mind?"

"I don't know. He cut right back after… uh, well, I haven't told you about his stint as a Knight of Hell yet, have I?" Sam said heavily.

"I already knew about it. It's actually why I came back, in a sense. What I don't know is how you got him back again."

"It's a long story," Sam said. He led Gabriel into the kitchen and opened the coffee machine to see dry, unused coffee in the filter. "Huh. Dean must have started making coffee and got distracted." He pushed the power button but nothing happened. "Or the machine isn't working. Dammit."
"It's OK," Gabriel said.

"We have soda," Sam said, opening the fridge. He pulled out two cans of Coke and waved one at Gabriel.

"Sure," the archangel said, cupping his hands to catch the can as Sam tossed it to him. He popped the ring pull and took a long draft. Sam watched the movement of his throat and then coughed and looked away. Why was that so fascinating all of a sudden?

"So," Gabriel said, unaware of Sam's sudden inner turmoil. "Did you have something you wanted to discuss or did you just want the pleasure of my company?" He waggled his eyebrows at Sam and the hunter flushed. Gabriel's ability to make him flustered and confused was apparently undimmed by his bound Grace.

"Actually, I did want to ask you about something," Sam said, suddenly struck by inspiration. "When we ran into you in Oberlin, you knew the thing we were tracking wasn't a werewolf. It seemed to be some strange cross between a werewolf and a vampire."

"Ah, yes, the varcolac," Gabriel said.

Sam raised his eyebrows. "So they do have a name."

"Yes. They were always rare though," Gabriel said, his eyes distant with remembrance. "The last one was killed over a thousand years ago."

"Why were they so rare?" Sam asked curiously.

Gabriel gave him a warm smile, clearly enjoying being cast in the role of teacher. "Because, like vampires and werewolves, they rely on converting humans to propagate the species. But unlike vamps and weres, the transformation process is more often fatal than not. You often see that with manufactured species. Only one in four will survive the initial metamorphosis, and only ten percent last more than a year. Since they can't pass on their curse until they reach maturity, which takes about eighteen months, that's a huge attrition rate."

"No species could even hope to maintain its numbers with a reproductive success rate like that," Sam observed.

"Right," Gabriel agreed. "And unlike vamps and weres, they can't blend into human society, which makes hunting for food much more difficult."

"So you said the last one was killed over a thousand years ago," Sam remembered. "Except for the one we killed, that is."

"Well, that's the worrying thing," Gabriel said, looking pensive. "There's no way that thing should have existed. Unless someone's playing games."

"What kind of games?" Sam asked. "When Eve escaped Purgatory, she was making new monsters, she was hybridizing some of the current species. We met some weird things, believe me."

"You keep blurring out these terrifying revelations," Gabriel complained. "How did Eve get out of Purgatory?"

"Dragons," Sam said. "That was not our fault, I swear. Well. OK, maybe partly mine but I didn't know it at the time."
"Tell me you at least dealt with her," Gabriel begged.

"Yeah, she's dead. Or back in Purgatory. It's another long story."

"Let's leave that for another time," Gabriel suggested. "If Eve isn't doing this, then that raises serious questions, Sam."

"Yeah, like how did someone resurrect a long extinct monster?" Sam agreed. "Could this just have been a weird accident? Maybe Max Schmidt got bitten by a werewolf and transformed by a vampire on the same night."

"That's not how it works," Gabriel said. "Such an unlucky fellow would just die."

"Hmm." Sam sipped at his drink and thought hard. "So, you're telling me someone or something deliberately decided to create this uh… varcolac?"

"Yes. Which means they have access to a soulforge. Either they found one or they found the grimoire that tells you how to make one." Gabriel looked so solemn, it made Sam feel a strange tugging sensation in his chest. He got up and opened a cabinet, taking only a second to locate what he was looking for. He grabbed the Snickers bar and tossed it to the archangel, who caught it with a look of surprise.

"Thanks," Gabriel said, a peculiar look on his face.

"You looked kinda down," Sam said by way of explanation. He didn't add that seeing the archangel sad made him ache inside. Because he was damned if he knew why, or what it meant.

Gabriel opened the candy bar and bit off a large chunk before offering it to Sam. Sam laughed at the oddness of the gesture, but took a small bite anyway and chewed happily.

Dean grabbed the bottle of bourbon from the cabinet in the war room and slumped down into a chair. He didn't even bother with a glass, swigging directly from the bottle.

"Dean," Cas said as he entered the room.

"Can it, Cas," he said warningly. "I'm not in the mood."

"I'm not doing this for fun," the angel growled. "I will not watch you drink yourself into the grave like this."

"The door's that way," Dean said, gesturing vaguely.

"Is that all you have to say to me?" the angel demanded.

Dean slammed the bottle down on the table and grabbed Cas by the lapels. He shoved him backwards and snarled in his face. "What else do you want me to say?"

"I don't know," Cas said desperately. "But I'm your friend, and I care about what happens to you."

"Look, the booze might not make me happy," Dean grated. "But just for a while, I'm not as fucking angry and I hate myself just a bit less." A look of consternation flickered across his face and when Cas opened his mouth to speak again he pushed the angel away and walked back to his bottle.

"The anger I understand," Cas said relentlessly. "But why do you hate yourself so much? Ever since we met, I've wondered why."
"Because so much of what's gone wrong in the world is on me," Dean said. "The world has been almost destroyed what, four, five times now? And my name's on every single one."

"That's not true," Cas objected.

"Yeah? Bullshit, Cas. Look, man, I appreciate what you're trying to do. But... you can't fix this. Just leave me alone." Dean took another large mouthful of bourbon and hoped Cas would get the message.

"No," Cas said. He grabbed the bottle out of Dean's hand and held it out of reach. "I mean it, Dean. I'm done with passively letting you destroy yourself."

"Gimme the bottle back, Cas," Dean yelled. "I'm not screwing around here, give it back or I will fucking end you."

"No, you won't," Cas said calmly. "You couldn't kill me when the Mark of Cain was riding you hard and you had an angel blade in your hand. You won't do so now."

"Damn you," Dean said, dashing angry tears from his eyes with an impatient gesture. "Damn you to Hell." He pushed the chair out of the way and stormed out of the room.

"Too late," Cas said softly.

Dean headed straight for the kitchen, where he knew there was at least beer and maybe another bottle of liquor if he was lucky. He rounded the corner to see Gabriel feeding some kind of candy bar to Sam, his brother's face lit with a rare joy. At any other time he might not have reacted the way he did, but his temper was still burning from his argument with Cas and this was just more than his stressed nerves could bear.

"What the fucking Hell is going on in here?" he demanded. Sam jerked back guiltily, his face a riot of emotions. Gabriel was staring at him in horror.

"Dean," Sam said weakly. "I uh..."

"Sam, a word," Dean commanded. He turned on his heel and walked away.

Sam gave Gabriel an apologetic look. "I'm sorry," he offered. "He's just pissed with Cas and he takes it out on everyone else."

"It's fine," Gabriel said, but his voice sounded dismayed. Sam didn't have time to wonder about that now.

"I'll be right back," he promised. He left the kitchen and after a moment's consideration, walked towards the garage. As he'd guessed, Dean was in there, leaning moodily on the hood of the Impala.

"Jesus, Dean," Sam said impatiently.

"Are you sleeping with him?" Dean demanded. Sam stared at him in astonishment and then burst out laughing.

"You're not serious."

"I'm damn serious," his brother insisted. "You think I can't see the way he looks at you?"

"Is it anything like how you look at Cas?" Sam snapped, driven beyond endurance.
"What did you just say to me?" Dean breathed.

"You heard," Sam said defiantly, tilting his chin up. He'd stepped in it but there's no way he could back down now.

Dean didn't bother to grace that with a reply, his fist shot out and caught Sam in the right cheek. Sam staggered back and stared at his brother in shock.

"What the fuck was that for?" he said challengingly. "Because I called you out on your bullshit?"

"What have I told you about your weakness for monsters, Sam?" Dean snarled.

"First of all, Gabriel's not a monster," Sam yelled back. "And secondly, where the Hell did you get this mad idea we were having sex? Dean, that's some epic fucking projection you've got going on there."

"Fuck you," Dean barked. He yanked open the door of the car, and cranked the engine hard.

"Dean," Sam said, but his brother ignored him, shoving the Impala roughly into drive and roaring out of the garage at top speed. Sam winced and then sighed, pushing his hair out of his face.

"That was quite the impressive meltdown," Gabriel said, leaning nonchalantly against the wall.

"I'm sorry you had to hear that," Sam said.

Gabriel's face was curiously, almost angelically blank. "Why?"

"Dean's pretty unpleasant when he's in that mood. Don't take anything he said too seriously." Sam advised. "But I am sorry about the monster thing, that was out of order."

Gabriel shrugged, apparently unconcerned. "I've been called worse."

Sam took a few deep breaths. "I'd better go check on Cas," he said. He felt very tired suddenly, like all his energy had been sucked away.

"I'll come with you," Gabriel offered.

"Thanks," Sam said, giving him a wobbly smile. "I'm warning you, he's likely to be in bad shape. This is the worst it's been in a long time."

"I can handle it," Gabriel assured him.

They found Cas in the library, curled up tightly into a ball in a corner. He was clutching a bottle of bourbon in his hands, which struck Sam as quite odd, since the angel didn't drink.

"Cas?" he said tentatively. "Are you OK?"

The seraph's head came up and Sam took in his red eyes, wet cheeks and pale face with a sharp intake of breath. "I'm sorry, Cas."

"Why are you sorry," Cas said bitterly. "It's not your fault." He blinked once, twice. "You're hurt."

"Dean punched me in the face," Sam said acidly.

Cas gaped at him. "I don't understand."
"It's not important," Sam dismissed. "I let him provoke me, and I said something I shouldn't have said. He got mad and lashed out."

Cas's eyes flicked up to Gabriel and he let out a rapid stream of Enochian that to Sam's ears sounded vaguely accusatory. Certainly the archangel was retorting indignantly.

"Hey," Sam said. "Don't you two start."

"I apologize," Cas said. He rested his head on his knees for a moment. "Where is Dean now?"

"I don't know," Sam admitted. "He got in the car and drove off in a snit. He'll be back when he calms down."

"Come on, bro," Gabriel said, patting Cas on the shoulder. "You can't stay here and mope."

"Why not?" Cas said.

"Because you're not a doormat, OK? When that raging asshole comes back."

"Gabriel," Sam warned.

"All right, when Dean comes back, you can't let him see you like this. Don't give him so much power to hurt you, Castiel." He offered Cas his hand and the angel took it and allowed Gabriel to haul him to his feet.

"That's easy for you to say," the seraph said.

"Is it?" Gabriel shot back, and then blinked. "Well, it doesn't matter if it is or not, I did say it. Now, why don't we go and get something to eat? I'm starving."

Appreciating this for the well-intentioned lie it was, Cas nodded.

Sam shoved the remains of the pizza into the fridge and looked at his watch. "So, Gabriel," he said, trying to seem casual. "With your Grace the way it is, do you actually need to eat and sleep and the like?"

"No," Gabriel admitted. "I just like eating. And sleeping, when I can, although I've not done so in a long time."

"Why not, if you enjoy it?" Sam asked curiously.

"I like sleeping in beds, not on park benches," the archangel said. "I don't have a roof over my head, remember."

"Well, yeah, that's kinda why I was asking," Sam said. "Look, it's gonna make Dean pissed, but right now I don't care. Do you want to stay here? I can make up a room for you."

"Just for tonight?" Gabriel asked. His hand was shaking and it caught Sam's attention. Was Gabriel upset about something?

"As long as you want," Sam assured him.

"Until Dean throws me out you mean," Gabriel snorted.

"He won't," Sam said confidently.
"I shouldn't," Gabriel said, shaking his head slowly. "Your brother's already in a bad mood. Why risk me making it worse?"

"Because he doesn't get to dictate to me what I do or don't do," Sam snapped.

Gabriel cocked an eyebrow at him. "Are you really that angry that he accused you of screwing me?"

"No," Sam said. "Why would I be? The idea is absurd."

"Is it?" Gabriel said, his eyes bright.

Sam laughed easily. "Of course. Why, were you thinking of trying to convince him otherwise?" He shook his head and laughed harder. "I don't think we could pull a trick like that off. I'm not that good an actor."

Gabriel seemed a little bewildered. "I wasn't…"

"I know," Sam said, sobering. "I'm sorry, I got carried away. I told you, Dean and I used to have these prank wars, and they would escalate like you would not believe."

"Used to?" Gabriel asked. He seemed strangely brittle in that moment, like he'd been when they'd run into him in Oberlin.

"You kinda cured us both of that childishness," Sam admitted. "After Mystery Spot, neither of us really felt like pranking each other anymore."

Gabriel looked away. "I said I was sorry."

"Hey," Sam said. "I didn't say I was still mad. I don't hold a grudge, I swear." His phone buzzed and he saw it was Dean. "Uh oh." He swiped the screen to answer. "Dean?"

"Sammy," Dean said breathlessly. "I… you need to come get me, Sam."

"Where are you," Sam said, sitting up straight. "What happened?"

"A tree happened," Dean gasped. "I'm hurt. Bad."

"OK, OK, where are you?"

"Uh, about five, six miles south of the bunker. I was heading to the lake." He groaned and the phone went dead.

"Shit," Sam swore. "Gabriel, Dean's hurt. Where did Cas go?"

"He left ages ago. Said something about wheels, I didn't understand it," Gabriel told him.

"OK, he's probably in his room," Sam said. "I'll go get him. Wait here."
Cas's hands shook as he struggled to unlock the truck. After a few moments of trying, Sam put one hand on his shoulder.

"Gimme the keys, Cas. I'll drive." Cas nodded and climbed in the passenger seat, Gabriel perched in the middle.

It wasn't that he wasn't worried, but focusing on Cas's distress kept his head level. He pulled out of the garage and headed for the road he guessed Dean had taken. Luckily it was late enough that there were few other cars on the road and they found the Impala crashed into a large oak tree without encountering anyone else.

Cas stumbled out of the truck with a wordless cry and got to the car first. Dean was slumped over the steering wheel, his phone still held loosely in his fingers. The angel ripped the door off, making Sam wince, and knelt down in the grass.

"How bad is it?" Sam asked, his voice quivering.

"If I weren't in possession of my Grace, he'd spend the next few months in traction," Cas said angrily.

"Maybe he should then," Gabriel suggested, his tone implying he was only half joking.

Cas gave him an anguished look over his shoulder and the archangel colored with shame. Sam regarded him curiously. It wasn't an emotion he was aware Gabriel could feel. Cas was already healing Dean, and muttering to him in a low voice. Sam couldn't hear all the words but the tone was clear, Cas was pissed.

Dean's eyes fluttered open and he looked at Cas with a mournful expression. "I'm sorry," he said.

"You should be," Cas said heatedly. "You're lucky to be alive."

"I know," Dean replied, his face drawn with remorse. He struggled out of the wreck of his car and looked down at the damage. "Oh God, baby," he breathed. "I'm sorry."

"We brought my truck," Cas told him. "We can tow the car back to the bunker."

"Good idea," Dean said, still looking everywhere but at Cas. The angel grabbed his face and glared at him.

"Next time I will take Gabriel's advice and let you heal on your own. Perhaps months in hospital will teach you not to take your life for granted." Dean just stared back at him, unable to speak. Cas leaned forward and for a moment Sam wasn't sure what was going to happen. "I mean it," the seraph snarled and then backed away. He turned on his heel and walked back to Sam and Gabriel, his face crumpled with distress. Sam clapped him on the shoulder and then walked over to Dean.

"If you've come to kick my ass as well, could it wait until tomorrow?" Dean said plaintively.

"I think Cas did a good enough job for now," Sam told him. "Now let's get the tow ropes out and get out of here before anyone passes by and sees us."

By the time they got back to the bunker, it was very late and Sam was dragging with exhaustion.
Dean had let Cas bully him off to bed already and he was about to stagger off to his own room when he remembered that he'd offered Gabriel a bed for the night too.

"Don't worry about it, Sammy," Gabriel told him.

"No," Sam said firmly. "I did offer. It's not fair to-

"Sam," Gabriel said. "Go lie down before you fall down. Castiel will help me make up a room if I change my mind."

"OK," Sam said, swaying slightly. Gabriel put an arm around his waist to steady him. Sam looked down at him, his brows creased in puzzlement.

"I'm just gonna help you down the hall," Gabriel said.

"OK," Sam said, too tired to argue. He let Gabriel steer him to his room and then flopped untidily onto the bed, dragging the archangel down with him.

"Oof," Gabriel huffed.

"Sorry," Sam slurred.

"It's OK," Gabriel said, wriggling out from underneath him. "Lemme take off your shoes." Sam didn't say anything so he took that as permission and quickly unlaced them and tossed them in a corner. He looked up to see Sam had already fallen asleep.

"Good night, Sammy," he said softly and crept out of the room.

Mary pulled out her phone and dialed Dean's number. It rang four times before going to voicemail. Frowning, she hung up and tried Sam instead.

"Hey, mom," Sam said. He sounded stressed and unhappy, Mary thought.

"Hey, kiddo," she said cheerily. "How are things?"

"OK," Sam said, and she could taste the lie. "Hey, cut it out, Gabriel."

"Gabriel?" Mary said sharply. "The guy we met in Oberlin?" She was acutely aware of Max and Alicia's eyes on her and wished she'd gone outside to make the call.

"Yeah," Sam said. "He came by to help us with something. We'll tell you about it when you get back."

"OK," Mary said. "Is Dean there? His phone wasn't picking up."

"Oh, it's broken," Sam told her. "Hang on, I'll go get him. What? OK, thanks, Cas. Cas is going to bring him in."

"Is everything all right, Sam," she pressed. "You don't sound too good."

"It's been a difficult few days," Sam said, his voice dropping. "Cas and Dean had a big fight and Dean went out and crashed the car."

"Jesus, Sam," Mary blurted out.
"He's OK. Cas was able to heal his injuries. But the Impala's in bad shape." Sam paused for a second. "Here he is."

"Mom," Dean said. "How is Mel?"

"She's fine," Mary said. "Sam says you were in a wreck."

"Yeah, my own stupid fault," Dean said shortly. "Sam's got a big mouth."

"Now, Dean," Mary said. "He worries about you. He also said that Gabriel guy showed up again."

"Yeah, we needed his advice on something." Dean said, his voice suddenly wary. "Why?"

"I don't trust him, Dean," Mary hissed. "I know what you said about him, but there's something off about that guy."

"We'll talk about it another time," Dean said shortly. "Do you want to talk to Sam again?"

"No," she said. "I'll call again in a few days. And he'd better be gone, Dean."

"Don't hold your breath," Dean said sourly and hung up.

"Trouble?" Max asked, his eyes alight with curiosity.

"I don't know," Mary said honestly. "I'm probably being paranoid."

"You've got good instincts," Max said. "You should listen to them."

"So," Sam said, once he'd finished his cereal. "Why don't you tell me how you came to get your Grace bound by Death."

"It's a long story," Gabriel said.

"I haven't got anywhere else I need to be," Sam said.

Gabriel inhaled slowly. Cas and Sam were looking at him expectantly.

"Give me your hand," Cas said suddenly to Sam, who blinked at him. "I can link our minds and Gabriel can share the memory directly. Since he's so uncomfortable with talking about it."

"This is not better," Gabriel grumbled. But he took Cas's hand. Sam looked at him, hesitant about invading the archangel's privacy in this way. "It's OK, Sam," he said. "Honestly."

Sam took Cas's hand and closed his eyes. He felt an odd tilting sensation and all he could see was gray fog. Then his vision cleared.

Gabriel slid onto a stool at the counter of what was supposedly the best cheesesteak joint in Philadelphia, next to the tall cadaverous man who was sitting alone. He was eating his sandwich rather incongruously with a knife and fork, each movement neat and precise. Unlike most Americans, he held the knife in his right hand and the fork in his left, and did not put down either utensil or switch hands at any point. The Brits ate that way, Gabriel remembered.

"Hello, Gabriel," Death said. "Have you eaten here before? The cheesesteaks are really quite remarkable."
"I had no idea you were a foodie," the archangel said. Death smiled at him and the effect was rather unnerving. Gabriel wasn't used to feeling scared and he was tired of how the Apocalypse was introducing him to the sensation on a regular basis.

"What do you want?" Death asked baldly.

"I need your help," Gabriel told him. "I was just gonna stay out of it, y'know? Let my stupid brothers destroy the world if it made them happy. At least it would be over."

"And yet, here you are, looking for a way out. Why is that, I wonder?" Death's gaze was so penetrating, Gabriel felt as if his entire existence was being dissected.

"Have you met the vessels?" Gabriel asked with a grin. "They kinda draw you into their orbit whether you like it or not."

"And you particularly like the younger one," Death stated. Gabriel gulped, shocked that he was so easy to read. "A pity, since he's the one most likely to die."

"Is there no way we can cram a lid on this thing?" he asked desperately. "I mean, you're the most powerful being in the universe. More powerful than Dad even. Surely."

"My relative power is not the point," Death interrupted. "What makes you think I care enough to intervene?"

"I didn't presume any such thing," Gabriel told him. "I was hoping we could make a deal."

"A deal," Death said with distaste. Gabriel wondered if he'd miscalculated. "What could you possibly have to offer me?"

"You don't want this Apocalypse," Gabriel said. "I think you're looking for a way out, but you need Dean Winchester to make that happen."

"That's true," Death agreed. "Very well, Gabriel. I'll give you what you want. A way to stop the big fight between your brothers. You might not like the price."

"I don't care," Gabriel said. "Whatever it is, I'll pay it."

"Lucifer's Cage can be reopened," Death told him. "There is a lock and of course, a key. That key is formed from the four horsemen's rings. If the Winchesters can take the rings from my brothers, I will give them mine. All you have to do is let them know that this is possible. Maybe they can come up with a way to trap him."

Gabriel breathed in and out, more as a stalling tactic than anything else. Tricking Lucifer back into the cage was not going to be easy, but if anyone could manage it, he could.

"No," Death said. "This has to be humanity's doing. Which means the Winchesters have to figure out how to do it. You haven't asked me what the price is yet."

"OK," Gabriel said. "Tell me."

"I want you to leave earth. Fake your own death, and go. Don't come back for at least a century."

Gabriel gaped at him. "Why?"

"Your constant interfering in the Winchesters lives is an abomination, a crime against the natural order of things," Death said, his lips thinning. "So you will make them think you are dead and you
will leave and not return until I have reaped them both."

"I don't understand," Gabriel confessed. "Why do you even care?"

"I take what you might call the long view," Death said easily. "I think your association with the Winchesters will lead to calamity. Not just for you, or them, but for humanity as a whole. If I am sticking my neck out to save it, it will not do for you to endanger it again a few years from now."

Pain throbbed in Gabriel's chest. This was a much higher price than he'd expected to pay, and he'd expected to pay with his life. He swallowed past the lump in his throat and nodded to indicate his agreement.

"Excellent," Death said, dabbing delicately at his mouth with a paper napkin. "I'll leave the details of your 'death' up to you of course, but I recommend you make it suitably dramatic."

"Have you ever known me to be anything else?" Gabriel said bitterly.

Death canted one eyebrow at him. "It's for the best," he said.

The scene faded and the bunker came back into view. Sam gasped at the feeling of shared pain, the dizzying sensation of sorrow and loss. He tried to meet Gabriel's eyes but the archangel was staring off into the distance. And then his vision wavered and dissolved once more.

Gabriel inspected the body lying on the ground with a heavy heart. It was true then, Dean had killed Cain with the First Blade and was one step closer to becoming a Knight of Hell. Dammit, he never should have left. Death had been wrong about his presence in the Winchesters' lives. He could have prevented this.

"Perhaps," a cold voice said from the darkness and his heart sank. Of course he would be here. "I'll admit things have not turned out the way I might have liked. But I told you not to return here, Gabriel. Not until I had reaped both Winchesters." Death strode out the shadows and stared icily at the archangel.

"I know," Gabriel said. "But when Dean took on the Mark of Cain, the whole universe vibrated with it. This was never meant to be. How could I ignore it?"

"Many things were never meant to be," Death said dismissively, looking down at Cain's corpse. "Ever since you and I conspired to derail the Apocalypse, we've been in uncharted territory."

"Look, I'll stay away from them, I promise," Gabriel said. "But you have to let me fix this. The Mark of Cain is the only thing keeping the Darkness at bay. If she gets out-"

"We had a deal," Death said resolutely. "And you broke it."

"I know," Gabriel said desperately. "But we made that deal to be sure that world-ending catastrophes didn't happen every few years. Me going away has not stopped that from happening. So let me help, and then I'll go away again. I swear."

"Until the next time you decide I should make an exception, and the next, and the next," Death said witheringly. "No. We had a deal. You broke it. There. Are. Consequences." He slammed his cane down on the floor and the vibration made Gabriel's teeth rattle. He felt a strange sensation crushing at his ribcage and he gasped.
"It is quite painful, I understand," Death said coldly.

"What are you doing?" Gabriel wheezed.

"Binding your Grace," Death said casually. Gabriel stared at him in horror. "I told you not to cross me." Everything went white.

Sam gasped and wheezed with the impact of being forced out of Gabriel's memory rather abruptly. Cas was staring at Gabriel in appalled shock.

"Brother," he said. Gabriel held up one hand to forestall him.

"Save it, Castiel," he said. "I made my choice. He was right, I broke our deal. And I'm not sorry I did, even if the consequences were… considerable."

"Gabriel," Sam said, his throat aching. The pain of Death binding the archangel's Grace, the way Gabriel had screamed out his loss haunted him.

"Sam," Gabriel said, giving him a sad smile. "Now you know why I didn't want to talk about it."

"My God," Sam said. "Gabriel, I'm sorry."

"What for?" the archangel said in bafflement. "You didn't do this to me."

"We were pretty mean to you when you first showed up," Sam said, his eyes watering with regret.

"You weren't to know," Gabriel said easily. He squeezed Sam's hand and Sam looked down at the table for a moment before raising his eyes to the archangel's once more.

"No, I didn't know. But I didn't ask either. I just assumed this was another one of your tricks," Shit, he did not want to cry, dammit.

"And it was," Gabriel emphasized. "My reasons aren't important. I lied to you and I understand why that made you angry. Now, stop with the wailing. I told you, it's embarrassing for everyone." He grinned and Sam couldn't help but smile back, even though his eyes still misted with tears.

"So," Cas said, shifting uncomfortably. "We still haven't decided what to do about Michael's tarot cards. The runes we inscribed on that safe probably won't hold them for long."

"I've been thinking about that," Gabriel said. "I've got a couple of ideas but… you're not going to like any of them."

"Shoot," Sam said. "We've got nothing right now."

"OK, we could take them to Heaven," Gabriel said, wrinkling his nose in agreement at Cas's look of consternation.

"Let's park that one for now," Sam suggested.

"Idea two would be to toss them in the Pit," the archangel said. "You're friends with the King of Hell. I'm sure he could make sure they never see the light of day again."

"Crowley's throne isn't so secure I'd want to trust something like this to him," Sam admitted.

"I agree," Cas said. "Hell tolerates Crowley's reign. They don't love him."
"Well, the only other thing I've got is we stick them in a lead box and drop them in the Mariana Trench."

"I doubt that'll be enough," Sam said sourly.

"I didn't say it was a good idea," Gabriel groused. "There's only a small number of beings that can destroy an item this powerful. An archangel could do it, but I'm out of action and although you could ask Luci of course, I can imagine the price of his help. Michael's in the cage and I don't know if he'd be interested in helping us. Death could have done it, but uh, he's out of the picture. And Dad of course, but he's off playing with Auntie Amara."

When Gabriel didn't say anything more, Sam narrowed his eyes at him. "There's something else."

"Oh, well, you can unmake anything on a soulforge, of course."

"A soulforge?" Cas said, his lips pulled back in a terrifying scowl.

"Don't look at me like that, Castiel," Gabriel complained. "I don't want to be on the same continent as a soulforge, but it doesn't detract from the fact that one could destroy the cards."

"I refuse to be a party to the crafting of such a hideous thing," Cas said curtly.

"Well, that's lucky isn't it," Gabriel said. "Because I'm pretty sure there's one here already."

Cas's nostrils flared angrily. "What? Where?"

"I don't know," Gabriel huffed. "But where do you think your varcolac came from?"

Cas went white. Sam had never seen the angel look so terrified. "Gabriel, the varcolac have been extinct for a millennium at least."

"And then there's the Jefferson Starship," Sam said.

Gabriel looked puzzled. "The what?"

"It was this hybrid monster Eve made. Dean called them Jefferson Starships. They were kinda a cross between wraiths and vampires," Sam rubbed his mouth in thought. "We heard on one of the hunter's forums that one had been spotted in Kentucky. We thought we'd wiped them all out."

"See?" Gabriel said, holding out his arms. "Soulforge. Gotta be."

"Crafting a soulforge is… expensive," Cas said, looking sick.

"Quite," Gabriel agreed, his own face twisted with distaste. "I think you probably would have heard about it if someone managed to kill the number of souls you need to build one."

"How many?" Sam asked.

Gabriel frowned. "At least a thousand."

Sam felt like he wanted to vomit. "Well, is there any chance this unknown person just found one?"

"I don't know," Cas said. "The last one I know of in the US was destroyed."

"OK, could it have come from somewhere else? How big is a soulforge anyway?" Cas and Gabriel exchanged a look that Sam couldn't interpret.
"It's not so much the size as the… weight," Cas said finally. "Souls are-" he waved his hands expressively. "Heavy. Moving a soulforge around can trigger earthquakes, or volcanic eruptions wherever the crust is too thin to support it."

"I see," Sam said. "Well, maybe it doesn't matter. One way or another, somebody's got one."

"It matters," Gabriel disagreed. "If they found it, we can destroy it. If they made one, they can make another."

"Let's worry about that once we figure out who has it and where," Sam decided. "OK, I'm gonna go check on Dean, take him something to eat." He got up and went to the fridge, grabbing cold pizza and a can of soda. Cas and Gabriel waited patiently for him to be out of earshot.

"You don't think there's any chance someone found-" Cas said.

"No!" Gabriel snapped. "No, there's no way. We sealed it. Completely."

Cas folded his arms over his chest. "Still, we lied to Sam. If someone found a way to open the Gate..."

"It's impossible," Gabriel said firmly. "Not even Dad could open it again."

"But it would make sense," Cas said. "It would explain everything."

"You think we would be stupid enough to leave any possible route open?" Gabriel snarled.

"No," Cas sighed. "But I can't think how else someone could get access to a soulforge."

"The Necropolis Gates are permanently closed," Gabriel said icily. "This will just be a regular soulforge. Unpleasant certainly, and difficult to deal with. But it's nothing more than that."

Mel was lying on the couch, one arm flung over her eyes. Max was slumped in the armchair, his eyes closed.

"They look wiped out," Mary said to Alicia in a low voice.

"Curse-breaking's hard work," she said. "And things aren't going well."

"Why not?" Mary frowned at her.

"I'm not sure. It's a powerful curse, but I've seen Max break other powerful curses. He once broke a hunter cursed with Ataraxia."

"What's that?" Mary said. "I've never heard of it."

"It's one of the worst curses in witchcraft. Most witches are terrified of it. The word means 'an untroubled and tranquil state of the soul'."

"That doesn't sound that bad…” Mary said, confused.

"No? Think about it. Nothing that happens touches you. You can watch your family murdered right in front of your eyes without so much as a frown. You can kill without remorse, without hesitation. No empathy, no love, no pity, no mercy. It's like being soulless. Except your soul's still there, getting blacker and blacker." Alicia looked bleak. "When Max broke the Ataraxia curse on Winston Brandt, he started screaming. Within two weeks, he'd plucked out his own eyes and been committed to a
mental institution. He continued screaming the whole time. He died four days later by jamming a plastic fork into his brain through the empty eye socket."

"My God," Mary said. "I knew Winston, a little."

"But we had to break the curse," Alicia added. "He was on a rampage. He'd strangled hundreds of women up and down I-55."

"Wait a minute," Mary said, her eyes widening. "Winston Brandt was the I-55 strangler? The serial killer they thought killed your friend?"

"Why do you think we got involved?" Alicia said, her voice breaking. "But although he killed a lot of women, he didn't kill Amanda. Max is certain and I trust him."
Chapter 10

Crowley scanned the report in front of him and then made a face at Rogers, the roguish-looking demon who was fidgeting in front of him. Crowley wondered if he was wearing the eye-patch for effect or whether the meatsuit really had something wrong with his left eye.

"So you're telling me there are now eight demons unaccounted for," he said.


"Kinda! I don't pay you for kinda!" Crowley snapped.

"You don't pay me, period," Rogers pointed out.

"Yeah?" Crowley said, canting an eyebrow at the insolent son-of-a-bitch. "You thought this was a paying gig?"

Rogers sniffed but didn't dignify that with a reply. Or maybe he was a little cowed, Crowley's eyes had flashed red with irritation and everyone knew an irritated Crowley was more dangerous than some demons in full fury.

"All right, so have we learned anything more about the missing angels?"

"Yes," Rogers told him. He pulled out his phone and scrolled through something on the screen. "Mostly cupids, it seems."

"Cupids? What the Hell, Rogers?" Crowley leaned back on his throne, his mind boggling. "Cupids are the lowest order of angel. I wouldn't fuck with one, or fuck one for that matter. But if someone, or something is responsible for these disappearances, what would they want with cupids?"

"Bloodlines," Rogers suggested. "Cupids control the bloodlines Heaven wants to shape. If you control some cupids, you could redirect that to your own ends."

Crowley blinked at him. "You're smarter than you look."

"Actually, my meatsuit suggested it," Rogers said, looking embarrassed.

"You talk to it?" Crowley gaped at him.

"Sometimes. He's cool and super smart. I know he looks like he escaped from a production of the Pirates of Penzance but he's actually a genius. We're getting on pretty well." Rogers flushed suddenly. "I mean, he's OK. For a human."

"Give me strength," Crowley said, raising his eyes upwards.

"Well, I actually have something else as well," Rogers added, looking pleased with himself.

"Do tell," Crowley said, waving one hand as regally as he could manage.

"The Alpha Vampire sent a message to you. Apparently, some vamps have just vanished too. Not to hunters. Hunters take out the nest if they can. This is individual vamps just going… poof." Rogers spread his fingers wide.

"Poof?"
"Yes sir." The idiot managed to look at little shamefaced.

Crowley's brow furrowed in thought. "I've been known to kidnap a vampire or two in my time," he said after a moment. "I did it for information. What do angels, specifically cupids, low rank demons and vampires all potentially know, I wonder?"

"Vampires know about bloodlines too," Rogers said. "They shape some themselves, remember. Especially the Chicago lot."

"OK, but where do my demons fit in?" Crowley demanded. "We don't manipulate bloodlines. We don't need to."

"Azazel did, in his way," Rogers said, looking nervous.

"You think this is one of the other princes?" Crowley asked. "Bah. Ramiel doesn't care, Asmodeus isn't interested. Dagon, maybe, but last I heard she was enjoying herself in Bali." He paused, the cogs in his mind beginning to turn. "Blood…" he said. "I need to speak to Castiel."

Rogers looked nauseous. "Rather you than me."

"You're too sensitive," Crowley advised. "Castiel's OK."

"What are you reading?" Gabriel asked Castiel, whose head was bowed over a very old book.

"The Book of Bai Ze," Castiel told him. "I had no idea a copy existed but I found one here."

"Doesn't that list all the monsters that exist in the universe?" Gabriel asked curiously.

"Supposedly there are 11,520 different kinds listed in here," Castiel said. "That's not quite the right number, but there's not much missing."

"Well, I'll leave you to it. Do you think Sam will mind if I check out the basement?"

"That depends," Castiel said with a smile. "Don't break anything, release any horrors or set anything on fire and you should be fine."

"No breakages, no releasing evil, no fire. I think I can manage that," Gabriel laughed.

"So you say," Castiel said drily.

"Later, bro," Gabriel said loftily and drifted off to find the basement stairs.

The first thing he realized was that the basement levels, because yes there were more than one, were considerably more extensive than the upper living quarters. And those weren't exactly small. But he had a specific destination, the room where the safe containing Michael's creepy-ass tarot cards were kept. When he entered the room, the lights flickered and he frowned. But the wards Castiel had inscribed seemed to be intact. Satisfied he turned to leave and was plunged into darkness.

"Great," he grumbled. He could see well enough, his celestial vision was thankfully undimmed by the binding on his Grace. But he didn't want to be blamed for breaking something, even a lightbulb. He was here on tolerance, Dean's in particular. He really did not want to rock the boat. But then a bluish glow in the corner caught his eye.

"Hello?"
The figure didn’t speak, but it clearly was a human figure. A ghost? It seemed to be pointing to a filing cabinet in the corner.

"A ghost who likes filing, who knew?" Gabriel said to himself. He wandered over and started when the second drawer slowly slid open. "Huh." He began to flick through the files, noticing that they were personnel files and every one was marked 'Deceased - unknown'. He cast a look at the ghost again, noting the style of dress and haircut.

"Hmm. 1920's maybe?" The phantom seemed to flicker. "1930's then." He felt the spirit's approval and nodded. He rifled through the files, noting dates of death and pulling all the relevant files. There were six, four men and two women. He immediately discarded the women as he'd already gotten the sense the ghost was male, and looked through the four remaining files.

"Well, look at this. Vanished on a Mississippi steamer, oops. Vanished, no explanation or even location. Odd. Missing presumed dead investigating a dragon, wow. And… murdered by an unknown assailant, here?"

The ghost flickered and disappeared. Gabriel took that as a sign.

Sam padded into the kitchen with only one thing on his mind. Coffee, and lots of it. He'd slept poorly again, plagued by odd dreams that dissipated like mist upon waking. He wanted to sing when he saw an almost full pot, ready to go.

"Whoever made coffee has my undying love," he declared, pouring himself a cup.

"Who knew it was so easy to win your heart?" Gabriel remarked from the table.

Sam started and then swore as he spilled hot coffee on his bare feet. "Ow, fuck, fuck, fuck." He grabbed some kitchen paper and began mopping up the mess.

"And now I get to see you on your knees," Gabriel said. "Today's just getting better and better!"

"Funny," Sam said, deadpan. "You know, it's a bit early for your sense of humor."

"Nonsense," Gabriel proclaimed, grinning broadly. Sam looked up from the floor at him.

"You're in a good mood," he observed.

"I know," the archangel said, leaning back on the chair, tilting it onto it's back legs. "Disgusting, isn't it?"

"Whatever," Sam said, giving up. He stood up and tossed the coffee-soaked kitchen paper in the trash and turned to top up his cup again.

"Did you know you have a ghost?" Gabriel said nonchalantly.

This time Sam didn't spill his drink but it was a close run thing. "Are you doing this on purpose?" he demanded.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Gabriel said, affecting an air of innocence. Sam rolled his eyes expressively at him. "OK. Maybe a little."

"I will kill you if you don't let me have some caffeine," Sam warned. "I slept like shit last night."

Gabriel's amused expression dropped into one of concern. "Are you OK?"
"Yeah, just a lot of weird, jumbled dreams that I can't recall," Sam said, sighing. He dropped into a chair opposite the archangel.

"But there's no sign of any more cards?" Gabriel pressed.

"Not that I've seen. It's probably just stress." Sam swallowed a large mouthful of coffee and sighed. Gabriel reached out and squeezed his hand and Sam looked down at the point of contact, his eyes widening.

"Am I part of that stress?" the archangel asked gently.

"What? No, no," Sam denied. "I just keep waiting for the other shoe to drop with Lucifer. Where is he? Cas is pretty sure now that he's still alive, and out there somewhere. What is he doing? Is he going to come for me again?"

"Oh, Sam," Gabriel said softly. He lifted one hand to brush his knuckles against Sam's cheek and Sam had to fight the bizarre urge to turn his head into the touch and close his eyes. He leaned back instead, looking away and concentrating on regulating his breathing.

"It's OK. I'll deal. What choice do I have?" He laughed bitterly. "What choice have I ever had?"

"We'll figure something out," Gabriel promised impulsively.

"Oh, yeah," Sam said. "Because that worked out so well last time."

Gabriel's head went back as if he'd been struck. "I never intended for you to jump in that hole, Sam."

"I know," Sam said. He met Gabriel's gaze again and his eyes were haunted. "That wasn't even the worst part."

"What was the worst part?" Gabriel asked in a hushed whisper.

"Honestly?" Sam laughed but there was no humor in it. "Not long after I said yes, Lucifer gathered a range of people from my past. People who turned out to have been demons sent by Azazel to watch me and manipulate me. An old babysitter, friends from college, an ex-girlfriend. He gave them to me as a gift."

"And what did you do with this gift?" Gabriel asked, his eyes wide.

"I opened it," Sam said, his voice hollow. "I took my revenge in the most appalling ways possible. When I was done, I was soaked in blood and… other fluids."

"Father," Gabriel breathed.

"And I loved it," Sam said, still in that stiff, distant tone. "I fucking revelled in it. I can't blame Lucifer for that, because it was all me."

Gabriel was quiet, just watching him and chewing on his bottom lip.

"It's OK if you're revolted," Sam told him. "Dean threw up when I told him, and Dean's got the strongest stomach of anyone I know."

"I'm not revolted," Gabriel assured him. "I'm… sorry. Apologies are inadequate for such a thing, but this was partly my fault and nobody else is going to say it."

"It's not on you," Sam said firmly. "I didn't think so when I thought you were dead, and now I know
what really happened I still don't blame you. At all. I made my own choices."

Sam inhaled and exhaled, trying to calm his frazzled nerves. Gabriel was holding his hand again he noticed and the warmth of the archangel's skin against his was soothing. He gave Gabriel a weak smile and was rewarded with a wide grin that lifted his spirits.

"Sam?" Cas said suddenly from the door and Sam jumped, pulling his arm away in alarm.

"Uh, yeah, Cas. What is it?"

"Crowley," the angel said, looking annoyed. "He's coming to see us and wants us to open the wards."

"Crowley? Why? Has he got a lead on Lucifer?" Sam's heart rate skyrocketed and Gabriel reached out and touched him again. He relaxed almost against his will and cast a troubled look at the archangel, who just gave him a sheepish grin. Cas's eyebrows were somewhere near Saturn and after a moment of indulgence, Sam pulled away again.

"Is Dean up?" he asked.

"Yes," Cas said. "He's adjusting the carburetor on the Mustang since the Impala's not usable right now. Apparently he's concerned the mixture's too rich."

"Well, look at you," Sam chuckled. "Do you know what any of that means?"

Cas's face fell. "No."

"Ask him," Sam suggested. "He'll enjoy explaining it to you, I promise."

Cas looked delighted at the idea. "I'll do that." He sobered. "And Crowley?"

"Look, he's Dean's friend, not mine," Sam said. "If he says it's OK, I'm not going to argue." The icy look that had settled on the seraph's face was more than a little disconcerting. "OK, not friend then. Uh, ally?"

"I'll make the arrangements," Cas said stiffly and left.

Sam gave a meaningful glance to Gabriel. "Don't say anything," he cautioned.

"Who me?" Gabriel said innocently. "What could I possibly have to say? Except I had no idea my brother's eyes were so green."

Dean grabbed a rag to wipe his hands and saw Cas hovering close by.

"I didn't want to startle you and make you hit your head again," the angel said diffidently.

"I told you, that was partly my own fault," Dean said indulgently. "What's up?"

"I asked Sam about Crowley," Cas said. "He's OK with bringing him here if you are."

"Good," Dean said, slamming the Mustang's hood down.

"So you were adjusting this… carburetor," Cas said. "Sam said you would explain it if I asked."

A line formed between Dean's eyebrows. "Did he now? It's probably not that interesting if you're not
"I want to know," Cas insisted.

A slow smile spread across Dean's face. "OK. Is that the only thing you want to learn?"

"I'll learn anything you want to teach me," Cas said emphatically.

Dean swallowed at the innocent promise in that statement. Now was not the time to lose his head.

"Well, if Crowley's coming I guess we better go meet him. But after that, we can start, if you want."

Cas smiled with such pleasure, Dean wished he could make the angel that happy more often.

"Can I ask you a question?" Sam said. "A personal question?" It seemed to catch Gabriel off-guard.

"Uh, sure. I won't promise to answer, however." His gaze was steady but he seemed tense.

"No, that's OK," Sam promised.

"Then shoot."

"You eat food, mostly candy but still, food. You sleep, if you can get a comfortable bed. You uh," Sam coughed uncomfortably. "You have sex. They're all very… human things. Cas only does those things when his Grace is low. I'd like to understand why."

Gabriel didn't seem offended by the question, thankfully. "Well, some of it is because I've been on earth so long," he said. "You gain an appreciation for things if you try them and since humans get pleasure from food and sleep and sex, I figured I would at least try it out."

"OK, that makes sense. Cas complains that he can't taste food properly when he has his Grace. When he was Fallen, he could."

"It's a skill," Gabriel explained. "Celestial senses are sharper than human ones. That might sound good but for some things, like taste for example, it's too sharp. The effect is rather gross. You have to learn to turn down those senses to a level closer to a human's. I can teach Castiel how to do it. The question is, why do you want me to?"

"I never said that," Sam denied.

"OK, so why were you asking?" Gabriel's amber eyes were bright and too knowing.

"I was just curious. I-" Sam bit off the next question.

"You want to know what celestial senses do to the experience of sex?" Gabriel's eyes were compelling and as much as Sam wanted to look away, he couldn't.

"No," he said weakly. "I was actually going to ask about sleep."

"Sleep? Sleep is necessary for humans and animals because this world provides more sensory input than your brains can process while conscious. Sleep, and specifically dreams, are important for making sure your mind stays clear and focused during waking hours. Angel brains are not so overloaded by the sensory input of the world, so we don't need to switch off data collection in order to do that processing. It's that simple. But for me, I just find sleep pleasurable. Relaxing."
"Oh," Sam said, disappointed.

"Sex on the other hand, is different. Angels don't procreate, so we have no natural breeding instincts." Sam felt his face flush, which was ridiculous. "So, sexual attraction is not something that's hardwired, but our vessels do experience it. If an angel is in a vessel long enough, they will begin to experience sexuality on their own."

"I see," he said, shifting in his chair. Why the Hell had brought this up? The archangel was looking at him consideringly.

"So I have to wonder why you're asking me about sex, Sam?"

"I wasn't", Sam denied. When Gabriel smirked at him he added. "OK. You know why. Cas and Dean."

"Well, that's a pretty tangle, isn't it?" Gabriel said. "But you told me not to interfere."

"I haven't changed my mind," Sam asserted quickly. "I was just curious."

"Curiosity's healthy," Gabriel said sententiously. And then he flashed Sam a lascivious grin. "I'm always happy to satisfy you, in any way I can."

The tension in the library was palpable, Crowley noticed. He couldn't see anything untoward, other than a certain degree of hostility from Sam and a rigidity to Cas's stance that suggested his presence was not altogether welcome.

"Well," he said, rubbing his hands together. "Have I got a mystery for you."

"I think Cas already explained that we're not the Scooby gang," Dean said. But he looked almost pleased to see him, which was something at least.

"Eight demons, six angels and twelve vampires are missing," the demon king said. "And the angels were cupids."

"Cupids," Dean said, shuddering. Cas looked like he was chewing on a wasp.

"Indeed," Crowley said, warming up to his subject.

"You're sure they're all cupids?" Cas said sharply.

"Yes." Crowley tugged at his lapels. "So, I reckon this is about bloodlines. Cupids shape bloodlines to ensure specific humans are born. The vampires have their own breeding programs, I understand. And the demons who are missing were all Azazel loyalists, I'm sure I don't need to explain that connection."

"Bloodlines," Cas said slowly, a considering look on his face. "Which bloodlines, I wonder? The cupids and the demons, I could see them having overlapping interests. After all, they did in the run up to the Apocalypse. But the vampires? Their bloodline interests are totally different, because they're looking for strong potential recruits."

"Well, it's the only connection I can think of," Crowley said. "I don't suppose you have any intel on the old angel radio."

"It's been quiet," Cas said. "I think the confrontation with the Darkness has caused Heaven to retreat and rethink things."
"Makes sense," Dean commented. "So, OK, let's go with Crowley's theory. Someone is what? Kidnapping cupids and demons and vampires? Even as low ranking as they all are, that's not easy to kidnap and keep quiet all of those beings."

"Right," Sam agreed. "Which means this isn't one person. It can't be. It's gotta be a group." His phone buzzed and he picked it up from where it lay face down on the table. Sam picked it up, read a message on it and place it back on the table. "Uh, I don't suppose you've encountered any weird hybrid creatures?"

"Hybrids?" Crowley said, startled. "Not that I'm aware."

"And nothing about a… soulforge?"

"A soulforge!" Crowley yelped. "The last soulforge in the US was destroyed centuries ago. Don't tell me somebody's made another one."

"We don't know for sure," Sam said, a strange look on his face that Crowley couldn't interpret.

"Let me put out some feelers," Crowley offered. "I'm not saying it's impossible. But making a soulforge is hard and expensive. And honestly, as powerful as they are, you're always playing catch-up keeping it fed."

"What do you mean, keeping it fed?" Dean asked, his eyes narrowing.

"What do you know about soulforges?" Crowley asked.

"Only what I've told them," Cas said. "Which isn't much because that knowledge is forbidden."

"OK. Well, maybe Hell doesn't care about that so much. A soulforge is created with human souls, I'm sure Castiel told you that much." Dean and Sam nodded. "Well, creation is one thing. But soulforges need regular infusions of power. Human souls can be used, but so can other entities."

"Could some of these kidnap victims be for feeding a soulforge?" Sam asked him, his stomach roiling.

Crowley's face screwed up. "Not the demons or the angels, obviously. No souls. Vamps, maybe but twelve of them would keep a soulforge going for about a week. If this was about feeding a soulforge I would expect a lot more missing. What makes you think there's a soulforge out there anyway?"

"We've encountered some hybrid monsters," Sam explained. "A varcolac not far from here. And we've heard about a Jefferson Starship up in Kentucky."

"Varcolac? Blimey. Well, I can see why you think somebody's got a soulforge." He frowned. "Any reports of black vortices?"

"What the Hell are black vortices?" Dean asked. He was pale and sweating and Sam gave him a concerned look.

"A black vortex is a… hole in creation," Cas said. He gripped Dean's shoulder and squeezed. "No, we're not aware of any. Stop being so melodramatic, Crowley."

Sam shuddered. A hole in creation? That did not sound like something he wanted to see. "Is it something we should look out for?"

"No," Cas shook his head.
"Yes," Crowley contradicted. "The first sign is usually people behaving out of character. Which is a bit vague, I know. But think about the people Amara left soulless. It's kinda like that."

"These things suck the soul out of people?" Dean asked.

"Not exactly," Crowley admitted. "But the effect is similar."

"Enough," Cas said. "Crowley, I know you mean well but there's no reason to believe a black vortex will form. Let's deal with the problem we have, not one we're imagining."

Crowley narrowed his eyes at the angel then nodded. "OK. You win for now. So, what do we do?"

"Do you know where any of the missing were before they disappeared?" Sam asked.

"My factotum has a list," Crowley said. "I'll get him to email it to you."

"What are you thinking?" Dean turned to look at his brother.

"Geographic profiling," Sam told him. "It's a technique used by the FBI to locate and identify serial killers and other serial offenders. I use it sometimes when we're hunting, to track vamp nests, things like that."

"Huh," Dean said. "OK, it's probably worth a shot."

"Rogers will be in touch," Crowley said. His nostrils flared and his brow furrowed. "I'll be seeing you. And then he was gone."

Gabriel stepped out from behind a bookshelf. "Interesting," he commented. He strolled over to the table and tossed a manila folder to Sam.

"What's this?"

"I met your resident spook," Gabriel said. "He wanted me to find this."

"You mentioned a ghost earlier," Sam said. He noticed that neither Dean nor Cas looked surprised.

"Yes," Cas said. Dean elbowed him and Sam raised his eyebrows at them both.

"Were you planning to mention this anytime soon?"

"Yeah," Dean said. "There was just too much going on. We met it in the basement when you were in Peoria. It led us to a box."

"What was in it?" Sam asked.

"Nothing," Dean said. "I mean, not nothing, but nothing interesting. It was a case file, a big one, from 1934. Something to do with cave paintings in Massachusetts I think."

"Cave paintings?" Sam said, looking puzzled.

"Yeah. Or carvings, maybe. I dunno. It was boring." Dean shrugged. "It's in my room if you want to take a look."

Sam opened the file Gabriel had produced and skimmed it. "So this is a report on a murder, right here in the bunker," he said in alarm. "In 1934."
Dean blinked. "When was this?"

"May 20th. His name was Gil Schwartz. He'd transferred here from German Men of Letters according to this."

"Wait." Dean got out of his chair and left the room. Sam looked over at Gabriel, who had been unusually quiet. He was leaning against a wall, his face angelically blank.

"You OK?" he asked

Gabriel gave a one-shouldered shrug. "Yes." But he looked uncomfortable and Sam wasn't going to let himself be brushed off.

"Why don't you come and sit down instead of hovering like an uninvited guest?" he suggested. Gabriel flinched but nodded and hesitantly came over to sit next to Sam. The hunter gave him an encouraging smile which the archangel returned a little stiffly.

Dean returned carrying a large box and dumped it unceremoniously on the table. He rifled through it and pulled out a sheaf of paper. He handed it to Sam.

"'The Petroglyphs of Taunton River by Gil Schwartz, May 13th, 1934.' Oh, wow." Sam flipped through a few pages of the double-spaced typed report. Photographs had been carefully mounted in several locations, with reference numbers written in pen to indicate the locations of larger prints and negatives. "OK, I'll read this later. Let me tell you what happened to Schwartz first." He picked up Gabriel's report again.

"So get this, Schwartz had returned from Massachusetts on May 12th and spent the next day writing up his report. He filed that on May 14th. On May 17th, he was called into the office of his superior, Cuthbert Sinclair, for further questioning about his report. He filed a supplemental report on May 19th. On May 20th he was found dead in his room by his friend and colleague, Mark Vanness. The Men of Letters had their own medical examiner, and he performed the autopsy. Cause of death was determined to be strangulation, but although finger-shaped bruises were found on his neck, they didn't have the ability to lift fingerprints from skin in those days. I don't think they reported the death to the police. Schwartz had no family here in the US, so he was buried in a Jewish cemetery in Kansas City."

"So why did this ghost want you to find this?" Sam asked Gabriel.

"I assume he is Gil Schwartz," the archangel said easily. "They never found his killer I take it."

"No," Sam said, leafing through the rest of the investigative report. "But given who his supervisor was, I wonder…"

"Cuthbert Sinclair!" Dean exclaimed. "Magnus."

"Right," Sam said, nodding. "Maybe he was our killer. He certainly would have had no scruple in killing a fellow Man of Letters if it was in his interest."

"This was the Master of Spells you met a few years ago?" Cas asked. " Doesn't it seem strange to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Sinclair was a very powerful magic user," Cas replied. "This killing seems crude and there's no attempt to hide the body. Surely someone like Sinclair could have made Schwartz disappear without
a trace."

Sam's face twisted as he considered the angel's words. "That's a good point. Strangling someone is personal. Intimate, even."

Dean looked revolted. "Intimate?"

"Yeah. Don't look at me like that. I just mean that most stranglers either know their victims personally and hate them, or if they're strangers, there's a sexual dimension, like the Boston Strangler."

"So?"

"So, either Schwartz's killer throttled him for kicks, which seems unlikely. Or perhaps the killer was friends with Schwartz and was angry with him, killed him in a fit of rage." Sam picked up the other paperwork in Gabriel's file. "His personnel file doesn't list any problems with getting on with colleagues or an abrasive personality. He's quiet, hard-working and diligent."

"He doesn't sound like the type to rub someone up the wrong way," Dean agreed.

"So, I could believe Magnus might kill him if he knew something. Something he didn't want the higher-ups to know. But to kill him like this, and just leave the body lying around to be found doesn't sound like his M.O. at all."

"What about the friend that found him?" Cas asked.

"Mark Vanness? Don't know," Sam said. "There's nothing else in here about him."

"It's strange," Dean said. "This ghost is clearly restless but not angry, despite being here for over eighty years. And how come neither Sam nor me have seen it before?"

"The bunker's wards might suppress such activity," Cas suggested. "Perhaps something has awoken it." He cast a look at Gabriel, who ignored him.

"Well, I'm not much for murder mysteries," Dean declared. "That's more Sam's bag." He glanced at his watch. "I'm going to go back to working on the car. You coming, Cas?"

"Sure," the angel said, with a shy smile. Sam watched them leave and then turned to Gabriel. "What about you? Still interested?"

"Very," the archangel said, pulling the box Dean had found across the table. His nose was twitching with curiosity. He took out a box of photographs and began looking through them.

Sam grinned. "At least someone around here appreciates a good mystery." He helped himself to a spiral-bound notepad from the box and began to read.
"So, look here," Dean said, holding the spark-plug and pointing to the electrode, which was blackened with some kind of sooty deposit. "This is called fouling, and it's caused by the mixture of fuel and air having too much fuel."

"I see," Cas said, leaning closer.

Dean was distracted for a moment by the nearness of the warmth of Cas's breath on his skin. He drew in a shuddering breath. "So, we have to adjust the mixture on this thing here, the carburetor." Dean pointed to two screws with his screwdriver, ignoring the fact his hand was shaking. He replaced the spark plug and tightened it into place. "OK, now get in and start the engine for me, willya?"

Cas nodded and climbed into the driver's seat. The keys dangled from the ignition and he turned them, the car roaring into throaty life.

"Good, good." He saw Dean duck under the hood and the sound of the engine changed subtly. "OK, that sounds good. Give it a little gas."

The angel pressed the accelerator cautiously. "Ugh, OK, let up. Lemme give this another tweak." Cas eased off. "Right. Again, Cas." He pressed down again. "Yep, I think we're good. You can turn her off."

The angel switched the engine off and climbed out of the car. Dean had a smudge of black on his nose that made him smile. "How did you know what the right setting was?" he asked.

"Experience, mostly," Dean said modestly as he reattached the air filter. "You can smell it when the mix is too rich. And you can hear it, the sweet spot." He closed the hood and began wiping his hands on a rag. His eyes drifted over to the wreck of the Impala and he sighed.

"Are you going to be able to fix it?" Cas asked.

"Damn right I am," Dean said. "But it's gonna take time."

"Thank you for showing this to me," the angel said.

Dean clapped him on the shoulder. "Anytime."

"Dean," Cas said, looking nervous suddenly.

"What is it, Cas?"

"It's about Sam," the angel said. "Do you know he's lost weight?"

"I noticed back in Houston that he'd dropped a few," Dean said.
"It's more than a few now," Cas said. "I would estimate he's down over fifteen pounds."

"Jesus," Dean said. "That's a lot to lose in three weeks."

"Exactly," Cas said. "I'm concerned."

"OK, I'll talk to him," the hunter said. He eyed Cas for a moment. "Was that the real reason you came to watch me work on the Mustang?"

"No," the angel denied. "I... like watching you work with your hands." He looked chagrined by the admission. "But I realized that since I had you alone I should take advantage of you."

Dean flushed at the angel's phrasing. He knew Cas didn't mean it the way it sounded, and it was stupid to get flustered over it. "Sure. I uh... Let's go get cleaned up."

"Yes," Cas said, grinning suddenly. "You're filthy." Before Dean could react, he reached out and touched a finger to his nose and then held it up for his examination. Black grease was smeared over the angel's fingertip.

Dean cleared his throat and nodded, simultaneously wishing Cas would stop looking at him like that and that he'd look at him that way forever. He ducked his head and headed for the door.

Sam's phone began to ring and he jumped in surprise. He and Gabriel had been sat going through the box in comfortable silence and the sudden sound was jarring.

"Hello? Mom? Hey, how's Mel?"

"Not great," Mary said, sounding tired and unhappy. "Max is working his butt off but this curse is very difficult to break."

"Damn," Sam said. "Is there anything we can do to help?"

"No," Mary said. "It's not why I called."

"OK, what's up?" As he spoke, Dean walked into the room. His hair was wet and his face a little pink, suggesting he'd just gotten out of the shower. "It's mom," Sam said, covering the phone for a second. Dean brightened.

"Since I couldn't help here, I thought I would check out a case that caught my attention," Mary was saying. "But I think I'm gonna need your help."

"OK, mom, I'm gonna put you on speaker," Sam said, pressing a button on his phone and laying it on the table.

"OK, so at first I thought it was a banshee," Mary said, her voice tinny and thin through the phone's speaker. "A crop of eight suicides in a small town, all within the last week. People don't typically kill themselves by bashing in their own skulls, so it looked pretty textbook. But when I got here, that's when things got weird."

"Define weird," Dean said.

"Banshees use their scream to send their victims insane. They crack their skulls open to escape the sound, which of course only the target can hear."

"Yeah, we've encountered banshees before," Sam told her. "They're nasty."
"Right. But here, things weren't so simple. These weren't suicides, they were murder-suicides. Each victim killed a loved one before killing themselves." Mary paused. "More like a siren than a banshee."

"Mom, are you saying… what are you saying?" Sam stuttered.

"I don't know what this thing is," Mary said. "I can handle a banshee. But a siren's a different matter, and this thing isn't quite like either of those. Backup seems like a good idea at this point."

"OK, mom, we'll head up there. Uh, where are you?"

"Parksville, Vancouver Island."

"You're making me drive to Canada?" Dean squawked in outrage.

"Don't be ridiculous," Mary said. "You make it sound like an ungodly hellhole. I'll see you boys soon?"

"Yeah, mom," Sam said, giving his brother a quelling look. She hung up.

"Are you coming?" Dean said, turning to Cas.

"I think it might be wise. Gabriel?"

The archangel looked startled. "Are you inviting me?"

"No-" Dean said and Sam cut him off.

"Yes. If you want to. No pressure."

"I think I'll tag along then," Gabriel said.

Mary watched the silver Mustang swing into the parking lot of the motel and frowned to herself. The Impala must be in really bad shape if Dean was willingly driving another car.

"Hey mom," Sam said with a smile as he climbed out of the front seat. Castiel and Gabriel appeared from the back and Dean got out last. Mary pulled her boys in for a hug and then gave Sam a critical stare.

"You're thinner," she said bluntly.

Sam's face settled into a mulish pout. "I know. Dean's already pointed it out more than once."

"Sam, honey, if you're losing weight and it's not intentional, that's a bad thing, OK?" Mary told him.

"It's nothing to worry about," he deflected. "Can we talk about your case?"

"All right," Mary relented but her eyes told him they'd be having this conversation again. She turned her gaze to Gabriel and her expression became cold.

"Gabriel, is it? Why are you here?"

"Mom, I asked him to come," Sam said impatiently.

She propped her hands on her hips and glared at him. "I don't hunt with… strangers." Sam wondered what word she'd originally intended to use.
"He's not a stranger," he defended. "I promise he'll be helpful."

"Hmm," Mary said in a disbelieving tone. She looked at Dean, who shook his head at her.

"So, this banshee. Or siren, or whatever," Sam said, deliberately changing the subject.

"OK, come on. Let me show you what I've found." Mary strode towards her room and they all trailed in her wake.

"I can leave if I'm making your mother unhappy," Gabriel muttered to Sam.

"No," Sam said firmly. "Mom's… got a lot on her mind. I'm sorry she was rude to you."

"It's fine," Gabriel assured him. "I understand, she's protective of her boys."

Inside Mary's room, she'd pinned up a large map of the area and marked each of the murder-suicides with red pins. Other colored pins were scattered across the surface.

"The red pins are the deaths," Mary explained unnecessarily. "I've marked all the locations the victims visited in the days before their deaths. Each one is a different color. So for example, white here is Ed Vitali. He was the most recent vic."

Sam peered at the map. "There's only a few places they all intersect. This diner on Island Highway, an elementary school on Despard Avenue and the Cumberland Lake Campground."

"Right," Mary said. "The diner's a popular lunch spot, so I think that's probably coincidence. The school is interesting. Of the eight suicides, four had kids at the school, one worked there as a teacher, one coached baseball and soccer. That leaves two who I have no idea why they would visit an elementary school. Raynaud Thayer was a single, 32 year old graphic designer originally from Winnipeg. Bruno Segal was 40 and worked at the Cumberland Park campground."

"What about that campground," Sam said. "They all visited that area too."

"According to the deputy, the campground runs these adventure camping trips. All the vics were on the trip, except Raynaud Thayer. Again, I just can't figure out why he was there."

"But maybe that explains why Segal was at the school," Sam said.

"Maybe," Mary said, but she looked doubtful. "But he was in charge of the boat launch. None of the kids went boating."

"All right, well, you said you talked to the police," Dean interjected. Mary nodded in acknowledgement. "And the school?"

"I spoke to Ellen Beckham, the principal," Mary explained. "But she wasn't much help. I wanted to speak to someone at the campground but nobody there would talk to me."

"Odd," Sam said. "OK. Gabriel and I will go up to the campground, see if we can coax anyone into speaking with us."

"Have you spoken to any of the families?" Dean asked his mother. She shook her head.

"That was next on my list."

"OK, Cas and I will tag along with you. Let's meet back here in-" he looked at his watch. "Four hours."
"Did you deliberately separate us from your mom and Dean?" Gabriel asked as they walked up the trail to the campground.

"Yes," Sam admitted freely. "I thought it might be best."

"This is nice," the archangel said, looking around. "Very romantic."

Sam choked and glared at Gabriel when he started laughing. "Very funny." He strode away down the path, leaving the archangel to run after him.

"Hey, wait up," Gabriel said breathlessly. He looked around at the trees, a light mist clinging to the tops. "Sam!"

"What is it?"

"I don't know," Gabriel admitted. "But I feel like we're being watched."

Sam tensed and spent a few moments carefully checking for any sign of life. But the woods were still and there was no sign of any campers or staff.

"OK," he said. "Let's keep going, but stay alert." He frowned and then pulled Ruby's knife from his belt and offered it to Gabriel, who took it with a surprised look.

"I don't like the idea of you walking around unarmed," Sam explained. The way the archangel's mouth softened with some unexpressed emotion made him feel a little peculiar so he looked away and drew his gun, making a play of checking the clip to hide his discomfort.

A loud crack, somewhere deep in the forest made him freeze. When there were no more sounds, he moved forward slowly. There was a clearing up ahead, with some picnic tables and a hastily constructed rain-shelter where a man was huddled looking rather miserable.

"Hey," Sam said, quickly tucking his gun away and making a gesture at Gabriel. "You OK?"

"Oh!" He was tall, although not as tall as Sam, with a neatly trimmed beard and aviator sunglasses on top of his head. His orange jacket had a long tear down the front and his jeans were brown with mud. "I uh, had an accident. My buddy was supposed to go get help but he's been gone for hours." He didn't look badly hurt, Sam thought, and they weren't that far from the road. What was going on here?

"What happened?"

"I fell down a ridge and hit my head," the man explained. "Ricky thought I might have a concussion, so he told me to wait here. But it's been hours."

"OK. Well, I'm Sam and this here is uh, Gabe."

"Nathaniel," he said, holding out his hand. It was muddy and there were several scrapes and lacerations. He looked down at it in surprise. "Oh. I guess I'm kind of a mess."

"I'm not a doctor but I do know some first aid," Sam said. "Why don't I take a look at you?"

"Sure," Nathaniel said. Sam pulled out his flashlight and shone it in his eyes, noting that his pupils were different sizes and the left one barely reacted to the bright light. He nodded to himself, Nathaniel's friend was probably right about a concussion. "Can you turn around so I can see where you hit your head?"
"Sure," Nathaniel said. He moved and pointed to the left side of his head. There was a huge matting of hair and blood, enough to make Sam wince at the sight of it. He put the flashlight away and pulled out his phone instead, cursing when he realized there was no signal.

"Can you walk?" he asked. "If we walk back to the entrance, we can use their phone to call for help."

"How far is it?" Nathaniel said plaintively.

"Maybe ten minutes, no more," Sam promised. Nathaniel nodded and then flinched.

They started walking back the way they'd come, Sam on one side and Gabriel on the other.

"So are you guys here to hunt?" Nathaniel asked.

"Something like that," Sam said.

"Ricky and I come here a lot," the injured man told them. "The hunting's better on the other side of the lake, but the boat launch is on this side, I like to fish too."

"How long have you and Ricky been friends?" Gabriel asked.

"Since high school," Nathaniel said. He began to gasp and Sam turned to him in alarm.

"Nathaniel?"

The man was shaking and without warning he collapsed to the ground, his eyes rolling back in his head.

"Shit," Sam swore and knelt down in the mud. "Gabriel, take your belt off and jam it into his teeth, stop him biting his tongue off. The archangel moved immediately to obey without argument, to Sam's relief.

"Hey, Nathaniel," he said. "Hey, hey. You're OK."

"Oh God! Ricky, Ricky, no please, Ricky!" Nathaniel was yelling incoherently and Sam started to get a very bad feeling. He looked up to see another man, a little shorter than Nathaniel but broad and solidly built. His blond hair was stained with blood and there was a wild look in his eyes. He was totally focused on the convulsing man on the floor.

Sam wasted no time in drawing his weapon. "Hey. Stay back."

The newcomer ignored him, raising a large branch over his head and roaring, a loud animalistic sound. He rushed forward, leaving Sam with little choice but to fire. He staggered back when the bullet hit, but was otherwise unaffected.

"Dammit."

"Sam!" Gabriel yelped as the branch swung towards his head. He ducked out of the way but it caught him a glancing blow on the side of his skull. He staggered and struggled to remain upright. If he fell down, this maddened man would kill him.

His attacker gave out another roar and Sam blinked blurry eyes to see Ruby's knife flash as Gabriel neatly hamstrung the man. He collapsed to the ground and began to crawl, snarling viciously, towards Sam.
"Oh, no you don't!" Gabriel exclaimed. He cast an apologetic look at Sam and clicked his fingers. Sam couldn't quite comprehend what was happening. Suddenly, Gabriel had a golden sword in his hand that seemed to warp and waver in his vision. Gabriel stabbed it downwards, right into the man's neck and the resulting scream made Sam feel like his eyeballs were about to burst from his skull. And then it was mercifully silent.

Unable to stand any longer, Sam toppled to the ground in a dead faint.

"I'm tired of answering the same questions, over and over," Sienna Sands said angrily when Dean introduced himself as Agent Rutherford. "And what the Hell is the American FBI doing investigating a case here?"

"I was invited up because of a similarity with a case down in Washington state," Dean lied easily.

"Well, I've already told the cops everything I know," Sienna snapped. She went to close her door and Mary's hand shot out to stop her.

"Wait," she said. "I know you've been questioned more times than you'd like. But a lot of people are dead and we're no closer to finding out what happened than we were when the first body dropped."

Sienna sighed and opened the door again. "Look, my brother was a creep, OK. Jules, my sister-in-law, was a fool for putting up with his bullshit. He cheated on her so many times, I can't even count. She kept saying she would leave, but she never did."

"Do you think maybe she did try to leave and he killed her for it?" Dean asked. Mary gaped at his bluntness but Sienna didn't seem to mind.

"Maybe," she admitted. "It certainly wouldn't be a surprise. But in that case, how does it tie in to your serial killer?"

"I never said we were tracking a serial killer," Dean defended.

"Come on, I watch TV. Look, I don't know. All I know is, Jules is dead. Her skull was totally caved in. And Ed cracked his own head open like an egg with a mallet."

"Christ," Dean muttered.

"Affair? Nothing so romantic. He liked glory holes, so Jules reckoned." Dean saw Cas's mouth open and he kicked the angel in the ankle. Cas gave him a wounded look but stayed quiet.

"OK, Sienna. Thanks for your time. One more thing, do you know where Ed went to uh-"

"The Roadhouse. It's just outside the city limits." Sienna stood and opened the door.

"Thanks," Mary said. "You've been a big help."

Sam's head hurt abominably. He shifted uncomfortably, was he lying on a pile of rocks? He tried to open his eyes, but the light was so bright he cried out.

"Hey, Sam," a familiar voice said. "Can you hear me?"

"Uh," Sam said incomprehensibly.
"It's OK, Sam. You took one hell of a whack to the head, but we're gonna get you outta here, OK? But to do that, you gotta help me." A hand stroked his face and Sam felt something warm and wet on his face.

"OK," he managed and tried to open his eyes again. His eyes met a golden gaze and he gave a weak smile. "Gabriel."

"Hi Sam. OK, so I want you to slowly try and stand, OK? I'll help you. Just take it easy." Sam realized then that he was lying across the archangel's lap. He shifted to put his arms under him and pushed slowly to a sitting position. Gabriel carefully scrambled out from underneath him and stood, one hand on his shoulder. Sam looked up at him, wincing at the brightness of the sky.

"Do you think you can stand?" Gabriel's face was taut with concern.

"I think so," Sam lied. He grabbed the archangel's proffered hand and to his surprise was able to haul himself to his feet. He felt as weak as a day old kitten, but he was upright. He swayed and Gabriel quickly ducked under his arm to provide support.

They moved slowly, stumbling occasionally on the uneven ground. Although the small building that served as office and general store at the entrance to the campground was not far away, in his current condition the walk seemed to take hours. He wanted to weep when they finally reached the door and Gabriel pushed it open and he was able to drop down onto a wooden bench to rest.

"Sam? Don't fall asleep on me, Sammy," Gabriel admonished as his eyes drifted closed. "I need Dean's number."

Sam blinked slowly at him and then reeled it off from memory. Gabriel flashed him a quick smile and then picked up the handset on the desk.

"Dean? It's Gabriel. We're in trouble."

As Dean parked the car outside the home of Lucy Garnet Denis, the ex-wife of the third victim, Louis Denis, his phone rang. The unfamiliar number made him frown but he answered. Mary watched with alarm as Dean stiffened.

"Where are you? Is Sam hurt?"

She couldn't hear the reply but she didn't need to. That damned Gabriel had let her son get injured and dammit there would be hell to pay.

"Change of plan. Sam and Gabriel ran into trouble at the campground." Dean cranked the engine and threw the car into drive, the tires squealing in protest as he pulled away.

They reached the campground ten minutes later, by which point Mary had built up a nice head of steam. She strode across the lot to the store cum office and yanked the door open. The sight that greeted her was disturbing. Sam lay on a wooden bench, his head in the lap of the so-called archangel, who was looking down at him with a worried expression. He was carding his hand through Sam's hair and muttering to him in a language Mary didn't recognize.

"Sam!" Dean exclaimed behind her and dashed to his brother's side. Cas pushed past Mary and knelt down beside her son.

"Sam," he rumbled. He didn't respond.
"What happened?" Dean demanded as Cas laid his hands on Sam's forehead.

"We were attacked by this man, he hit Sam with a big-ass tree-branch," Gabriel told him. "I managed to get him in here so I could use the phone, since there's no cell signal out here."

Sam groaned and Cas removed his hands. His eyes flickered open and he smiled.

"Hey," he said. He turned his head and Mary was glad to see his eyes were clear. Gabriel's damn hands were still on him though, and that was making her antsy. She stayed still and silent through sheer force of will.

"OK, Sam," Cas said. "Can you try and sit up?"

"Sure," Sam said and slowly pushed himself upwards. "Yeah, I'm good." He swung his legs onto the floor.

"OK, we had the headlines. What actually happened?"

"We met this guy, Nathaniel, up the trail there. According to him, he fell and hit his head on a ridge and his friend Ricky went to get help. Except when we tried to bring him here, Ricky appeared and attacked us." Sam turned to look at Gabriel, a line appearing between his brows. "I can't remember much after that."

"He hit you with that tree branch so I dived in and hamstrung the motherfucker with that knife you gave me," Gabriel snarled. "Nathaniel had managed to crawl over to us and wailing 'Ricky, Ricky'. He grabbed Nathaniel and smashed his head into the ground, over and over. He just kept going so I stabbed him in the neck. But he just wouldn't die and I couldn't stop him. Finally, when the kid was dead, he started banging his own head against a rock until he was dead."

Sam frowned at him and opened his mouth, but seemed to think better of it and closed it again. Mary took a deep breath. "You nearly got my son killed," she said tightly.

"Mom," Sam said and she whirled around, her eyes hot.

"No," she said. "I will say my piece." She turned back to the archangel. "I don't know you. I don't like you and I don't trust you. I certainly don't think you've got my son's best interests at heart. So let me be plain, fuck up like that again and I will kill you."

"Winchesters," Gabriel sighed. "Always with the threats."

"Don't you dare mock me," Mary snarled, baring her teeth at him. Dean placed a restraining hand on her arm.

"Mom," Sam said, standing up. His face was furious and Mary blinked at him. "Can we have a word?" He nodded towards the door and strode outside. Mary exchanged a look with Dean and then followed him.
"Look, I appreciate your concern," Sam said as soon as they were out of earshot. "But don't threaten to kill my friends again."

"Some friend," Mary retorted.

A muscle ticked in Sam's jaw as he wrestled with his temper. "If it wasn't for Gabriel, I'd be dead. Whatever the hell was going on with Ricky, he was unbelievably strong and bullets barely slowed him down. Gabriel killed him before he could finish me off."

Mary shook her head. "He said the guy finished himself off."

Sam looked puzzled. "Yeah, I know. I… Look, whatever. Point is, he disabled him and if he hadn't, the son of a bitch would have hit me with that branch again and I don't think I'd have survived a second blow. So cut him some slack, OK?"

Mary huffed out a breath. "OK. For now. But I'm not backing down, Sam. There's something not right here. I'm gonna be watching him like a hawk."

"Fine," Sam sighed. "I can't stop you. But give him a chance, please."

Dean eyed Gabriel for a moment, noting the tension in the archangel's body as he watched Sam and Mary argue outside.

"You hurt?" he asked.

Gabriel shook his head. "Not seriously. I'll have some interesting bruises no doubt, but nothing more."

"Mom and I are just looking out for Sam, you know," Dean continued.

"I know," Gabriel replied. "I wish I could convince you I'm no threat to him."

"Oh I already know that," Dean said. "If I thought you were, there's no way you'd be staying in the bunker."

Gabriel regarded him carefully. "But Mary feels differently."

"She was wary of me when we first met," Cas offered. "But we've come to an understanding."

"Did she threaten to kill you too?" Gabriel snarked.

"No," Cas said. "Her reaction to you is admittedly much stronger."

"Great," Gabriel said.

"So what the Hell happened out there?" Dean said, changing the subject.

"I told you-"

"No, I mean, what was wrong with the guy? Was he a monster or a human under the influence of a monster?"
"The latter, I think," Gabriel said. "He was immensely strong and full of rage, like the old berserkers. He swung that branch around like a baseball bat. We were lucky Sam's reflexes are good, if he'd caught the full force of the blow I'm not sure he would have made it." The archangel's mouth was turned down and he was staring down at the floor. He made an odd noise and his shoulders began to shake. To Dean's horror, he realized the strange sounds were sobs. Utterly unable to cope with this unexpected outpouring of emotion he looked helplessly at Cas. The seraph had already begun to move, sitting down on the bench next to his brother. Gabriel let out a howl and threw himself into Cas's arms, where he remained shivering and gasping for a few minutes.

Nonplussed, Dean turned his attention to the window. Sam and his mom seemed to have calmed down at least, and were heading back to the store.

"Incoming," he said by way of a warning. He heard the two angels shift and by the time Sam opened the door, Cas had stood and moved over to Dean's side. Gabriel's face was a little pale but there was no other sign of his distress.

"OK, so I think we should go take a look at this Ricky and his friend," Sam suggested. "Maybe there's some clue as to what we're hunting here."

"Good idea," Dean said and without thinking, grabbed Cas's arm and dragged him towards the door. Mary gave him a curious look before shrugging and following him out.

Sam peered at Gabriel. "Are you OK? I never asked if you were hurt."

"No, I'm fine," Gabriel said, his voice wobbling.

"You don't sound fine," Sam said sternly. He knelt in front of the archangel and with his fingers tilted his chin up.

Gabriel shifted his head away from Sam's touch. "I'm OK. You gave me a scare is all."

"All right. You up to taking a look at this body?"

Gabriel gave him a feeble grin. "Sure."

Crowley sipped at the fancy cognac his guest had brought him and nodded approvingly. "Nice."

"I thought you would approve," the man said. His delicate features and soulful brown eyes made Crowley's heart pound faster and the way his long, black hair shifted as he spoke was almost hypnotic. Damn he was hot, Crowley thought idly. Those elegant fingers would look so very fine wrapped around his-

The stranger cleared his throat.

"So what can I do for you?" the demon king said hoarsely.

"One of my siblings has gone missing," his guest said. "Since there are so few of us, you understand that this is the source of some concern."

"Of course," Crowley agreed. "How many phoenixes are there these days?"

"Five," the man said. "Not including me."

"I don't suppose you have a name?" Crowley asked.
"What do I need with a name?" the phoenix laughed. "But you can call me Darius." He canted an eyebrow at Crowley and the demon swallowed in nervous anticipation.

"So, uh, your sibling?"

"Olivia. She has been living for many years in the Cascades. We are not social creatures, you understand. And Olivia has already had her only offspring, so she saw no need to engage in further social interaction."

"You can only have one offspring?" Crowley blurted out.

"Yes. We pick a time to reproduce, find a suitable partner and have one child. That's it. My species is immortal, and very hard to kill. If we could reproduce like the mortal species, we would have out-competed them long ago."

"Instead, you're almost extinct," Crowley said.

"Not quite. Our numbers are relatively stable, because we choose reproductive partners from other species."

"I see," Crowley said, wondering why the phoenix was telling him this.

"So, Olivia had her offspring about ten years ago," Darius explained. "It will take a century at least before the egg hatches but she will need to be there when it does. If she is dead… I do not know if her child will survive."

"Do you know where the egg is?" Crowley asked.

"Yes, it's safe. But we need to find Olivia." Darius began pacing back and forth. "You're the king of Hell. If anyone can find her, it's you."

"Oh, certainly," Crowley bluffed. "So, what do I get in return?"

"My undying gratitude," Darius said. "That's not a small thing, from a phoenix."

"I'm sure," Crowley said. "But I like my payment to be a bit more tangible."

"What do you want?" Darius raked him up and down with a glance. "Let me guess. You're not that powerful a demon, despite being king. What you need is to consolidate your power."

Crowley glared at him, but couldn't deny the phoenix was right. "What did you have in mind?"

"A raw source of power. It's called the letalis aqua."

"A power source called 'death water'? Sounds legit," Crowley snarked.

"Well, for humans drinking of it would be lethal," Darius allowed. "So, are you interested? Help me find my sister and I'll take you to the fountain."

"I don't know," Crowley said honestly. "I didn't get to be king of Hell by being stupid. Why would you share such a powerful thing with me? Don't pretend this is about deep love and affection for Olivia."

"I wouldn't insult your intelligence," Darius said mildly. "But there are few enough of us that the loss of even one is a crisis. And I have not yet reproduced myself. If Olivia is gone, I will have to raise her offspring if I can, which means I must put off my own reproductive cycle again."
"Again?"

"My brother, Elias was the last phoenix to be destroyed. His offspring had hatched a mere handful of years before he was slain. Olivia and I had to raise him ourselves. He was past the most trying age, thankfully and will make it to adulthood without incident I think."

"I'll think about it," Crowley said. He'd already decided he wanted nothing to do with this mess, but didn't want to say so to this beautiful but deadly creature's face.

"Perhaps I can persuade you," Darius said, stalking towards him with clear intent. He gazed at Crowley with unabashed lust. Fuck. How was he supposed to turn this down? Darius dropped to his knees in front of him.

"Your majesty," he said, looking up at Crowley through thick lashes. The king of Hell gave up. He was a demon, for crying out loud. Resisting temptation was not in his nature.

Sam and Gabriel found Dean inspecting the body of Nathaniel while Cas and Mary were focused on Ricky.

"Find anything?" Sam walked over to his mom and looked down at the corpse on the ground. Everything Gabriel had said lined up with the evidence. The hamstrings were sliced cleanly at the ankle. A stab wound to the neck was severe and had caused an impressive amount of damage. And the man's skull was cracked open like an egg. He wondered why his memories just before he'd passed out did not quite match what Gabriel had said. He frowned and resolved to press the archangel further when they were alone.

"I wonder if Nathaniel here told you the truth," Dean said from his crouched position.

"Why?" Sam asked.

"Well, look here. This wound on his head, the one he supposedly got from falling and hitting his head?" Dean pointed. "There are wood splinters. If he fell and hit his head on a rock, why would they be there?"

"You think Ricky attacked him and he got away? Why lie about it?" Sam poked his fingers through Nathaniel's hair, and examined the slivers of wood.

"No idea. Maybe he got confused, you said he was concussed, right?" Satisfied, Dean stood up and wandered over to Mary and Cas. He picked up the branch from the ground and whistled.

"Wow, that thing is hefty. No wonder he nearly split your skull, Sam." He dropped it again and rubbed his hands on his jeans. "Hey, is this from you?"

"Is what from me?" Sam walked over to join him and looked at where he was pointing. There was a trail of blood drops leading off into the forest. "No, it can't be. I fell down over there somewhere," he waved to where Ricky's body lay. "And the store is that way too. We didn't come this way. Maybe it was Nathaniel?"

"In which case, maybe we can trace it back to the site of the original attack," Mary concluded.

"Do you think that will help?" Dean asked.

"Who knows? But right now we've got a lot of dead bodies and not much else to go on."
"Good enough for me," Dean agreed. "Let's go."

The blood spots led into the forest, along a narrow but well-maintained trail. They followed it for almost twenty minutes before the spots vanished into the thick undergrowth.

"Dammit," Dean swore, looking around.

"Dean," Sam said, pointing to a tree behind him. There was a place where a large branch had clearly recently broken off.

While they were examining the tree, Mary had cautiously left the trail and began pushing through the bushes. "Hey!" she called out. "Come take a look at this!"

Dean cut a path through the branches using a knife. "OK, Mom, what have you got?"

"Here," Mary said, pointing to a large patch of blood on the ground.

"I guess this was the spot," Dean said, leaning over to take a closer look.

"What is it?" Sam said from behind him.

"I think we found where the first attack happened." Dean responded. Something caught his eye and he knelt down to pick it up. "Well, look at that."

"What is it?" Mary asked. He dropped it into her palm. "It looks like a promise ring."

"Read the inscription."

"To Nathaniel, all my love, Richard. Oh, no." Mary looked distressed. "They were lovers."

"See, that's what didn't make sense," Dean said. "All the others killed their spouses or girlfriends or whatever. Ricky and Nathaniel didn't fit the pattern, two buddies who went hunting together?"

"So we think this is a siren then?" Mary asked.

"Must be," Dean said. "Just a really fucked up one. Why did they leave the trail though?"

"I don't know for sure," Sam said. "But maybe this cave had something to do with it?" The opening in the blackish rock was more like a crack, barely wide enough for a person to slide through. On either side of the crack were strange carvings like hieroglyphics. Sam pulled out his phone and began snapping a few pictures. The symbols seemed mesmerizing somehow. He reached out his hand and traced over a couple of the shapes with his fingers.

"Sam!" Gabriel's voice cracked like whip. "No!"

Sam snatched his hand back in surprise. "What is it?" The archangel pushed him out of the way and beckoned for Cas to come closer.

"Gabriel, is this…"

"Yes. Hell, we need to get out of here." Gabriel began to back away from the cave, slipping on the muddy ground. He grabbed Sam's hand for support and then dragged him back to the trail. Cas started herding Dean and Mary in the same direction.

"What was that language?" Sam asked.
"Better not to ask," Gabriel warned. "It's dead. And the people who invented it are long gone."

Sam glared at him. "Seriously? We're in the middle of a hunt and you're gonna start keeping secrets?"

"Not secrets," Gabriel denied, looking hounded. "But we can't be here. It's not safe!"

"I agree," Cas said. "This is not a safe place and it's probably not related to the case. We need to focus on finding the monster at work here."

"But we still don't know who it is," Sam said in frustration.

“Well, there is one clue,” Dean said. "The glory hole at the Roadhouse."

Sam's eyebrows shot up. "The what?"

"Oh, one of the vics apparently cheated on his wife that way," Dean shrugged.

"Right," Sam said, an uncomfortable feeling beginning to form. "And we're going to investigate this how, exactly?"

"Well, I can only think of two ways," Dean said seriously. He cast a sideways glance at their mother. "One of us has to go check it out. Either as uh, client or… service provider."

"No," Sam said, shaking his head in revulsion. "No way."

"Come on, Sam," Dean said encouragingly.

"You do it if you think it's such an awesome idea," Sam snapped. Gabriel noticed the young hunter had gone pale.

"I agree," he interjected. "If you're so sure it's a good idea, why should Sam be the one to do it?"

"Enough," Mary said. "Nobody's forcing anyone into this. We'll just have to think of something else." She stalked off down the trail. Sam gave Dean an angry glare and followed her. Both angels were scowling at him.

"What did I do?" Dean asked.

"You just asked your sexually traumatized brother to perform sex acts with a stranger," Cas said acidly, and Dean gaped at him.

"You what now?"

"You heard him," Gabriel said, looking just as pissed.

"Now wait a second, when did anyone say anything about trauma? I know that Lady Bevell bitch put a bit of mojo on him to make him think they'd screwed but calling it a trauma is laying it on a bit thick ain't it?" Dean looked from Cas to Gabriel and back again.

"Perhaps for you it might not seem so bad," Gabriel said icily. "Sam's a bit more sensitive than you are for a number of reasons. Not least of which are the depredations my brother visited upon him, years ago."

"Fuck," Dean said. "Lucifer… my brother… are you saying what I think you're saying?" He stumbled and leaned heavily against a tree. "Fuck, I think I'm gonna hurl."
"I thought you knew about this," Cas said. "Didn't Sam talk to you?"

"He didn't tell me about… ugh God!" Dean groaned and vomited noisily. Cas sighed and walked over to him, laying a hand on his back.

Gabriel took a deep breath, carefully reining in his temper. Maybe Dean hadn't understood what Sam had meant when he'd talked to his brother about his time as Lucifer's vessel. Knowing Sam, he probably hadn't been explicit. Or maybe he had unconsciously chosen to ignore the oblique references Sam had made. Humans could be like that, he knew.

"I'm going to check on Sam," he told Cas and left his brother to deal with the wreckage of Dean Winchester.

Mary was stalking angrily back and forth in front of the store when Gabriel approached. She stopped pacing and stood in his path.

"Gabriel," she said, her head at a defiant angle. "I owe you an apology."

Gabriel blinked in astonishment. "You do?"

"I was wrong about you. My older son can be a little bull-headed, just like his mom it seems. He was hurting Sam and didn't even realize it. But you did, and you stood up for him. Don't get me wrong, there was no way I was going to let it happen. I just want you to know I'm sorry I misjudged you." She looked uncomfortable and the resemblance she'd referred to between herself and Dean was never more obvious than in that moment. "OK," she added, when Gabriel struggled to find something to say. "Good talk."

"I don't think Dean quite appreciated what he was asking," Gabriel told her. "He's a little shook up."

Mary narrowed her eyes at him. "There's a lot here I don't know, isn't there?"

"Yes," Gabriel confessed. "And I can't be the one to tell you."

"He's my son! How can you keep this from me?" Mary said accusingly.

Gabriel thrust his hands into his hair. "Turns out Sam told his brother a highly edited version of events when he was Lucifer's vessel. The only person he's told everything to is Castiel. I only know what I've gathered from what Sam has been willing to tell me and the rest I'm guessing about. You can't ask me or Castiel to tell you what Sam has been unwilling to talk about."

"God," Mary said. "This is all my fault."

"Not really," Gabriel told her. "Heaven manipulated events very carefully, and Azazel was a wily operator. No offence, but you really didn't stand a chance. Now, I'd really like to go check on Sam."

"He's in the bathroom," Mary said. She sat down on the hood of the car, her arms wrapped around herself. Gabriel wanted to offer her some words of comfort, but he wasn't sure there was anything he could say.

Inside the small store, he quickly spotted the sign to the restroom. He knocked on the door and waited. After a moment, he heard the lock click and Sam poked his head out. His relief when he saw Gabriel was momentarily gratifying. The grayish pallor of his skin was not.

"Sammy," the archangel said. "I think we're done for the day. Once Dean and Cas get back we're
gonna head to the motel." He reached up almost without thinking to touch Sam's face and the young hunter deftly moved out of range.

"OK," Sam said woodenly. "Lemme wash up and I'll be right with you." The door closed again and Gabriel kicked over an unoffending display of postcards in frustration.

"Dean," Cas said gently, rubbing soothing circles on his back. "It'll be getting dark soon. If we're not hunting tonight, maybe we should call it a night?"

"Yeah, sure," Dean said heavily. He wiped his mouth and took a few deep breaths before heading back to the trail. He eyed the angel and Cas could feel him gathering his courage to ask a question.

"How long have you known?"

"He's been talking with me about it over the past few years." Cas said, grimacing. "I'm not sure he's told me everything, but he's told me enough. I didn't realize he hadn't told you as well."

"No, because I'm such a crappy brother, I didn't even notice Sammy was fucking suffering from PTSD!" Dean punched a random tree trunk and then swore in pain.

"It's not your fault," Cas comforted. "It's possible he wasn't comfortable sharing it with you."

"Yeah, I guess it makes sense. I'd probably do the same thing." Dean slung an arm around the angel's shoulders and pulled him in for a one-sided hug. "Thanks for being there for him, man." He dropped his arm again as they left the woods and approached the car. Mary was sitting on the hood of the car and Sam and Gabriel were leaving the store.

"Don't you think it's odd that there's nobody here?" Mary said when she heard them approach.

"Yeah," Sam said. "There wasn't anyone here earlier either."

"But somebody must come and lock up," Gabriel said reasonably. "I mean otherwise the store would be looted."

"What if the monster, whatever it is, is the owner?" Mary suggested. "All the victims came here for one reason or another. What time does the sign say it closes, Sam?"

"6pm," Sam said. "Which is about thirty minutes from now."

"You wanna stake the place out?" Dean suggested.

Sam looked at Gabriel and then shrugged with studied casualness. "What's the harm? If it turns out to be a bust, we'll go get pizza and beer and go back to the motel." There was still a shadow behind his eyes but he didn't seem to be holding a grudge.

"Now that's a plan I can get on board with," Mary said. "We'll need to stash the car."

"I'll do it," Dean said. "You go hide out in the tree line, I'll meet you there in a few."

"Depends how good this thing's eyes are," Sam warned. But he dutifully followed the angels and his mom back to the woods. They managed to find some bushes dense enough that even if the creature had perfect night vision, a casual glance would not reveal them. Hopefully.

Dean returned about five minutes later and joined them in the bushes. "Anything?"
"Not yet," Sam hissed.

As the sun began to set, Sam realized that huddled behind these bushes, his leg was beginning to cramp. He shifted uncomfortably and bumped against Gabriel's shoulder.

"You OK?" the archangel whispered.

"Yeah, it's just my right leg going to sleep," he muttered back, then bit back a yelp when he felt Gabriel's fingers began massaging his tortured thigh muscles. But once he got over the initial surprise, it became clear Gabriel had some hidden talents. His clever fingers manipulated the muscle, forcing more bloodflow through and after some initial pain, the cramps receded and Sam had to bite his tongue not to groan with relief.

"Better?" he asked in a low voice.

"Oh God, yes," Sam whispered. The fingers paused and he added, "Don't stop." They started moving again and Sam was vaguely aware that he'd switched from pain relief to sheer pleasure at the sensation of being touched. "OK," he stuttered. "Thanks." He felt Gabriel's hand withdraw and tried not to regret it.

There was a crunching sound as a light-colored pickup truck pulled slowly into the lot. They all froze as the headlights briefly illuminated their hiding spot. But either the bushes were too thick for the light to penetrate, or the woman who climbed out of the truck was not expecting anyone to be lying in wait for her.

"Son of a bitch," Dean breathed. "It's Sienna Sands."

"Who's that?" Sam hissed.

"The sister of Ed Vitali," Dean told him. "He's one of the victims."

"She's the monster?" Sam asked. "That doesn't really fit."

"No," Dean said. "She seemed human to me."

Her phone rang and she answered it as she locked up the store one-handed. "Hey, Ed."

"Ed?" Mary said.

"It's a common name," Dean said unconvincingly.

"No, there's nobody here. Wait. There's… ah it's Richard Evans. Shit, he's a mess. And here's poor old Nathaniel Broadbent. You were right."

They watched as she poked at the bodies with her foot. "I'll have to call it in. The sheriff's not going to believe I didn't see two dead bodies lying out in the open like this."

"What the fuck is going on here?" Dean murmured.

"She's in league with it," Mary spat. "It happens sometimes. Collaborators. Traitors to humanity."

"OK, if that's what you want. But don't let anyone see you." Sienna was saying. She hung up and shoved the phone in her purse, walking over to the store and unlocking it again before heading inside.
"Bingo," Dean said. "The thing's coming here."

"If Ed's the monster," Sam said. "But even if he is, we still don't know what he is or how to kill him."
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning - non-explicit implications of incest (not Wincest) and rape.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Crowley lay sprawled on his enormous bed, the sheets a hopeless tangle and his body deliciously sore and heavy with lethargy. It had been some time since he'd had a lover so... enthusiastic. There was a tentative tap at the door and he sighed. No rest for the wicked. And he was so very, very wicked.

"Come in."

"My lord," Rogers said. Crowley opened one eye to see the demon staring openly at him. "I uh…" Crowley lazily dragged a sheet over himself and closed his eye again. "I have more news."

"Do I have to drag myself out of bed to torture it out of you?"

"No, sire. I'm sorry," Ugh, the little snot was grovelling. "But you asked if anyone had ever heard of this letalis aqua. I put out some feelers with some of our academics and scholars. I have a Professor Elliston who says he knows the term. But uh, he's considered a bit of a crank. Just so you know."

"Did you bring him here?" Crowley asked.

"Yes sir. He's right outside." Crowley opened his eyes again and sat up. "Fine. Let me get dressed and then I'll talk to your cranky professor."

"Of course, sir." Rogers withdrew and Crowley snapped his fingers, clothing himself in a well-tailored suit. He adjusted his tie, raked a hand through his hair and then poured himself a glass of cognac. Rogers knocked on the door again.

"Enter," Crowley said pompously.

The man who entered didn't look like a crank. Tall, with patrician good looks and swept back dark hair with a tasteful amount of silver at the temples, he looked like he'd wandered off the set of a soap opera.

"Nice to meet you, Professor Elliston," Crowley said smoothly.

"We've met before," Elliston said coldly.

Crowley blinked at his tone. "I apologize, but I meet so many humans," he said, flustered. How had he managed to end up on the back foot with a human whose soul he owned?

"Quite," Elliston sneered.

"Well," Crowley said, rallying and tugging at his jacket. "I understand you're the expert to consult about this letalis aqua."
"It's related to my research interests," Elliston said. He strolled over to the drinks cabinet and helped himself to one of Crowley's extensive collection of single malts. After spending a moment appreciating the golden glow of the liquid in the light of the fire Crowley always kept lit, he sipped at it with a smile.

"I'm a historian," Elliston said. "Egyptology, originally, until a chance discovery when I was working on my thesis led me into a more… esoteric area. I was working at a site near Alexandria when I began turning up references to Necropolis. Now, everyone knows about the famous ancient burial ground near the city so at first I dismissed it. But something about the way it was referred to didn't make sense. You see, necropolis is a Greek word, derived from nekros for dead and polis meaning city. City of the Dead, see. But when the writings I was finding were referring not to a burial ground, but an actual city. The mystery was where to find it, but alas the references I found were cryptic and obscure. I finished my fieldwork, went back to the University of Chicago and wrote up my dissertation on the Egyptian art during the Ptolemaic period. I defended my thesis, got a tenure track faculty position at Brown and probably would have trod that well worn path of the academic Egyptologist. You know, winters in the desert digging up artifacts and summers back home analyzing the finds."

Crowley suppressed a yawn. Was this guy ever going to get to the point? He didn't care about the snotty prick's résumé.

"But I couldn't stop thinking about those odd references to Necropolis. My mentors told me I was nuts, that the writings were talking about the cemetery and nothing else. But I kept digging. And then I met Professor Farhana Ali at a conference in Milan. She told me about some writings she'd found in Jordan, referring to a city called Madinat Al'amwat. Which if your Arabic is any good, you'll know also means City of the Dead.

Crowley suppressed a groan. "OK, but how does this relate to this letalis aqua thing?"

"I'm getting to that," Elliston said loftily. "Professor Ali sent me her research and photographs of the clay tablets she'd found talking about this city. Several of them mention a spring or fountain in the center of the city, called Almiah Alqatila. Lethal waters. Odd name for a fountain, don't you think?"

"Very," Crowley agreed, but he had to admit he was interested now. "So, do you know where this city is?"

"Nobody knows," Elliston admitted. "But the writings suggest it may not be on this plane of existence at all." Now Crowley understood why this man was considered a crank. Most humans thought talk of other dimensions to be the stuff of science fiction. "There are supposedly many entrances, all over the world. One was in Alexandria, of course. Another at Petra, in Jordan. And yet another in Luoyang in China. There are others, even rumors of one here in the US, although nobody's ever found any solid evidence of that."

"But the entrances you know about," Crowley said, homing in on the important point here. "Has anyone passed through them to this 'other plane'?"

"No," Elliston said, pursing his lips. "We don't know precisely where any of the gates are except one, the Petra gate. And it was destroyed long ago."

"Destroyed? By who?"

"We're not certain, but based on the archaeological evidence Professor Ali has unearthed, most likely the Crusaders in the 12th century." Elliston looked at Crowley curiously. "You've supported my career as we agreed and I am grateful. But my time is almost up. It'll be ten years next year. If I help
you find another of these gates, will you consider an extension?"

"Do you really think you can find one?" Crowley asked. "I mean, you've spent your whole career to date on this stuff."

"Yes, but I was focusing on the entrance in Alexandria. I've never attempted to find any of the others," Elliston countered. He sipped again at his scotch and watched Crowley with hooded eyes. Crowley considered the matter. If Darius was going to lead him to the letalis aqua, what was the point of looking for another entrance to this fabled city? On the other hand, he wasn't at all confident of finding the missing phoenix, and now he knew about it, he really wanted to get his hands on this powerful artifact.

"I think we can make a new deal," he said, rubbing his hands together.

"I think we should go in there and capture her," Dean insisted. "Get some info on what this thing is."

"No," Sam said, shaking his head. "We wait. What's the point in capturing Sienna Sands only to find out that we don't have any way of killing this thing?"

"Hush," Mary hissed. "Someone's coming."

A battered old green Jeep had turned into the campsite parking lot and parked beside Sienna's pickup. The door opened and Ed Vitali climbed out awkwardly. He limped towards the store, his left arm dangling uselessly at his side. Sienna opened the door and smiled at him.

"Sienna," he said, his voice weirdly distorted like he had something in his mouth.

"Ed, thanks for coming," she said. "The bodies are over here." She led him over to the corpses lying on the ground and watched dispassionately as he knelt down beside Ricky and appeared to sniff him before leaning over the body, his back to them.

"What's he doing?" Sam whispered to Gabriel.

"I'm guessing, but I think he's consuming his brain," Gabriel said into his ear, his lips brushing lightly against Sam skin. He quivered at the sensation and then carefully moved away.

"What the Hell is he?" he asked.

"No idea," Gabriel said. "This isn't normally how sirens feed. Banshees consume the frontal lobe, but banshees can only drive a person to suicide, not convince them to kill their significant others too."

"A hybrid then?" Sam suggested.

"It's possible. Which means the usual methods for killing sirens or banshees may not work." Gabriel sounded frustrated. "If I had my Grace, it probably wouldn't be a problem, but right now I'm useless."

"You're not useless," Sam assured him, giving him a smile. Gabriel's eyes glinted in the small amount of light filtering through the bushes. "OK, so banshees can be killed with a weapon made of gold, but sirens need a bronze blade dipped in the blood of a victim."

"Right," Gabriel said. There was a slight rustling as Dean moved behind them.

"So what's the plan?" he asked. "I brought the bronze knife and the gold one from the car. Although
this guy doesn't look like any banshee I've ever seen."

"Or siren," Sam added. "Why would you look like Ed Vitali if you had a choice to look like anyone?"

"And is Sienna a victim or an accomplice?" Gabriel said.

"Ugh, this case is too complicated," Dean complained. Ed seemed to have finished feeding on Ricky Evans and had begun moving over to Nathaniel Broadbent. Cas leaned over to speak and as he did so, he pushed a branch out of his way and it snapped with a loud crack. Everyone froze and Ed's head snapped around, his eyes flashing silvery-white.

"Shit," Dean swore.

Ed began to prowl towards them. Sienna produced a handgun and stepped off the porch to investigate. Sam wondered why she didn't turn on a flashlight.

"Who's there?" Ed growled.

To Sam's horror, Dean stood up and held up his hands. "Uh, just me. Sorry, I was walking out here, didn't notice the time." He grinned disarmingly at the man, trying to ignore the monstrous distortion of his chest that was only now apparent.

"Who are you?" Sienna called out. "You're no FBI agent."

"Guilty," Dean admitted. He stepped out from the bushes. "Actually, I'm a reporter. Thought I'd catch a good story. Didn't mean to scare you."

"Stay where you are," Sienna warned. "You've already shown yourself to be a liar. Maybe a night in the cells will sort out your faulty memory." She looked away from him to find her cellphone in her purse and Dean exploded into action, leaping forward and kicking Ed squarely in the face. Cas jumped out on cue and wrestled Sienna to the ground. Sam grabbed the bronze blade Dean had left on the ground and shoved the golden one at his mom. Mary sprinted towards Ed, throwing the golden blade end over end. It flew in a deadly line, catching him in the shoulder. Ed roared in pain and staggered backwards. Dean took advantage of his distress to hook a leg behind Vitali's knee and send him crashing to the ground.

Cas had Sienna Sands pinned, her hands over her head. Sam skidded alongside to slice her arm with the bronze dagger. She spat and swore at him but the angel's strength was too much for her. She managed to twist one leg free to kick Cas in the groin but the angel just stared down at her impassively, only his mouth twitching.

Sam scrambled back to his feet and ran over to where Ed Vitali had lashed out and brought Dean down on the ground. They were rolling around in the dirt and Mary was aiming her shotgun but couldn't get a clear shot. Ed was grinning a wide grin full of too many teeth as he loomed over Sam's brother. Sam let out a yell and plunged the bronze dagger down into his back. Ed thrust Sam backwards with a hideous scream and his form began to twist and bulge unpleasantly before collapsing to the ground in a pulsing, twitching heap.

Sienna howled, an agonizing sound that made Sam's ears hurt. Cas covered her mouth with his hand and glared at her.

"Wow," Dean said from his prone position. "That was a nasty son of a bitch." Mary held out a hand and hauled him to his feet.
"You took your eye off the ball," she said sternly. "And while you were wrestling with him on the ground, I couldn't get shot off without risking hitting you instead."

"Sorry, mom," Dean said in contrition.

Gabriel appeared from the bushes and made his way over to Sam, who was kneeling in the dirt trying to catch his breath.

"For a group without a plan, that was impressive," the archangel said.

"We're just lucky the bronze dagger worked," Sam said tightly. "Dean, what the Hell were you thinking?"

"He's dead, isn't it?" his brother shrugged, unconcerned.

"Yeah, and what if it hadn't worked?" Sam snapped. "You could have gotten us all killed."

Dean rolled his eyes at him and wandered over to Cas, who was still holding Sienna Sands to the ground.

"OK, I think we can let her up," he said. Cas leaned back and dragged her upright as he stood. She spat in his face.

"Classy," Dean commented. "So, what's the story here, Miss Sands?"

"Fuck you," she snarled, twisting in the angel's grip.

"Is she human?" Dean asked Cas. The angel peered at her before nodding.

"So what do we do with her?" he asked.

Sam, Gabriel and Mary had all made their way over and Mary's face was stony.

"Kill her," she said.

Dean gaped at her. "She's human."

"She aided and abetted a monster. That makes her a monster too." Mary was adamant.

"Mom," Sam said, placing a hand on her arm. "We don't just kill people. Even bad people. We can't just slaughter her in cold blood."

"Maybe you can't," Mary said coolly. "But I can." She produced her pistol and aimed it at the woman.

"No!" Dean said, stepping in front of her. Mary pointed the muzzle to the sky and glared at him.

"Move out of the way, Dean," she instructed.

"No way, mom. I'm not letting you kill her."

"So what do you propose we do? Just let her go? A lot of people are dead because of her," Mary yelled.

"Wait," Sam said, disturbed by his mother's bloodthirstiness. "Sienna, you have to explain to us what happened here."
"Why?" she said, tossing her head. "It sounds like you're gonna kill me anyway."

"Please," Sam begged.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Ed came to me about a month ago. Said he was gonna divorce Jules and start over. It was odd, he seemed different. Stronger, more confident. Talked about quitting his job too and starting his own business. I liked Jules OK, but Ed's my brother, so I said I would help. Then Raynaud Thayer was found dead. Him and Ed had this on-off thing going on for years, and Ray was always threatening to kill himself whenever it was off. The sheriff thought it was a suicide, so case closed. But Ed was acting weird about it and I confronted him. He admitted he'd killed Ray. They'd had a fight and he'd pushed Ray and he'd hit his head but that it was an accident and if I didn't cover for him, he'd go to jail."

Mary shifted her stance. "I've heard of standing by your family, but seriously?"

"I don't have to justify myself to you," Sienna said loftily. "Do you want to hear the rest of my story or not?"

"Tell us," Sam prompted, giving his mother a quelling look.

"So, I gave him an alibi. Said he had dinner with me that night and the cops couldn't prove otherwise. I was pissed at him, but really, I didn't want him to go to jail. Two nights later, he comes over, stinking drunk and smelling like a men's room." She shuddered at the memory. "He begged me to let him spend the night. I forced him into the shower and while he was in there, emptied his disgusting pockets so I could throw his clothes in the washer. And there was blood on his jeans, a lot of blood. I knocked on the bathroom door and asked him if he was injured." She paused and gave Cas a plaintive look. "I need a cigarette."

He looked over at Dean, who nodded his permission and then rooted through her purse. He found a packet of cigarettes and a lighter, handing them over wordlessly. She removed one from the pack and lit it with a shaking hand.

"So he came out and said, no, he wasn't hurt. But he'd hurt someone else, by accident, at the Roadhouse. I yelled at him because it was one thing getting stupid Ray killed by shoving him too hard but two accidents? I didn't believe him for a second. So I straight up told him I wasn't bailing him out again." She puffed contemplatively for a moment, watching the bluish tobacco smoke spiral upwards into the cool evening air. "He agreed to tell me the truth, which was that he'd discovered he had an 'ability'." She made airquotes with her fingers. "He claimed he could mind control anyone he'd had sex with. It was the craziest story I'd ever heard. I told him he was full of shit and to get out. Well, that just made him mad. He punched me in the face, told me he'd show me if I didn't believe him."

"Jesus," Dean said. Sam had gone white and Gabriel grabbed his arm, pulling him away.

"You don't have to listen to this," he said. Sam bit his lip and nodded, letting the archangel lead him over to Sienna's pickup truck. Sienna was still talking, gesturing with her cigarette.

"What are we going to do with her?" Sam asked when his breathing had evened out.

"Honestly, I don't know," Gabriel sighed. "She was Ed's accomplice, it seems, but I'm guessing that at least some of that was not exactly her choice."

"Right," Sam agreed.

"Best option is probably to get Castiel to knock her out, leave her in the store and call the police with
an anonymous tip. Hopefully they'll figure it out, but if not I don't see that we can do anything more. She's probably not a danger to anyone else." Gabriel squeezed Sam's hand at the look on his face. "I know, but this isn't about justice. We came to stop a monster killing people and that's what you achieved. There's nothing more we can do."

Sam looked at him, a variety of emotions rippling across his face. "Any ideas what he actually was?"

"Let's take another look," the archangel suggested. He walked over to Ed Vitali's body and crouched down. Sam followed and watched as Gabriel poked the carcass and frowned.

"Beats the Hell outta me," he announced finally. "Some siren-like features, including the vulnerabilities. Maybe a bit of banshee in there too, maybe something else."

"Something else as well as banshee, like a three-way hybrid?" Sam said, revolted.

"Yeah. But I'm not sure. I've never seen anything like this monstrosity," Gabriel stood up and huffed out a breath. He looked over to where Sienna was talking to Mary, Castiel and Dean. Mary had a look on her face that he found a little alarming.

"I think she's almost done. You wanna head back over?"

Sam nodded and walked slowly back over to the group. Gabriel followed warily.

"Well, that's it," Sienna was saying. "You know what happened when Ed got here, since you fuckers killed him."

"Good enough for me," Mary said coldly, cocking her weapon.

"No," Sam said, restraining her arm. "Gabriel and I have a better plan. Cas, can you knock her out?"

"Sure," the angel said, touching two fingers to her forehead and watching contemptuously as she slid gracelessly to the ground.

"We dump her in the store, call the cops and get the Hell out of here," Sam said.

Mary looked unhappy, and for a moment Sam thought she would continue to object but she clicked the safety back on and tucked the gun away. "Let's get a few miles under our belts first," she suggested.

Dean pulled the car into the motel parking lot and Mary climbed out. "Gimme some time to get clear before you call."

"You've got plenty of time," Dean advised her. "Cas says she'll be out until morning so there's no hurry and I'd like to cross the border first. Let's give it a couple hours."

"Great," Mary said. "I'll be back at the Banes probably before you call." She slung her bag over her shoulder and rapped on the trunk, before raising a hand in farewell.

Sam watched her out the back window as they drove away. "Is she OK?" he asked.

"Yeah," Dean said. "I don't think she's super thrilled with the way that went down, but hey, neither am I. We'll live."

"Hmm," Sam said. He dropped his gaze to meet Gabriel's amber eyes, creased with concern. Unsettled, he quirked a half-smile at the archangel and then turned around to stare out the window.
Mary carefully packed up her belongings and loaded them into the rental car she'd driven here from Max and Alicia's house. According to her calculations, she had about an hour to do what she needed to do and get on the road. It was tight, but doable. She reversed out of her parking spot and drove slowly out of the lot. She didn't notice the motorcyclist, parked in the shadows by the office and watching her.

Back at the campground, it was eerily quiet, but Mary was glad of it. She grabbed a length of rope and a large flashlight from the trunk. She had little choice but to drag each of the bodies into the store. It would leave telltale signs that would be difficult to erase, but she couldn't carry a corpse on her own. Ricky and Nathaniel were thankfully not big guys although she was panting and sweating by the time she'd dragged them inside and laid them by the counter. Ed Vitali presented a larger problem, literally. She didn't have time to dismember him to make it easier to move his body. Finally she settled on rolling him along the ground and thanking her lucky stars that there were no steps into the store. Mary had to drag him those last few feet but since it was only important that he be inside the building, that was good enough.

Outside, she inspected the stony ground for any evidence they might have left behind. She pocketed two shells from Dean's handgun that she didn't even remember him firing, and shook her head when she found candy wrappers in the bushes. Then she carefully scraped over all their footprints, tire tracks and erased as much of the drag marks as she could. Inside the store, she wiped down every surface she could find. The police might guess someone had erased evidence, but it wouldn't leave them a trail to follow.

Finally, she was satisfied. Sienna Sands was still out cold on the wooden bench. There was some bruising on her face and neck from where she'd wrestled with Castiel. She bound the woman's hands and feet tightly with the rope before returning to her car for a tank of gas. Mary paused in front of the store as she considered her next move, but decided to stick with the original plan. She doused the store liberally in gasoline and tossed the canister into a corner. Removing the book of matches from her pocket, she struck the lot against the brick wall of the store and tossed them inside. The flames caught immediately on the stack of newspapers near the restroom and she stepped back instinctively. Mary walked back to her car and sat in the driver's seat, watching the fire take hold. When the store erupted into an inferno, she started the engine and drove away.

As her taillights disappeared around the corner, the motorcyclist pulled into the campground parking lot and stopped. He raised the visor of his helmet and took in the scene. Mary Winchester had cleaned this mess up like a pro, which rather made him suspect she'd done this before. The file his superiors had generated on the Winchester brothers had not been impressive, but their mother was clearly a force to be reckoned with.

"Hi, I'd like to report an incident at the Cumberland Lake Campground," Dean said into the burner phone.

"Another one?" the startled voice on the other end said.

"Uh, yeah," Dean said. "I heard gunshots."

"OK, OK. I'll let them know to expect a gunman," the dispatcher said. "Can I have your name please?"

Dean hung up. What exactly had she meant by that? Sam was sound asleep, his head tucked between the seat and the car door. He looked up and met Cas's eyes in the mirror and turned to look over his shoulder. Gabriel was curled into a ball and making soft snuffling sounds.
"Is something wrong?" Cas asked in a low voice. Dean returned his attention to the road ahead.

"I don't know," he said quietly. "The dispatcher said 'Another one?'"

"What does that mean?" the angel asked.

"No clue," Dean sighed. "That hunt sucked ass."

"You're unhappy with the outcome," Cas said. "I understand. But there were no good options."

"I know. Doesn't mean I have to be happy about it."

Chapter End Notes

Miez_LaKatz pointed out I'd written Impala when in fact it's still wrecked so I went in and fixed it. Thanks for pointing that out. I appreciate it. :-(
They'd agreed that it was impossible to make the entire drive back to the bunker that night, so when Dean felt his eyelids begin to droop, he decided to stop at the next motel he came across.

"Hey, Cas," he said.

"Yes, Dean."

"I need to stop and get some shut-eye. Is there anything coming up ahead?" He handed his phone over to the angel.

Cas muttered something under his breath that Dean liked to imagine was swearing in Enochian as he fumbled with the map function. "There's a motel in about five miles. It's called the Rodeo City Inn," Cas said.

"Great," Dean said in relief. Cas handed the phone back over his shoulder and their fingers brushed briefly, the sensation sparking down Dean's fingers and making him shiver. Gritting his teeth, he scanned the road ahead, looking for the motel's sign.

Rodeo City Inn was unprepossessing even by their standards, but Dean was dog-tired and didn't care. He shook Sam's shoulder and left his sasquatch brother to deal with Gabriel as he went to get a room. The clerk on duty was an older woman with thinning gray hair and a sour expression. But she was pleasant enough, if not exactly chatty. Cas wouldn't sleep but it seemed Gabriel did, so after wincing at the expense, he decided on two rooms. The arrested look on Cas's face made his stomach flip over when he handed the angel one of the keys and told him to give it to Sam and Gabriel.

"What?" he said pugnaciously.

"I was just surprised," Cas said.

"You think I wanna share a room with Gabriel? I'd rather saw off my own arm," Dean said grumpily.

"No, I understand that," the angel said. "But I thought you'd be sharing with Sam."

Dean scratched at his stubble and looked at him uncertainly. "We can do that if you want."

"No! No, this is fine," Cas said hurriedly. "I'll be right back." Dean stomped off to find their room, determined not to think too hard about why he'd made the arrangements the way he had.

Sam raised an eyebrow at Cas as the angel hurried over to where the car was parked, holding a motel room key like it was a live snake. He shoved it into Sam's hand.

"Dean says you and Gabriel get your own room," he said and fled. Sam stared after the angel in consternation. What the Hell? He turned and opened the back door and couldn't help but smile at the contented way Gabriel was curled up, fast asleep.

"Hey, Gabriel," he said softly. The archangel reacted immediately, his eyes popping open. "We're stopping for the night. Come on."

Grumbling, Gabriel stumbled out of the car and followed Sam to the room. As soon as Sam unlocked the door and opened it, he stopped and looked up at the hunter in confusion.
"Where are Dean and Castiel?"

"They got their own room, apparently," Sam said. He was just as baffled as Gabriel, but too sore and tired to question it.

"Right," Gabriel said, sounding disturbed. "Are you OK with this?"

"Me?" Sam said, yawning. "Sure. Why not?" He peered at the archangel. "If you're not happy about it, I'm sure we can switch."

"No, it's fine. It's just… odd." Gabriel sat down on one of the beds, jumping up and down on it experimentally.

"It's not a bouncy house," Sam chuckled.

"Just testing the suspension," Gabriel said, waggling his eyebrows.

"You do that," Sam said indulgently, grabbing his washbag and some clean clothes and heading for the bathroom. He heard Gabriel puttering around the room as he brushed his teeth. Then he locked the door and ran the shower, a pathetic trickle of lukewarm water that made him sigh. But it was enough to freshen up and remove the mud, blood and sweat of the day.

When he opened the bathroom door again, Gabriel had tossed his jeans and button-down shirt onto the floor and was watching TV in his t-shirt and shorts. Black and white footage of an airship crashing on the screen, Sam recognized it as the footage from the Hindenburg disaster.

"What are you watching?" Sam asked, as he pulled back the covers on his bed.

"Some drama about time travel," Gabriel said. "There's this woman who's a historian, and the cute guy there, he's special forces or something. And there's another guy not on the screen right now, he's the pilot of the time machine."

"Cool," Sam said, but he was already drifting off.

"Sleep well, Sammy."

"So, what do we think that thing was anyway?" Dean asked as he unpacked a few essentials from his bag.

"I'm not completely sure," Cas said. "But it did seem to have features of both sirens and banshees. It was a puzzling combination."

"So you do think it's another one of these hybrids?" Dean seemed tense and Cas knew his answer was not going to make the hunter feel any better.

"Yes. I think it's the only explanation."

"Great," Dean said sarcastically. "I mean, aren't there enough horrors in the world already? Why would anyone want to do this?"

"Eve created her hybrids to fight the leviathans," Cas mused. "Crowley suggested somebody's building an army."

"What, you think the missing angels and demons are related to these hybrids?" Dean asked, giving the angel a searching look.
"It makes more sense than the idea of manipulating bloodlines," Cas said reasonably.

"Is this Lucifer?"

"I don't know," Cas said. "But he seems the most likely culprit."

Dean sat down on the edge of his bed, his hands dangling loosely over his knees. "And this soulforge. You think he made one to create these monstrosities? Are we gonna meet a half-angel half-something else at some point?"

"If we're right that the maker of the hybrids and the kidnapper of the angels, demons and vampires are one and the same, then it seems inevitable." Cas's mouth twisted in distaste. "Such an abomination would be almost unthinkable."

"You're telling me," Dean agreed. He began to unbutton his shirt and Cas watched him silently. "So tell me more about making a soulforge. How difficult is it?"

"Very," Cas said. "Purely from a technical perspective, that is. You have to gather a certain weight of souls and then hammer them into a single mass using a sort of enchanted hammer."

"An enchanted hammer?" Dean frowned.

"It's not really a hammer. More like pure energy, shaped by magic. The souls are bonded together into a sort of amorphous mass, and then distilled. It's an abstract concept and rather difficult to describe." Cas made a helpless gesture.

"So what does it look like?" Dean asked, leaning forward.

"You can bind the soulforge into any physical object. Historically, anvils and similar objects have been used. But it's not actually important." Cas's gaze was steady on his.

"Is there a way to recognize one if we find it?"

"If Gabriel or I are with you, we will be able to see it. If we're not there..." Dean could see Cas considering the matter. "I will talk to Gabriel. Perhaps there is something we can do. An amulet that would glow in the presence of a soulforge. But the power of a soulforge means there will be local effects that we might be able to use to find it."

"Like demon omens?" Dean asked.

"That's a good analogy," the angel allowed. "Soulforges need feeding. That has several effects on the local environment. Suicide, murder and violent crime rates all increase, but that can be difficult to spot. Spontaneous fires occur on hallowed ground, trees die and animals flee the area. People living nearby will report depression, hopelessness, insomnia. Weather patterns may even change in unpredictable ways."

"Not as easy as identifying demon omens," Dean commented.

"No," Cas agreed. He looked pensively down at the floor. "Dean, I should focus on finding Lucifer. If he's behind this, we need to stop him. And if he's not behind this, we may need his help."

"Ask Lucifer for help again? No. Oh no. Seriously, Cas, no way. If we need an archangel, let's work on fixing up Gabriel, OK?"

"Sam," a voice said urgently, shaking his shoulder. "Wake up, Sam!"
Sam opened his eyes to a darkened room and rubbed his face in confusion. His face was wet and his chest was aching. There was a weight on the side of the bed making the mattress sag. "Gabriel?"

"You were sobbing in your sleep," the archangel said. Sam reached out to turn on the lamp and blinked at him in the soft golden light.

"I must have been dreaming," he said, his voice blurry.

"You don't remember?" Gabriel asked. Sam was aware of the archangel's leg pressed against his own and thought vaguely that this seemed somehow familiar.

"No," he replied. "But… uh… have we done this before?"

"Done what before?" Gabriel's eyes were bright in the lamplight and his pupils large and black.

"I dunno, you sat on the edge of my bed. It's like *deja vu* or something." Sam struggled to remember but he couldn't focus, not with the way his body seemed acutely aware of Gabriel's presence. "It's not important."

"No," Gabriel agreed. He reached out and tucked Sam's hair behind his ear and Sam's mouth fell open in shock. The gesture had been intimate and unexpected and by the look on Gabriel's face, he was almost as startled as Sam. So startled in fact that he froze, his hand resting on the back of Sam's head. Almost as if he were about to kiss him, Sam thought in a muddled way. He wondered why he couldn't think straight but with Gabriel's eyes on him, it just seemed both impossible and unnecessary.

"I should let you get back to sleep," Gabriel croaked. He withdrew his hand and Sam noticed it was shaking. He wanted to stop him, wanted that hand back where it had rested. It seemed right, natural, even desirous. But the archangel was moving away and Sam couldn't seem to break out of this odd passivity. He let his eyes slide closed and slipped back into sleep.

The next morning, Sam awoke to find himself alone. He stumbled through his usual routine only skipping washing his hair because the shower was just too pathetic. Outside he found Gabriel perched on the roof of the Mustang, his eyes closed and his head tilted back. The early morning sun illuminated his face in red and gold. The effect was a little peculiar, like he was a golden statue covered in blood. Sam shook his head to dismiss the weird illusion and cleared his throat. Gabriel opened his eyes.

"Morning, Sammy," he said brightly. Sam wasn't fooled, there was that brittleness again that he wished he understood.

"Hey Gabriel," he said. "Did you sleep OK?"

"Yeah, great," the archangel declared. "Dean and Castiel went to get coffee and pastries from the diner over there. They'll be back soon and then we'll hit the road."

"OK," Sam said. "Look, are you all right?"

"Never better," Gabriel said, not meeting his eyes. "Well, except for my Grace still being bound of course."

"Of course," Sam agreed. If Gabriel didn't want to talk to him, he couldn't force the issue. "Here they are now."
Dean and Cas were crossing the road, juggling cups of coffee and an unfeasibly large paper bag. Dean was talking animatedly and Cas was smiling, his shoulder bumping companionably against Dean's. Sam watched them wistfully for a moment, a sensation somewhere between envy and joy at their odd, utterly unique relationship. When he turned his head, it was to see Gabriel watching them too, his eyes shimmering with unshed tears. Disconcerted, he reached out to touch his arm and Gabriel flinched.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I just... you looked..." He couldn't seem to articulate what he was feeling but he knew he hated seeing Gabriel look so distressed.

Gabriel dashed the tears away with a swipe of his hand. "The sun's bright, that's all," he defended. He slid down off the roof and opened the car door, climbing inside and closing it behind him.

"Morning, Sam," Dean greeted as he approached, but he'd clearly not missed the little scene with Gabriel, by the looks of the line that had appeared between his eyebrows.

"Hey," Sam said, feeling wrong-footed and unsure what he would say if Dean asked what was going on. But Dean just exchanged a look with Cas and then handed Sam a coffee cup.

"What would you like to eat?" Cas asked him, offering him the paper bag.

"It's all sweet pastries, I suppose," Sam sighed.

"No," Cas said. "I made Dean buy you fruit salad and yoghurt. But you can have a pastry too, if you like."

"The fruit and yoghurt sound perfect," Sam told him, finding them at the bottom of the bag. Cas nodded and handed over some plastic utensils. He smiled in response, aware it probably looked a bit fake and walked around the car to the passenger side.

"Dean?"

"Uh, the chocolate thing," he said, accepting the proffered pastry with a smile and balancing it in the empty slot on the tray where Sam's coffee had been. He opened the driver's side door and placed his cup in the cupholder. Looking over the seat at Gabriel, he held out the final cup. The archangel eyed it for a moment and then accepted it.

"It's got my name on it," he said, sounding nonplussed.

"Yeah," Dean said. "Cas ordered you this ridiculously sweet sounding latte thing. So we needed to be able to tell them apart."

Cas opened the back door and slid in next to Gabriel. He offered the paper bag to Gabriel, who dived in and selected a large pastry covered in sugar.

Dean leaned over and opened Sam's door. "Get in, slowpoke." Sam grimaced at him and then climbed in.

When they stopped for gas, Dean made a gesture at Sam and then headed to the restroom. As soon as they were inside the small bathroom and had checked the two stalls were empty, Dean folded his arms and looked seriously at his brother.

"Did you and Gabriel have a fight?" he asked without preamble.
"No," Sam said. "I don't know what's going on. He was fine last night. I woke him with a nightmare but he didn't seem mad, just worried." His face flushed as he remembered that strange, almost dreamlike encounter with Gabriel. "But this morning, he was like this."

"OK," Dean said. "Well, you know me, I hate this chick flick stuff. But Cas is worried about both of you and when he gets worried he chews my ear off. So, I don't care what you have to do but fix it, will ya?"

"I would if I could," Sam promised. "If I knew what was going on. But I'm just as in the dark as you are. One minute he's laughing and joking and the next he's distant and cold."

"I think you freaked him out at Cumberland Lake," Dean said, looking uncomfortable. "You came pretty close to buying the farm and after Cas healed you up, he just kinda… had a mini breakdown, I guess. Bawled his eyes out all over Cas, and right in front of me."

"What?"

"Yeah, I was weirded out by it too. You'd think he'd just lost… his dog," Dean said. Sam frowned at that odd pause in the middle of the sentence. What had Dean been going to say?

"Look, I'll talk to him," he said. "But if he won't talk back, what am I supposed to do?"

"Maybe Cas can get something out of him," Dean said, looking sly.

"Oh so that's why we're hanging out in this grim men's room," Sam said. "God, Dean, you are about as subtle as a brick to the face."

Dean grinned at him, unrepentant. "I get results."

"Talk to me, Gabriel," Cas said as soon as the Winchesters were out of earshot.

"What about?" the archangel said through a mouthful of croissant.

"Oh I don't know," Cas said sarcastically. "Why don't we start with the emotional meltdown at Cumberland Lake? Or if you prefer, why not tell me what you and Sam fought about."

"We didn't fight," Gabriel said airily.

"Right," Cas said. "That's why you're not speaking to him and you look like the world is ending."

"You're seeing things that aren't there, little bro," Gabriel warned.

"Am I?" Cas said. "Did I also imagine you weeping all over my coat yesterday?"

"No," Gabriel replied sullenly. Cas eyed him expectantly. "All right, Sam gave me a scare. When that guy hit him with that tree branch, I thought he was a gonna. And even after he survived the initial blow, he was in bad shape. If you hadn't got there when you did…" He drew in a shuddering breath. "Why are you putting me through this again?"

"Because I want to understand what's going on with you," Cas said. "You're confusing the Hell out of Sam, and he's not in a good place to begin with. Dean and I are worried about him, and if you're making things worse, Dean will kick you out."

"Thanks," Gabriel said drily.
"Don't make me choose between them and you," Cas warned. "You're my brother, and I love you. But I love them too, and I owe them everything. Dean, especially."

"I'm surprised at you, Castiel," Gabriel said snidely. "Whatever happened to pretending there was nothing between you and Dean than friendship?"

"You understand nothing," Cas said loftily. "Certainly not the value of true friendship. Do I wish I could have Dean's love too? I do. But I accept that it's not possible and must cherish what we have."

Gabriel looked away, the starkness of the similarity between their situations causing him physical pain. "I shouldn't have mocked you," he apologized softly. "I guess I'm jealous."

"Jealous?" Cas said in astonishment. "I don't understand."

"Your friendship with Dean. It's real, honest and if it's not everything you could wish it to be, you at least know that he values you in his life. What do I have? I'm hanging out at the bunker because Sam convinced Dean to tolerate it. But if I get access to my Grace back, that's all over. And if I can't touch my Grace ever again, how long before he gets tired of me and kicks me out anyway?"

"Gabriel, are you telling me you're in love with Sam?" Cas said, his voice tinged with wonder.

Gabriel bowed his head in shame. "Yes. Sometimes I think our Father has a really spiteful sense of humor."

"I think you're mistaken," Cas said seriously. "I don't know how Sam feels about you, or if any such thing is possible between you. But I do know that he likes you. In the time they've lived at the bunker, there aren't many who even get to visit, let alone live there."

"Doesn't that list include Crowley?" Gabriel said disbelievingly.

"Yes," Cas said thinly. "He and Dean were… quite close at one time, and they remain friends despite everything." Disapproval marked the angel's every line and Gabriel found himself speculating on just how close Dean and Crowley had been when Dean had spent time as a demon.

"You're not filling me with confidence here," he said.

"I'm not trying to," Cas said in that literal way that made Gabriel want to smile despite how he felt. "I'm telling you that you and Sam are already friends. It's early days, and you don't have the advantage of the bond I have with Dean that formed when I raised him from perdition. But Sam's also less guarded and more open than Dean is."

Gabriel swallowed as he digested the seraph's words. "OK. You'd better not breathe a word of this to Sam or Dean."

"Of course not," Cas said. He spotted Dean coming out of the restroom, making a sign to indicate that he needed to wrap up his conversation with Gabriel. "But you have to promise me you'll stop mistreating Sam."

"Mistreating!" Gabriel exclaimed. Cas glared at him and he subsided. "OK, fine."

As Sam approached the car, Dean was leaning on the roof, watching him. "You wanna drive for a bit?"

"Sure," he said, catching the keys when Dean tossed them to him. He blinked as Dean walked around the car and opened the back door. Gabriel looked up at him in confusion.
"Out," Dean commanded. "Sit in the front, and annoy Sam. I wanna talk to Cas."

Gabriel was too stunned to do anything but obey. He climbed out and opened the front passenger door and slid in. Sam gave him a sidelong glance he couldn't interpret.

Dean was sprawled on the backseat, one arm resting casually along the back. Sam eyed his brother for a moment, wondering what the Hell he was up to. Cas looked equally baffled.

"OK," he said. He started the engine and pushed the transmission into drive, accelerating smoothly away.

Dean's phone rang and he answered it. "Hey mom."

Sam relaxed, she was probably just checking in to say she'd got back to the Banes.

"God," Dean said, sitting upright. "I'm sorry."

"What's up?" Sam said over his shoulder.

"Mel's dead," Dean said shortly. He hit the speaker button on his phone. "What happened?"

"According to Alicia, her heart couldn't take the strain. It's apparently not uncommon but Max is distraught." Their mom sounded exhausted, Sam thought.

"OK," Dean said. "You did everything you could."

"I know that," Mary said. "That's not the point. Constance McBride is the point. A lot of people are dead because of this damn Hyde curse. I'm gonna track her down and this time I'm putting that bitch in the ground."

"You're not coming back to the bunker," Dean said, dismayed.

"Not until I finish this," Mary said crisply. "I'm sorry, boys. I am. But I have to do this. If I'd managed to kill McBride all those years ago, those seven people would still be alive. And she's probably responsible for other deaths too."

"I guess we can't stop you then," Dean said. "But why not let us help?"

"Because you have other work to do," Mary said reasonably. "Weren't you going to go looking for Lucifer?"

"All right," Sam said over his shoulder. "But call us if you need help, OK?"

"You know it," she said. "I love you." She hung up.
The drive back to the bunker had been quiet and solemn after Mary's phone call. None of them seemed to feel like talking. So when after he parked the car and Dean began unloading the trunk, Sam half-expected to be heading to the library alone. He was surprised when Gabriel followed him and accepted the offered glass of bourbon.

"Are we friends again?" he asked uncertainly.

"Are we friends at all, Sam?" the archangel responded, his eyes searching Sam's face.

"I thought we were," Sam retorted, stung. When Gabriel relaxed he was even more confused. "Gabriel, what's going on?"

"I... You were right," he said. "Angels aren't good at friendship. We don't understand it."

"I see," Sam said. Was this Gabriel's way of telling him it wasn't working out and he was leaving? He wished he didn't feel so disappointed.

"No, I don't think you do," Gabriel said. He sat in a chair and looked down into his glass. When he looked up again, his face was blank. "I thought I understood. But Castiel said..." His face twisted with distress. "If I'm making you unhappy by being here, if my presence is difficult for you in some way, would you tell me?"

"Of course," Sam said immediately. "But why would you think that?"

"Because despite what you say, you're not fine. You've got a textbook case of PTSD, no matter how hard you work to hide it. And this isn't just about Lady Toni Bevell and her dubious methods of extracting information. The roots of this are much deeper." Gabriel took a sip of his drink, not taking his eyes off Sam.

He could feel his face setting into hard lines. "Why does everyone want to poke around in my head?" Sam complained.

"Because we care about you," Gabriel told him. "And you can't bury this forever. It's ruining your life."

"Don't be so melodramatic," Sam snapped. "I'm fine."

"Have it your way," Gabriel said sadly. "You don't have to talk to me. But you should talk to someone. Castiel. Dean. Hell, go see a therapist."

Sam breathed in and out through his nose in an effort to rein in his temper. "OK, I'll tell you what. I'll talk if you do. Because you are confusing the Hell out of me."

Gabriel looked trapped for a moment and then he began to laugh. "Well. Look at you. Hoist by my own petard!"

Sam grinned at him. "OK. How about we start over?"

"Sure. Does that mean I get another drink?" Sam shoved the bottle at him and Gabriel sloshed liquor into his glass. "I have a confession to make, first of all."

Sam eyed him warily. "OK."
"I lied to you. I'm sorry, I should have been honest from the beginning. But I was afraid you'd walk away if I told you everything." Gabriel held his breath.

"Of course you lied to me," Sam said, his tone cool. "I should have expected it." He sighed. "OK, spit it out."

"I told you my Grace was bound," Gabriel said, and Sam's face began to harden. "That's true," he added quickly, holding up one hand. "I just neglected to explain that I'm not totally powerless."

"Not totally powerless," Sam repeated tonelessly. "What does that mean?"

"It's my vessel," Gabriel explained. "I never did tell you how I managed to escape Heaven's notice for millennia, did I? This vessel is the key."

"I remember you said something about a face transplant, which didn't make much sense. After all, angels can usually recognize each other regardless of which vessel they're in."

"Right," Gabriel said. "But what if my vessel weren't human?"

Sam blinked. "Cas said something about that. That you didn't masquerade as Loki, but that you were Loki. That he is your vessel."

"Bingo," Gabriel said. "When I met Loki, he was a mess. The Norse don't do anything by halves, and he'd been betrayed by everyone he loved or trusted. He made some bad choices too, don't get me wrong. But I guess I felt like we were kindred spirits."

"But how does a Norse god get to be an archangel's vessel? Uh, is he your True Vessel?"

"No," Gabriel said. "But because this isn't a human body, it's quite capable of hosting an archangel. Anyway, he was tired and frankly at the end of his rope. I made him an offer, let me take up residence and really, take over his life for a while. He could sleep, and heal."

Sam felt the prick of tears and wasn't quite sure why. Empathy for a god so downtrodden and forsaken by his family that he'd rather give over control of his body and his life to a stranger? "So, how does this explain how you lied to me?"

"Because although I can't access my Grace, Loki's power is still mine to command," Gabriel said. "He's not as powerful as I am, obviously. And since there aren't many who believe in him anymore, that weakens it further."

"I see," Sam said. He turned this over in his mind. "So how powerful are you?"

"I can still whip up illusions, but they don't have the corporeality my Grace could give them. Like this." He clicked his fingers and a Snickers bar appeared on the table. Sam reached out to pick it up and his hand passed right through it.

"Oh," he said, understanding dawning. "So no playmates either?"

"No," Gabriel agreed, looking pained. "But they're not that much fun anyway. They never were."

"So, when you were hiding from Heaven, you used Loki's power to mask your Grace," Sam concluded. "Is Loki still in there?"

Gabriel looked so sad, it made Sam's chest ache. "No. He asked me to let him go a few centuries back. I guess the damage was too great to heal."
"I'm sorry," Sam said, feeling at a loss.

"It was a long time ago," Gabriel said. "I just wished I could have done more for him. After all, he'd done so much for me."

"When we were at Cumberland Lake, after Ed hit me with that branch, I thought I saw you do something. Later, you told a different story but because of the concussion, I wasn't sure if what I'd see was real."

"Ah, yes. Loki's sword. I'd dropped the knife and without a weapon I was pretty useless. I keep it in a pocket dimension, and can draw it at will. These days it drains most of my remaining power to retrieve and replace it. I stabbed Ed with it and it killed him, thankfully. Then I bashed in his head with a rock to hide what I'd done." The archangel looked guiltily at him and Sam felt a pang.

"So why the meltdown?"

"Are you kidding me?" Gabriel said incredulously. "I thought you were going to die! I drained all my power, risked exposing my secret to you and it was almost for nothing. I couldn't heal you. Even if I hadn't used my power to grab Loki's sword, healing's not one of his gifts. If Castiel hadn't arrived when he did…" Gabriel made an odd sort of hiccuping sound.

"Gabriel, I…" Sam hesitated and then reached out to take the archangel's hand. "I'm sorry."

"What are you apologizing to me for?" Gabriel said.

"I didn't mean to scare you. I should have been more alert. It would have been my fault if I'd died. Not yours." He squeezed Gabriel's fingers, gratified when he felt them curl around his own.

"That wouldn't have been much consolation, even if I believed it," Gabriel said.

Sam smiled at him. "I am sorry you were scared and believe me when I say I wish it hadn't happened. But it's nice to know you care enough about me to be scared."

Gabriel blinked slowly at him, his golden gaze warm and Sam felt a sort of headiness as he stared into his eyes.

"OK," he said. "A deal's a deal. You're right, of course. What Lady Bevell did wasn't the start of this, but it did bring some things to the surface. Things I'd thought long buried. I told you about what happened after Lucifer took over my body? The demons in my friends?"

Gabriel nodded, his face sympathetic. "I still think you're wrong to lay all the blame for that on yourself. Luci has a habit of affecting his vessels. More than most angels. He's like… an infection."

"After they were all dead, Lucifer was…" Sam broke off, searching for the right words. "Solicitous. Asked me if I was OK, which I wasn't. Obviously. And this is going to sound stupid because we were inhabiting one body, but for a long time he just held me and God help me, I needed the comfort." Sam rubbed his face with his hands. "But when I was ready to let go, things changed. He began kissing me, my neck, my hands, my face. I pushed him away but he was strong, so strong. I didn't want what he was trying to draw from me. But I wasn't strong enough to resist him." A sob escaped and this time, Sam's hands covered his face and his shoulders heaved.

"There's no need to go into detail if you don't want to," Gabriel told him. "I get the picture. And, honestly, it's nothing I didn't expect. Luci's appetites are notorious."
"I suppose I wasn't surprised," Sam agreed in a soft, broken voice that made Gabriel want to weep. "He's the Devil, right?" He shook his head. "In the Cage, it was even worse."

Gabriel bit his lip. This part was as much his fault as anyone's. "Sam, I…"

"Don't apologize," Sam snapped. "It was my decision. Nobody, not you, not Dean, not Cas, can take responsibility for it." Gabriel subsided and settled for taking Sam's hand instead, soothingly rubbing his fingers against the hunter's knuckles. "He was so angry with me for what I'd done and I think angry at himself that I'd been able to do it. And Michael was just as bad. So when Lucifer took his frustrations out on me, Michael just sat there and watched. Later, he'd even offer up suggestions when Lucifer seemed to be running out of ideas on how to torture me."

"Did he touch you?" Gabriel asked tightly. Sam looked away but didn't answer and Gabriel thought for a moment that he might vomit. He was shaking and pale, his skin cold and clammy under Gabriel's hands. "Sam?"

Sam took a deep breath. "I can't talk about this anymore. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Gabriel said. "We don't have to do this all at once."

They sat there for a moment, Sam drawing a strange kind of peace from the companionable silence.

"How about you?" Sam asked after a while. "Are you all talked out?"

"No," the archangel replied. "If you've any other questions, best to ask them now. I'll try to answer them as honestly as I can."

"OK," Sam said. He really wasn't sure he wanted to ask about last night, but he didn't want to let the moment slip away. "Last night, when I had my… nightmare. You woke me up."

"Yes," Gabriel said. "Like I said at the time, you were crying in your sleep. Not just a few tears but full-on weeping."

"I really don't remember the dream," Sam told him. "But it wouldn't be the first time. Dean's woken me up a time or two like that." He swallowed, his mouth dry. "I don't quite understand what happened next. This morning you were distant and I didn't know what I'd done wrong."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Gabriel assured him. "I was being an ass."

"OK, but about what?" Sam pressed. "I remember you waking me up, and then it gets a bit hazy. I guess I was still half-asleep. Did I say something to offend you? Or…" He felt a bit nauseous. "Did I do something I shouldn't have? I once punched Dean in the face after he woke me from a particularly vicious dream. He wasn't impressed."

"No, Sam," Gabriel said reassuringly. "You didn't do anything bad. I swear."

"Then what is it?" Sam urged. "Don't dismiss me, Gabriel. Something happened, something that upset you. Please, you promised you'd be honest with me."

"It's… complicated," Gabriel said evasively. Sam leveled a look at him. "OK, it's to do with those creepy tarot cards."

"The Michael cards? What about them?"

"What do you remember about the enchantment that was put on you with the Ace of Cups?"
Gabriel's face was intent and Sam felt a flicker of memory.

"Not much. Uh… oh! You were on my bed. Uh…" He flushed. "That's why I felt the deja vu."

"Because I was sat on the side of your bed?" Gabriel looked disturbed.

"I guess. Are you saying I'm still under the effects of the enchantment?" Sam looked down at where his hand and Gabriel's were linked. There was a strange look on his face. "Gabriel, what do the cards want from me?"

"I don't know," the archangel admitted. He realized he was rubbing his thumb back and forth across Sam's fingers and stilled.

"I don't like this," Sam said softly.

"We'll figure this out," Gabriel promised. "I promise."

Cas wasn't surprised to find Gabriel in the library at this time of night, although his brother did enjoy sleeping when the humans slept. But he'd felt the edge of Gabriel's restlessness earlier when Sam had gone to bed.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

Gabriel held up the book. *Enchantments and Sentient Objects by Norman K. Ruffles.*

"Esoteric," Cas commented drily.

"Not really," Gabriel sighed. "Sam's not shaking off the enchantment from the tarot cards as quickly as I'd hoped."

"Ah. That must add… complications for you," Cas said sagely.

"That's an understatement," Gabriel said sourly. "Mr Ruffles here…” He rolled his eyes. "Makes him sound like a pet dog. Anyway, despite his stupid name, he does seem to know his stuff. Did you know Raphael's chalice can cast enchantments?"

"Really," Cas said curiously. "What kind?"

"Illusions, mostly. Which makes sense, given what it does."

"I don't see how True Seeing is related to illusions. Aren't they opposites?" Cas said, frowning.

"Not necessarily. Think of it like dramatic reconstruction," Gabriel explained. Cas looked dubious.

"So what were you hoping to find?" Cas asked gently.

"A cure of course," Gabriel said grumpily. "But Ruffles is more interested in what artifacts can do than how to counter their effects."

"You could just ask Michael," Cas suggested.

"Oh sure," Gabriel said. "I'll just pop down to the Pit, and ask my dear brother, trapped for eternity in the Cage, if he could do me a favor. *Please.* Michael hates my guts almost as much as he hates Luci's. And he was bad enough before. How do you think he's going to be after spending a few years in Hell?"
Cas looked uncomfortable. "I didn't realize you hated him too."

"Didn't you? Then you weren't paying attention," Gabriel snapped. "I hate Michael more than I hate Luci. More than Michael hates me."

"Father," Cas breathed. "Why?"

"Because Michael is the real reason I left. It was his fanaticism, his absolute insistence that we follow Dad's rules to the letter, that drove Luci to rebel. And once he'd thrown Luci into the Pit? He was ready to do the same to me. Raphael stopped him. Raphael!" Gabriel sneered at his brother. "And now I have other reasons too. So fuck Michael. All this mess is his fault."

Cas said "So why not just destroy the cards?"

"I already told you, they'll fight back," Gabriel said.

"They're causing considerable damage anyway," the seraph pointed out.

"OK, fine, I admit it. I'm scared of what they'll do to Sam." Gabriel shoved the book away and leaned his head back.

"Then maybe we should consult a witch. One we can trust."

Mary bade Max and Alicia a tearful goodbye, promising to stay in touch.

"Are you sure you don't want us to go with you?" Max said.

"No," Mary replied, shaking her head. "It'll be easier on my own. I'll call on you when I find her, but until then I'd rather she didn't realize she was being hunted. That's harder to pull off in a group."

"OK," Max said, pouting slightly. The fragile facade over his grief at failing to save Mel made Mary twitch. Max needed to toughen up if he was going to stay in the hunting community.

She hugged them both again and climbed into her car, heading for the interstate. All signs pointed to St Louis as the place to start looking for Constance.

About an hour into the drive, her phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hi, is that Mary Smith? It's Morgan Wensleydale."

"Oh, the antiques dealer! Yeah, hi. Thanks for calling me back," she spotted a gas station and drove in so that she could concentrate fully on the call.

"No, it's no trouble. You said you were looking for a book I sold about four months ago?" Wensleydale sounded slightly troubled.

"Yes. A friend of mine bought it and I wondered where it came from, whether there might be any others." The lie felt heavy on her tongue.

"What was the title and the author?"

"I don't know the author or the title. Apparently it didn't have one. A large book, hand-bound in leather, nineteenth century. It was quite large, about the size of a laptop. There was a brass plate inset
"Oh, yes, I remember that one. We joked that it looked like a witch's spellbook. Couldn't understand anything written in it, not any language I had heard of. Made it rather difficult to price, to be honest. I tried to sell it on, but nobody in the trade was interested. Weird, really. Well, I sold that one for ten dollars but it took so long and it creeped me out a bit. So I still have the others in storage."

"The others?" Mary breathed.

"Yes, two other books. One is quite small, bound in red leather and is quite old, I'd say seventeenth century although I think the binding is newer. The pages are vellum, not paper and the book is handwritten. It appears to poetry of some kind. The other is larger, though not as big as the one I sold to your friend. It's in very poor condition, probably nineteenth century and printed. I'd say it was some kind of recipe book, or maybe a herbalist's book? There are lots of nice drawings of plants."

"Was there a fourth book at any point?" Mary asked.

"No, no, just the three. It's a strange story really. The man who sold them to me said they belonged to his aunt and she had passed away. That's not uncommon, I must get over half my stock that way. But I don't normally deal in books, it's really its own specialty, you see. But this man was… desperate. I rather thought the books might be stolen. So I offered him a hundred bucks and to my surprise he took it. I called the police and asked if anyone had reported a book theft but they said nothing like what I had bought had been reported stolen."

"Hmm. So you didn't try to sell the other books?" Mary said.

"No, like I said, I did have them on display for a while but, well, I guess I'm superstitious but please don't laugh."

"I won't," Mary promised.

"Do you believe in curses?" Wensleydale gave a feeble laugh. "I think the books are cursed. The day I put them up for sale, everything started to go wrong. My wife was diagnosed with cancer, my daughter got flunked out of school. Then my car caught fire, just sitting parked out back. I sold the big black book to your friend the day that happened." He inhaled sharply. "After that, I put the books in storage and, I dunno. Things righted themselves again. Ford offered me a replacement car, said the fire was down to an undetected manufacturing defect and it was still under warranty. Lily, my daughter, was offered an internship at a TV station. Judith's cancer turned out to be a benign tumor. It was… peculiar."

"Wow," Mary said. "That's… an extraordinary tale."

"I'm not a crackpot, I swear," Wensleydale insisted.

"No, I believe you. Will you sell these books to me?" Mary waited as she heard him breathing raggedly. Please, she thought.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm afraid of what might happen. I'll tell you what. I'll give you the books. Free, gratis, on the house. But you take them away and I never want to hear from you again, OK?"

"Deal," Mary said. "Give me the address. I'll be there tomorrow."

Sam walked into the library, intending to look at Gil Schwartz's box again. He hadn't mentioned it to Dean or the angels, but the carvings they'd found on Vancouver Island reminded him of the report
Schwartz had filed and he wanted to compare the report photographs with the pictures he'd snapped with his phone. He lifted the box onto the table from where he'd stashed it in a corner and pulled out the files.

The pictures were black and white but Schwartz had clearly had a good camera and a steady hand. The lines of the carvings were crisp and clear. He opened the photo gallery app on his phone and zoomed in as much as he could. It was obvious even superficially that the symbols were very similar. Some were definitely meant to be the same, although the carvings they'd found were a little more ornate and stylized.

He opened his laptop and connected his phone using a USB cable so he could copy the pictures onto the computer. He opened a graphics program, zoomed in on one of the clearest and simplest symbols that seemed to be one of the most common in both the Vancouver Island and Massachusetts carvings. Then he saved it out and ran it through Google Image Search.

He grinned in triumph when he got multiple hits. Some of the photos were other pictures of the rock Schwartz had investigated. But there were others, one which he thought might have been the Vancouver Island carving, and several others from locations all over the world.

"Weird," he muttered and began clicking on the first link. It led to the blog of a rock climbing enthusiast, who claimed to have snapped the picture in Colorado. Unfortunately, there wasn't any more information and the unnamed blogger had not updated his site in over three years. The next picture led to a Chinese site that the automatic translation provided by his browser did not parse well. But he thought it might have been somewhere near Luoyang, the oldest city in China. There were sites in Arabic that indicated more carvings in Jordan and Egypt. Others in Mexico, Brazil and Peru. And finally, some in the background of a TripAdvisor review on the Bandelier National Monument.

"Hey, Sammy," Gabriel said, leaning casually against a bookshelf. "Whatcha got?"

Sam started guiltily. After Cas and Gabriel's reaction to the carvings on Vancouver Island, he wasn't sure how the archangel was going to behave when he explained the overlap between the old case files and the pictures he'd taken on his phone.

"Uh, you know the carvings on that strange cave we found at Cumberland Lake," he said hesitantly. Gabriel's eyebrows dived over his nose and Sam suddenly wished he'd been more circumspect. "I thought they looked a lot like the Taunton River carvings in this report."

"I was afraid you would notice that," Gabriel said unhappily.

Sam winced. "Are you going to tell me to stop?"

"No," Gabriel sighed. "For one, you'd probably ignore me. And we probably should discuss it at some point. Tell you what, why don't I bring Castiel and Dean in on this now, rather than repeat myself?"

"OK," Sam said. "Chances are Dean's in the garage, working on the Impala. And where Dean is…"

"Castiel is sure to be nearby." Gabriel nodded and left the room. Sam chewed on his lip as he waited. When a few minutes had passed and there was no sign of his brother, Cas or Gabriel, he began working on the laptop again. He made sketches of some of the carvings in a spiral-bound notebook as he worked.

"This had better be good," Dean said grumpily as he entered the library, a beer in hand.

"No," Cas said from behind him. "It is definitely not what you would call good."
"Never mind," Dean huffed and flung himself untidily into a chair.

"So," Gabriel said, folding his arms and looking like he'd rather be anywhere else. "Where do we start, Castiel?"

"The beginning," the angel said laconically. Gabriel gave him a sarcastic smile. "Very well. After the expulsion of Man from the Garden of Eden but before Lucifer was thrown into the Cage."

"Right," Gabriel said. "So, you know that when Lucifer was first expelled from Heaven, he began making a number of powerful artifacts and he also stole some items from Heaven. He created several crypts around the world to store these items. Like the angel tablet, for example. But one of the things he created was a soulforge. The first one, in fact. He used it to twist Lilith into the first demon. When he was thrown into the Pit, the soulforge was destroyed by Michael. Fast-forward a few centuries, to a brilliant but sadly amoral young engineer in the court of Amenhotep the Fourth, more commonly known to the world these days as Akhenaten."

"He was the world's first monotheist," Sam commented.

"Correct," Castiel said. "But the word engineer is a little misleading. His name was Nakhte and he was a mystic, an astrologer and a very powerful magic user as well as an architect and engineer. He designed many buildings in the city of Amarna, Akhenaten's new capital city. But he also was responsible many innovations, including a rudimentary plumbing system that predates the Romans."

"OK," Dean said. "Enough with the history lesson."

Cas's mouth pinched in irritation.

"But this is important." Cas sighed as Dean waved him on. "Nakhte was fascinated with the power of souls and how they could be harnessed. As far as we can tell, he did a deal with a demon for the information on how to construct a soulforge, and worked tirelessly to 'improve' it."

"I'm not loving the word 'improve'," Gabriel complained. "But essentially, yes, Nakhte was able to create the object the Roman philosopher Marcus Terentius Varro, who studied Nakhte's work extensively, called it the Anima Licio."

Sam rubbed at his chin. "Anima is soul, but I don't know what licio means."

"Loom," Cas said.

"As in weaving?" Dean interjected. "I don't know why but that sounds creepy."

"It is," Gabriel told him. "The soulforge Lucifer invented is nasty enough. The Anima Licio is another beast entirely. Nakhte was a genius really, but utterly without empathy or any sense of morality. A soulforge can be used to meld souls or vital essences, and can be used to twist human souls and angel's Grace into demons or monsters. The Anima Licio separates the strands of the soul and can weave them into complex tapestries. It's an object of terrifying power and should never have been allowed to exist."

"You keep referring to it in the present tense," Sam pointed out nervously. "Which means it still exists. Why wasn't it destroyed?"

Gabriel gave a hollow laugh. "Don't think we didn't try."

"So, where is it?" Dean asked.
"In a place known as Necropolis, or the City of the Dead. It's not really a city, exactly. Nor is it really on earth in any literal sense," Gabriel explained. "Think of it like Purgatory, or Oz. A completely separate, self-contained universe. But you can get to it from earth, if you follow the a set of waypoints to one of the Gates. These carvings mark you found mark one of these waypoints."

"I don't get it," Sam objected. "You and Cas seemed pretty spooked when we found those carvings and that cave."

"Because we didn't know it was there," Gabriel said. "It shouldn't be there. Necropolis is no place for a human, and any that have gone there have not returned… intact. It was one of Dad's early experiments in universe-building. I don't know what exactly went wrong, maybe Amara's interference, but it was corrupted and Dad sealed it off. Nakhte found a way inside and managed to break the seals." Gabriel shook his head.

"There's much we don't know," Cas added. "Our Father was never very forthcoming about Necropolis except to forbid any of us to step over its threshold. But Nakhte built the Anima Licio in Necropolis and used it to do many hideous things. The Heavenly Host descended on earth and destroyed the Gates and the waypoints that led to them. The rock in Taunton River is the remains of one of the waypoints, but it's only part of a larger structure so I suppose it was felt to be harmless."

"But the waypoint we found at Cumberland Lake was not only intact, it was active," Gabriel said solemnly.

"What do you mean, active?" Sam asked.

"The waypoints transport you from one to the next until you reach the Gate they lead to," Cas told him. "It's old magic."

"And it shouldn't be there," Gabriel said, sounding baffled and frustrated. "We destroyed or disabled all the waypoints and destroyed the Gates. Necropolis is sealed and cannot be reopened."

"Except you just found an active waypoint," Dean said. "So, what, is it just one that got missed somehow?"

"No," Cas said. "If it were a single waypoint with no connections it would have been dormant. There is one dormant waypoint under the Mediterranean sea that was damaged but not destroyed because doing so would endanger the lives of the humans who lived there at the time and so deep under the ocean it was felt to be no threat on its own."

"And the waypoint we found was active, which you're saying means it's connected to at least one other waypoint?" Sam concluded.

"Or the Gate." Gabriel looked ill. "There's no way to tell."

"But you said all the Gates were destroyed."

"I said all the waypoints were destroyed or disabled too. Shows what I know," Gabriel said with a self-deprecating grin.

Sam breathed in and out, trying to wrap his mind around the problem. "So, can we destroy it?"

"No," Gabriel said. "This is a job for Heaven. Castiel, I think you'll have to report this. Tell me there's someone in Heaven who'll listen to you?"

"Yes, I think so," Cas said, although he didn't look happy about it.
"So that's it?" Sam asked. "Cas tells Heaven and we just forget about it? Didn't you say you were worried that someone had a soulforge? What if they've gotten access to this Necropolis?"

Gabriel shook his head adamantly. "No. I admit the active waypoint was a horrible shock but there has to be another explanation. Reopening the way into Necropolis is impossible."

Sam exchanged a look with Dean. "I just think we should keep an open mind."

"I said no!" Gabriel snapped.

Dean's face hardened. "You don't get to order us around in our own home."

"Gabriel," Cas rumbled. "Sam and Dean have a point."

"No," Gabriel insisted. "They don't. Now, why don't you go and report this to Heaven and stop contradicting me?"

"I don't take orders from Heaven anymore," Cas said acidly. "And I don't take orders from you." He got up and stalked out of the room, bristling with temper.

"Nice job," Dean said sarcastically to the archangel and left in pursuit.

"What he said," Sam said, irritated with Gabriel's stubbornness and high handed attitude. He shut the lid of his laptop and stood up. "I'll see you later."

"What, you're leaving in a snit because you don't agree with me?" Gabriel said provocingly.

"No," Sam said angrily. "You've pissed me off by being as asshole. Cas didn't deserve that slap down you just gave him. So rather than risk saying something I'll regret, I'm gonna go be somewhere else until I calm down." With that, he strode out of the room, not looking back to the stricken look on Gabriel's face.
"Cas! Hey Cas, wait up!" Dean called as he ran after the angel. He skidded to a halt when he found him leaning against the door to his room.

"Dean, I am not angry with you but it might be better if you left me alone." Cas's mouth was a thin, furious line and his nostrils flared.

Dean took a breath. "If that's really what you want. But Gabriel's out of line and I'm gonna have to tell Sam he's gotta go. I won't have him upsetting you like this."

Cas stared at him. "You're kicking him out?"

"Damn right I am," Dean said pugnaciously. "He has no right to speak to you like that. I told Sam I wasn't putting up with him abusing anyone in the family. That includes you, remember?"

Cas's face softened. "Thank you, Dean. But don't make Gabriel leave on my account. He really doesn't have anywhere else to go."

"He should have thought of that before he started being a dick to you," Dean asserted.

"Sam won't like it if you do this," Cas stressed.

"You really think Sam is gonna choose Gabriel over you? Don't be ridiculous."

Cas sighed, putting one hand on Dean's shoulder. "I don't want to be the cause of any problems. I shouldn't have lost my temper. After all, Gabriel's right. We should report this to Heaven and let them deal with it."

"Not arguing with you," Dean said. He leaned closer, capturing the angel's gaze. "That doesn't mean he gets to order you about."

Cas's breath caught and his pupils dilated. Dean didn't know what to make of his reaction. Discomfort wormed in his gut and he swallowed, hard. Cas's eyes dropped to follow the motion of his throat and as though spellbound, Dean was unable to move. He found himself studying the tiny details of the angel's face, every delicate eyelash and the line of that full, pink mouth. Cas's gaze flitted back up and Dean found himself marvelling, not for the first time, at the color of his irises. Castiel blue.

"Thank you, Dean," Cas murmured.

The sound of someone clearing their throat had Dean turning his head and leaning back to see Sam standing diffidently in the hallway. Flushing he stepped away from Cas and turned to his brother, arms folded across his chest.

"You promised Gabriel wouldn't be a problem if we let him stay here," Dean said aggressively.

"I know," Sam said, his shoulders hunching. "I'm sorry. I suppose you want me to kick him out."

"If you already know that, then I don't have to say it, do I?" Dean replied. "Tell me you're not here to defend him."

"No," Sam said, shaking his head. His brother looked disappointed, Dean thought. "I'm pissed at him too. But I'm not sure I can throw him onto the street."
"Well, I can," Dean snapped and marched off in the direction of the library. Sam's eyes widened and he ran after him, Cas bringing up the rear.

Back in the library, Dean was irritated to see Gabriel was nowhere in sight. He shoved angrily at a chair and turned to leave, almost colliding with Sam as he did so.

"He's not here," he snarled.

"Maybe he's sulking in his room," Sam said. "Look, I know you're mad but will you let me deal with this?" Dean didn't answer other than to scowl and storm out of the room.

Gabriel's room was also empty and so were the kitchen, garage and the upper levels of the basement.

"Well, where the Hell is he?" Dean demanded. "I can hardly throw him out if he's not fucking here."

"I don't know," Sam said defensively. "Maybe he took off. I kinda yelled at him before I came to find you. He might have read the writing on the wall." He looked so forlorn Dean felt a lurching sensation in his chest.

"Dean, please," Cas said. "Please don't eject Gabriel over this. Please."

Dean growled at him and for a moment Sam was sure he would refuse. But he was staring at Cas and he saw the moment his brother's stance shifted and suppressed a sigh of relief. Dean clapped Sam on the shoulder.

"OK, OK. I can see I'm outnumbered. But no more second chances. Assuming you can find him that is." He scrubbed at his stubble. "You wanna see if he's hanging out outside? It's not like he's got transportation, and unless he was lying about his wings, he's not gonna get far."

"OK, that's a good idea," Sam said. He grabbed his keys from the kitchen table and headed for the door. As soon as he'd left, Cas frowned at him.

"Cas, I gotta a bad feeling about this."

"What is it?" the angel asked.

"Sam and Gabriel. That stupid tarot card. The enchantment was supposed to be gone, right?" Dean raked a hand through his hair in distress.

"Yes, the enchantment is gone. I've been monitoring Sam quite closely since the incident with the card and I'm sure he's clear," Cas told him. "But Gabriel said he thought there were some lingering effects."

"Oh he did, did he?" Dean said, gritting his teeth. "What kind of lingering effects?"

"He wasn't specific," the angel admitted. "But when we stayed in that motel on the way back from Vancouver Island, Sam had a nightmare and Gabriel had to wake him up because he was sobbing in his sleep."

"Woun't be the first time," Dean sighed. "I've had to do that a few times. You have to duck his fists sometimes too."

"Well, Gabriel felt that Sam's behavior when he woke him up was out of character." A muscle twitched in Cas's jaw. "I don't know what he meant by that."
"But you're certain the enchantment's gone."

"Yes," Cas said. "I fear Gabriel's ability to see things straight may be compromised where Sam is concerned."

"What the Hell is that supposed to mean?" Dean demanded.

Cas looked uncomfortable, his face twisting and his gaze dropping to the floor. "I just meant with his Grace bound, it might be hampering his celestial senses. Those cards really spooked him. I think it's making him paranoid."

Dean relaxed, nodding to himself. He'd thought Gabriel had seemed edgy and strangely fragile sometimes, it seemed Cas shared that view. Having all that power and then suddenly it's just out of reach must be incredibly frustrating, not to mention how vulnerable he must feel and how unaccustomed Gabriel would be to such a feeling. Dean realized irritably that Cas had managed to make him feel sympathy for the archangel.

"All right," he said. "Are you sure you don't want me to kick his ass out of here? Because you come first Cas, you gotta believe that."

Cas gave him a shy smile. "I do know that. But Gabriel is my brother too. And right now he's hurting."

'Ugh,' Dean said. "OK, OK. But he better start behaving himself."

It didn't take Sam long to find the small figure trudging down the road. He eased back on the accelerator and let the Mustang coast up alongside. Gabriel looked up and Sam was shocked by the grayness of his skin and the tight, unhappy lines around his mouth. He stopped the car and got out.

"Going somewhere?" he asked.

Gabriel shrugged but didn't speak. Sam huffed in frustration.

"Are you gonna give me the silent treatment now?"

"No," Gabriel said softly. Sam had to strain to hear him, his voice was so low. Gabriel was watching him with wide eyes, his mouth puckered with misery. It was chilly and a light fog was beginning to form. Sam shivered and wished he'd put on a jacket.

"We're not kicking you out," he said finally. "You owe Cas an apology, but he'll forgive you because that's who he is. Dean probably still wants to kick your ass, but if Cas says no then you're safe."

"Do you really want me to come back?" Gabriel asked. "Apparently I'm this unbelievable asshole."

"Yes, you are," Sam said bluntly. "It's up to you. I told you. I don't know why you got so angry, or why you felt you had to treat Cas like a doormat, but if you walk away now, there's no going back. Dean's cutting you some slack because Cas wants him to. Think about what that means."

"It means I don't know who's more oblivious, my brother or yours," Gabriel said tartly and Sam gave him a warning glance. "All right, I'm sorry. I was rude and domineering and all that archangel bullshit. I know better."

"You are better," Sam agreed. "Look, can we at least get in the car? It's freezing out here."
Gabriel nodded and opened the passenger door, hopping into the seat. Sam climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine. He held his hands out over the vents as warm air began to blow.

"Sorry," Gabriel said, eyeing his hands with a strange look on his face. "I didn't realize how cold it was."

"So," Sam said, turning in his seat to face him. "What's it gonna be?"

Gabriel was studying him carefully, his eyes roaming over Sam's face. Sam wondered what he was looking for.

"I'll apologize," he said finally. It was a little bit grudging for Sam's liking, but he agreed with Dean on this. Cas was the one Gabriel had wronged, and he got the final say.

"Make it good," Sam advised and shifted the gear lever into drive. He turned the car around and began driving back to the bunker.

"What did you mean?" Gabriel said suddenly. "When you said, 'Think about what that means'."

Sam chewed on his lip. "Dean isn't good at considering other people's feelings. He rides roughshod over me all the time."

"What are you talking about?" Gabriel said incredulously. "We're talking about the guy who sold his soul to save your life, and has done other, equally stupid and insane, world-ending things to keep you alive."

"Of course, but that's not for my benefit," Sam said dryly. "It's for his. He does those things because he can't bear to live in the world without me. That sounds nice but it really isn't. More than once I've been ready to check out. Happy to move on. And he's refused to let me go, even when I begged him to. So, you see, it's not about what I want."

"Father," Gabriel breathed. "You two are so fucked up."

"Thanks," Sam said with a wry look. "Lucky for you, I agree with you. We are. No point denying it. But for Cas, it's different. He does things for Cas that he wouldn't do for anyone else. Not even me. He puts Cas's feelings ahead of his own."

Gabriel digested this information slowly. "He loves him."

"I wouldn't use that word around Dean, and I certainly don't know how to characterize it, other than to say there's nothing brotherly about it, no matter what Dean says." Sam eased the car into the garage and parked in an empty space. "You ready?"

"As I'll ever be," the archangel said cryptically.

Dean leaned back in his chair, slurping on his beer and watching Gabriel apologize to Cas. Never let it be said that he sucked at saying sorry ever again. He fucking rocked at it compared to the incoherent mess in front of him. He didn't need to understand the language to hear how Gabriel seemed to stutter and stumble over his words until finally Cas pulled the archangel into a hug and Gabriel's arms flailed amusingly before settling on Cas's back. The look on Cas's face however, made his indulgent smile drop. The peace and happiness displayed there made something inside him snarl and scratch at his nerves.

"OK," he said mock-jocularly. "I think we're done, right?" Sam gave him a disapproving look,
which he ignored. "Well, I'm done anyway." He got up and tossed the beer bottle in the trashcan and
opened the fridge. Locating another beer, he looked over his shoulder. "Beer, Sam?"

"Sure," Sam said. Dean pulled two bottles and handed one to Sam, twisting off the cap of his own
and sauntering towards the door.

"Wait," Cas said. "Don't you want to hear what Heaven had to say?"

Dean turned around in surprise. "I didn't realize you'd spoken to them already."

"I called Arariel," Cas said. "He wasn't delighted to hear from me, but he did take me seriously."

"Rary's stick up his ass can be seen from space," Gabriel said sourly. "Of course he took you
seriously."

"Well, be that as it may, Gabriel..." Cas gave him a meaningful look. "Arariel is passing it up the
chain. He's not going to invoke my name, because as he so kindly pointed out, that would cast some
doubt on the claim. So he's going to visit the site himself and then report to whoever's in charge these
days."

"Rary didn't say who it was?" Gabriel said curiously.

"Not only did he not say, he made it clear that he did not know," Cas told him.

Sam's eyebrows shot up. "Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

"Yes, frankly," Cas said. "But Arariel always was taciturn. And whereas he deigned to speak with
me, we're not exactly friends."

"And that's it? We just have to assume Heaven will take care of it?" Dean said.

Cas gave him a helpless look. "I've done all I can."

"No, man, I wasn't attacking you. I was just hoping for something a bit more substantial as a
response." Dean stood up and raised his bottle. "And now I am going to bed."

"I'm coming with you," Cas said, getting to his feet. Dean gaped at him but the angel seemed
unperturbed.

"Whatever." He left the kitchen and walked in the direction of his room, aware of Cas dogging his
footsteps.

When he got to his door he turned and saw Cas was still behind him. "Did you want something?"

"Thank you," Cas said gravely. "I wanted to thank you."

"What for?"

"Letting Gabriel stay. You didn't want to but you did it for my benefit. I'm grateful." Cas had his
head down and was looking up at him through his eyelashes, which gave him a rather bashful
appearance.

"Of course," Dean said easily. "You know I'd do anything to make you happy."

Without warning, the angel pulled him into a hug. Reminded uncomfortably of Gabriel's flailing
earlier, Dean felt his own arms pinwheel in surprise and mild discomfort. But this was Cas and he
shouldn't be so prickly. He wrapped his arms around him and felt the angel tuck his nose into his neck, his breath hot against Dean's skin.

"Uh, Cas? Are you OK?"

"Yes," the seraph mumbled. "Just give me this moment, please."

He'd just told Cas he would do anything to make him happy. If that included this slightly over-intimate hug, then he would just have to suck it up. The warmth of the angel's body was a little distracting however. Was Cas always this warm? Cas moved his head and his nose nuzzled against the cords of Dean's neck in a way that was both pleasurable and faintly disturbing.

"OK," he said, patting awkwardly at Cas's back. "Time for bed." The angel lifted his head and looked at Dean with a wild light in his eye. Unnerved, Dean stepped back and with that the effect vanished so quick he began to doubt he'd even seen anything in the first place.

"Goodnight, Dean," Cas said, and he turned and walked back down the hallway.

The antiques store was rather incongruous, set between a nail bar and a liquor store on an unprepossessing strip mall. Mary frowned at it, the items in the window hardly inspiring confidence. She knew nothing about antiques but most of the stuff she could see looked like junk. Opening the door, and hearing an old-fashioned bell ring, she looked around the store and suppressed a groan. Moth-eaten stuffed animals on the walls seemed to watch her as she browsed through cheap sixties prefabricated furniture and a painting of a cat dressed as a court jester that was strangely disturbing.

"Are you Ms Smith?" a man said diffidently.

"Mary," she said, holding out her hand. He shook it with a limp, clammy had and she had to resist the urge to wipe her hand on her jeans.

"Call me Wen. Everyone does, except my wife. She insists on calling me Morgan." He gave her a smile and patted a small cardboard box on the counter. "The books are in here."

She opened the flaps and peered inside before pulling out a single book. "I thought you said there were two left."

"There are two," he said. He picked up the box and looked inside, frowning. "Weird."

"You're sure you didn't sell it?"

"I told you, they've been hanging around in my basement for months." He shook his head disbeliefingly. "Let me call Judith, maybe she took it." He pulled an old Nokia phone out of his pocket and dialed a number from memory. Mary watched him, her senses suddenly alert. She was certain the cellphone he was using was very old and from what she understood, most people stored numbers in the phones rather than bothering to memorize them anymore. It was probably nothing but it did make her wonder.

"Judith, it's me. No, no, I remembered. No, this is about those books from the basement. Yes, the cursed ones. No, I'm not going to sell them. Did you take any of the books out of the box?"

He started making sounds that told Mary that his wife was telling him a tale. "OK. Well, I wish you'd told me. Yes, I will. Maybe 4pm? OK, love you."

"So?"
"So, according to Judith, she gave it to a woman who came in asking about it." He looked baffled. "I don't understand. How did anyone even know to ask about it?"

"Did she describe the woman? Or get her name?" Mary asked.

"Courtney. I'm not sure if that was her first name or her last. Judith thought she had some kind of accent, but she's not sure what it was. She was dressed in a pantsuit, with a scarf on her head and big sunglasses, so Judith didn't get a good look at her face or see the color of her hair.

"Pity," Mary said.

"Well, the Codex Retorta is gone but the other book is still here and you can have it, as I promised," Wen said.

"The what?" Mary said, gaping.

"The book Judith gave away. That's what it was called, according to her." Wen frowned. "This is really strange you know. Judith doesn't work in the store much, just Saturday mornings so I can do my accounts. And I didn't know any of the books had names. I wonder how Judith knew which one to give her, if she asked for it by name."

"Just one more mystery," Mary agreed. She hefted the remaining book in her hand and smiled at him. "Thank you."

"It's no trouble," Wen told her. "Well, OK, these books have been lots of trouble and I won't lie to you, I'm glad to see the last one go. So, really, thank you."

Mary nodded to him and left the store, the mid-morning sun bright as she stepped back outside. Getting in her car, she placed a call to Max and Alicia.

"Hello?" Max sounded terrible.

"Max? It's Mary."

"Mary," Max said. "Oh, God. Mary, Asa's dead. Our dad's... dead."

"What happened?" Mary asked, all intent of telling them about the grimoires she'd just had handed to her forgotten. Asa, dead? Her throat closed with grief.

"We don't know, not yet. We're driving up to his mom's tonight."

"Gimme the address, I'll meet you there."

The banging sound that roused Sam from sleep echoed through the bunker and made his groan and wince. His head felt swollen and painful, as though he had a hangover. Except he'd drunk the sum total of one beer last night, so it really didn't seem very fair. He rooted around on the small cabinet next to his bed for painkillers but the bottle was empty. Irritated, he tossed it in the trash and got out of bed slowly. He pulled on some clothes and still the banging sound continued. What the Hell was going on out there?

He opened the door to his room which made the sound resolve more clearly. Someone was knocking rather insistently at the outer door. He frowned, had Dean gone out and forgotten his keys? Where was Cas or Gabriel? Well, Gabriel probably wouldn't open the door since he was technically hiding out here.
"All right, all right, I'm coming!" he called out. He opened the door and blinked at the sight of Rowena on the doorstep.

"Uh, hi?" he said in confusion.

"Hello, Samuel," she said imperiously. She peered at him, her mouth turned down. "Did I get you out of bed?"

"Yes," Sam said, hands on his hips. "What are you doing here?"

"I have some information for you," she told him. "My son thinks it is unimportant but I disagree. You've been fighting some hybrid monsters, haven't you? I know something about that."

Sam stood back and waved her inside. "OK, come in. But this had better be good."

"Are you feeling all right, Samuel?" she said, narrowing her eyes. "You don't look well."

"It's just a headache," Sam said dismissively as he directed her to the library.

"Ach, overindulged last night did we?" She shook her head in disapproval.

"No," Sam said firmly. The library was empty, and Sam frowned again. Where the Hell was everyone?

"Where's Dean?" Rowena asked, looking around at the bookshelves with wide eyes.

"Not here," Sam told her. He pulled out his phone and sent a quick text message to Dean and Cas to let them know the witch was there.

"So, hybrid monsters," he said. "What do you know about it? Please tell me you're not involved."

"God, no," Rowena said with distaste. "Nasty, messy business. No, it's not me. Have you ever heard of a witch called Constance McBride?"

Sam's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Yes. Her name came up on a hunt Dean and I were on recently."

Rowena nodded. "Constance and I were in a coven together a few years ago, but ah, we had something of a falling out." She made a moue of irritation.

"How many years ago?" Sam pressed.

"Oh, maybe a hundred, a hundred and ten years ago," she said. "The coven only lasted two years. Constance kicked me out because she felt threatened by me of course, but after I left, the group fell apart."

"OK, so how does this relate to making hybrids?" Sam asked impatiently. His phone buzzed on the table like an angry bee. He turned it over and glanced at the message from Dean.

*Getting parts for the car. Cas is with me. D*

Rowena glared at him. "Am I keeping you from something?"

"No, no. Sorry. Carry on."

"Well, before I left, Constance had presented to the coven a grimoire she had managed to obtain. She was a little vague about where she got it, so it was probably stolen. The grimoire was called the
"Codex Retorta." She looked at him expectantly.

"OK," Sam said. "Is that name meant to mean something to me?"

"It's the grimoire that contains the instructions for making a soulforge," Rowena said snippily.

"OK, I didn't know that. So what happened to it?"

"I may have… liberated it when I left the coven," Rowena said with a slight smile. Then her face fell. "But unfortunately, I had to leave it behind when hunters came knocking on my door back in 1933. They chased me from my home with nothing but the clothes on my back!"

"Tragic," Sam commented unsympathetically.

"I don't know what happened to it after that, but then I heard word about six months ago that the book had resurfaced. Or more specifically, that someone had used a curse that is only contained in that book."

"Which curse?" Sam asked, an uncomfortable feeling worming in his stomach. His head was pounding even more severely and there was a metallic taste in his mouth.

"The Marasmus curse," Rowena said, looking slightly sick. "It's a horrible spell, causes the afflicted to waste away slowly, no matter how much they eat."

"Oh," Sam said, relaxing.

Rowena's sharp eyes caught the change in his demeanor at once. "You thought I was going to say something else?"

He didn't see much point in denying it. "Yes. We met a hunter a few weeks back who turned out to be a Hyde. She was cursed by Constance McBride."

Rowena's eyes widened. "Now that's a nasty curse as well. But the Book of Winter is supposed to be in the hands of one of the Walters sisters."

"Amanda Walters," Sam agreed. "Except she was murdered and her collection of grimoires stolen."

"When did this happen?" Rowena exclaimed in outrage.

"A few years ago," Sam recalled. "She was supposed to be the final victim of the I-55 strangler, although nobody knows for sure."

"No, no, that's quite impossible," Rowena said, but her face was pale. "I spoke to Amanda just two days ago."

"I'm sorry but it's true. I don't know who you spoke to but Amanda Walters is definitely dead."

The witch stood up and began pacing restlessly. "Someone with both the Codex Retorta and the Book of Winter has the power to raise an army of monsters." She looked puzzled. "This really doesn't make much sense."

"Why not?" Sam asked.

"Raising an army implies war," Rowena pointed out. "Why would Constance, or any witch, be interested in that?"
"I don't know, you tell me," Sam said, folding his arms. "You said the Grand Coven fell apart after Olivette disappeared. Maybe this Constance wants to fill that power vacuum."

"I'm sure she does," Rowena said tartly. "But you don't need an army to do that, you need supporters and power. Constance is already a witch of considerable power, and whereas I don't know if she has many supporters, she's not going to get them by amassing a legion of monsters. That's more likely to galvanize other witches against her."

"Maybe she's working for someone else, someone who does want an army," Sam suggested.

"You've got someone in mind," she realized, pausing her relentless pacing and turning to face him.

"Lucifer."

Rowena went white, which given her already pale complexion made her look almost ghostly. Sam couldn't help a small pang of pity for her. Yes, she'd allied herself with the devil and maybe she deserved all she got. But her evident fear was something Sam could identify with and he wasn't made of stone.

"What would L-l-lucifer want with an army?" she stuttered, wrapping her arms around herself as though chilled.

"We don't know for sure," Sam admitted. "But Crowley thinks it's possible he's planning an assault on Heaven and Hell."

"My son singularly neglected to mention this," Rowena said angrily.

"It's nothing more than a theory at this stage," Sam reminded her. "I'm still not sure I believe it. All we really have is some evidence that someone is making hybrid monsters. It's pretty thin."

"Well, let's focus on what we do know," Rowena said with forced brightness. "Constance McBride."

"We don't know where she is," Sam said. "Mom's looking for her."

"Of course, your mother's a Campbell. I'd almost forgotten." Sam didn't believe her since she'd already brought the name up before but he let it slide. "Well, let me offer some assistance. Constance is in Chicago. She's renting an apartment there under the unlikely name of Charity Leblanc."

"What is she doing in Chicago?" Sam wondered.

"I'm sure I have no idea," Rowena said airily. "Officially, she's registered at the University of Chicago, studying to become a midwife."

The pounding pain in Sam's head became an icy lance of agony and he gasped. Rowena watched him carefully. "Sorry, this headache," he hissed. "Look, I appreciate you bringing this to us…"

"But you want me to leave so you can go back to bed," Rowena said kindly. "Of course, I could whip up a spell for you if you'd like?"

"No," Sam rasped. "Thank you, but I just need to find some Tylenol or something." He struggled to his feet and escorted Rowena to the door, half-blind with pain. She patted his hand in sympathy and walked out of the door. He watched her leave and then slammed the door shut, sliding down onto the floor and cradling his head in his hands. His breath came in tortured gasps, and he felt a warm wetness on his upper lip. A swipe of his hand revealed a stream of blood coming from his nose and he felt a dizzying sense of foreboding. And then his vision went gray and black.
"OK," Dean said as he lifted one end of the replacement tailpipe. "Gimme a hand with this would you?" Cas grabbed the other end and helped him carry it across the garage, laying it on the floor next to the partially dismantled Impala. His stomach rumbled demandingly and he laughed.

"I think I gotta eat before I start working again," he decided. He walked out of the garage and Cas followed him. Dean began calling Sam's name but there was no response. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," Cas replied. "There's no sign he's left the bunker. None of the cars were gone."

They checked the kitchen and the library and although they found his keys on the kitchen table and his laptop open and switched on, there was no sign of Sam.

"OK, maybe he went for a walk," Dean said. Cas quirked an eyebrow at him. "I know, but it's the only idea I've got left." He started heading for the stairs when he noticed a strange shape by the door, although it was hard to make out in the poor light. He climbed the stairs and yelped when he recognized the crumpled form of his brother. "Cas!"

The angel took the stairs two at a time and knelt down next to Sam. He checked his pulse and breathing before looking up at Dean, holding up his fingers which were smeared with blood. Dean's eyes widened.

"I can't find any sign of injury," Cas said. "But he's had a nosebleed and he's unconscious. I'd heal him but other than the burst blood vessel in his nose, I can't find anything wrong."

"Shit," Dean said. "OK, let's get him downstairs." He helped Cas pick Sam up off the floor and carry him down the stairs.

"Should we take him to his room?" Cas said, grunting slightly under Sam's weight.

"Let's put him on the couch in the TV room," Dean suggested. "It's closer."

Cas nodded and they manhandled the giant hunter down the corridor to the TV room. Laying him on the couch, Cas began checking his vital signs again.

"Where's Gabriel?" he asked.

"No idea," Dean told him. "You want me to go find him?"

"He knows more about human physiology than I do," the seraph said. "Maybe he can figure out what's going on here."

"OK, lemme go get him," Dean said, striding purposefully out the door. He headed straight for the archangel's room.

Hammering on the door brought one bleary-eyed and rumpled Gabriel to open it a crack and glare at him.

"Whassup?"

"Sam's unconscious and Cas can't find anything wrong with him," Dean said, the words tumbling out on top of each other. Gabriel straightened, the door swinging open to reveal he was naked. Dean covered his eyes and swore.
" Seriously? Put some fucking pants on and come help. " He turned away and loped down the hallway.

Sam opened crusted eyes and peered into the gloom, trying to make out a familiar shape. But nothing he could see looked remotely recognizable. There was a faint, bluish light that seemed to outline several amorphous shapes but it was too dim to see properly. Where the Hell was he? He seemed to be lying on a stone floor. Reaching out around him, he could feel the rough edges of hewn flagstones, gritty and irregularly shaped. He wiped his hands on his jeans and carefully got to his feet. Moving slowly, sliding his feet so that he didn't step off an unseen edge, he determined that he was in a room about the size of his bedroom in the bunker. Four wooden crates were stacked in a corner and there was a wooden door in the center of one wall which had a small opening in it. The blue light seemed to be coming from there. On this side of the door there didn't seem to be a handle or latch although Sam did find a large, old-fashioned keyhole.

He placed one hand in the small opening and pulled at the door but it didn't move. He tried pushing and pulling but it seemed to be stuck fast. Giving up, Sam kept investigating the room. In a corner opposite the door he found a dagger and a card that was around 5 by 7 inches. His breath caught and he dropped the card onto the floor. He tucked the dagger into his boot. Although he was sure there was no more light in the room than there had been before, he could clearly make out the abstract peacock-feather design of Ashton LaCroix's tarot card deck. He stumbled backwards and fell over one of the wooden crates. Landing heavily on his hip, he cursed in pain. The card seemed to lie there mockingly. He wasn't imagining things, a shaft of silvery-white light now streamed from the opening in the door. He lay there on the floor, letting the pain from his fall subside and trying to decide what to do. In the end, it seemed he had to at least turn the card over and see the image. He crawled painfully towards the card and flipped it over with the tip of the dagger he'd found, unwilling to touch the thing again.

A man stood with his back to the viewer, in a dingy white t-shirt and dark blue jeans. His head bowed so that his face was not visible and the scene was poorly lit but the hair and body shape looked very like himself. There was a table in front of him and several wine glasses were strewn over the surface, only two were upright. Red liquid stained the inside of the glasses and dripped down from the table to the floor. Sam wasn't sure if it was meant to be wine or blood.

He edged away from the card and stood up, his hip screaming in agony. Limping over to the door, he was surprised when it swung open at his touch. The door led out into a hallway with a high, vaulted ceiling, like you might find in one of those old castles in Europe. Unlit torches were placed in iron sconces on the walls and silvery moonlight came through large windows on one side. A red woven carpet runner in the middle of the floor was old and worn. Sam followed it down to a massive pair of wooden doors that were ornately carved with symbols that seemed vaguely familiar. He pushed at the doors and they swung open easily to reveal a rough-hewn cave. Taking a few steps inside, Sam found a staircase carved into the sandy colored rock that wound downwards in a spiral. He turned around to back up, but the doors had closed behind him and when he attempted to open them, they would not move.

Wherever he was, whatever was going on, he was being herded in a very specific direction. This was not a comforting thought. But he had little choice. He had to keep moving onwards.

There was a humming sound that was barely at the edge of his hearing when he began to descend the uneven steps, but by the time he reached the bottom it had become louder, a deep thrumming sound that seemed to vibrate in his chest. He found himself standing inside some large cavern, the strange bluish light emanating from several openings in the walls. The cavern was at least four storeys high and divided into levels, with what appeared to Sam to be small dwellings carved into the
rock, just as the staircase had been. Investigating one of the dwellings on this ground level, he found
a small room with an opening he could imagine would serve as a bed but otherwise it was
empty. *Maybe this wasn't a dwelling*, he thought. *Maybe it's a tomb.* Unnerved, he backed out and
looked around the cavern once more. In the center he saw a large, squarish block of black stone that
stood out starkly against the sandstone of the cave.

The block itself was easily large enough for Sam to lie down on and seemed to be made of obsidian.
On top of the block was a ring made of amber, strange symbols carved on the inside. Sam picked it
up and examined it. The symbols glowed faintly as he handled it and he felt an almost irresistible
urge to put it on. It slid easily onto the middle finger of his left hand, as though made for him. The
 Corresponding wave of power that crashed over him made him stagger. He felt like he could level
mountains and drain the oceans like this and it appalled him. Pulling the ring roughly from his hand,
it fell onto the obsidian block with a loud thunk that seemed out of proportion to its size and weight.

Sam backed away, wondering if he was ever going to find a way out of this place. He was scared
and confused and it seemed like he was the only living creature here. But the only entrance to the
cavern seemed to have disappeared and none of the crypt-like structures in the walls seemed to have
any exits. Sinking down onto the floor in despair, he rested his head against the wall and closed his
eyes, letting a few tears fall unheeded down his face.

When Gabriel entered the TV room to see Sam laid out awkwardly on the couch, his face bone
white and blood smeared across his top lip, his stomach gave a painful squeeze. Cas was leaning
over him, fingers pressed to his forehead and his eyes closed.

"What's wrong with him?" the archangel asked, his voice squeaking strangely as fear made his throat
close.

"I don't know," Cas said, not opening his eyes. "I can't find any signs of injury or disease. He's
just… unconscious. You know more about humanity than I do. What do you think?"

"What happened?"

"We don't know," Dean said, frustrated. "We came back from the autoparts warehouse to find him
blacked out by the door."

"What about the blood?" Gabriel asked.

"Nosebleed," Cas said. His eyes popped open and then narrowed at the look on Dean's face. "What
is it?"

"Back when Sam used to have his psychic visions, he used to get blinding headaches and
nosebleeds," Dean said, his voice troubled. "He never passed out, that I remember."

"Used to have," Gabriel said, looked confused. "He doesn't have them anymore?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Dean responded. "I mean, I guess he could have kept them to himself but he
hasn't had the headaches or the nosebleeds either, which is harder to hide. Until uh, three or four
weeks ago I guess. He had a migraine the day we drove down to Houston. But honestly, there's been
something going on with him since we rescued him from the Brits."

"I agree," Cas said. "Nothing Sam told us about what they did to him would explain this. I was
concerned for his mental health because of the torture. But he seems physically in good shape, except
for the unintended weight loss."
"You've mentioned that before. How long has that been going on?" Gabriel said sharply.

"Again, since we rescued him. His appetite's been off and as you know, there's evidence he may be suffering from PTSD." Cas removed his hand and stood up, moving away so Gabriel could take a closer look.

The archangel shuffled closer and placed one hand on his forehead. The skin there was hot and sticky. "He seems feverish."

"I know," Cas agreed. "But there's no trace of infection."

"Is there nothing you can do?" Dean asked, a little plaintively.

"I don't know what's wrong," Cas told him.

Gabriel carded his hand through Sam's hair, feeling a sense of helplessness that was as alien as anything he'd felt since Death had bound his Grace. A horrifying idea occurred to him and he turned his head to look at Dean.

"Have you searched his room?"

"What? No! Why would I do that?" Dean looked affronted.

"Because those damn tarot cards are still in this bunker," Gabriel grated. "Go, now. Check another card hasn't made it out of the box."

Dean gaped in horror at him for a second and then dashed out of the room. Cas hovered for a moment, looking torn.

"Go help Dean," Gabriel told him. "I'll keep an eye on Sam." The seraph nodded and ran after the older Winchester. Gabriel looked down at Sam again. His eyes were bruised-looking and sunken. The archangel stroked his fingers down Sam's cheek, desperately praying for him to open his eyes. There was a loud exclamation from somewhere deep in the bunker and he froze. Waiting for Castiel and Dean to return seemed to take forever.

"We found another card," Dean said from the door. Gabriel closed his eyes in resignation and anger.

"Which one?"

"Uh, eight of cups. But here's the weird part, it was inside the bed frame."

Gabriel's eyes opened in surprise. "Why is that weird?"

"Because we had to dismantle the damn thing to get at it," Dean explained. "Cas could feel it, as soon as we entered the room. But I had to take a screwdriver and undo a bunch of screws at the end so we could pull it out. We found those beds when we moved in here, they're really old. How did the card get in there?"

"We've already seen that they are capable of translocating themselves where they want to be," Gabriel reminded him. "Why not inside a bed frame?"

"So this is another enchantment?" Dean demanded. "How long has that damn thing been in there?"

Gabriel nodded slowly. "I think so. As for time, I'd say at least as long as Sam's had the set. Maybe longer." Gabriel felt old and tired. Those fucking tarot cards had to go. "We've got to get rid of them somehow."
"Agreed," Dean said shortly. "It's obvious we can't contain them." He blinked. "Wait, what did you mean, maybe longer?"

"I doubt distance is a barrier," Gabriel said. "Something woke these cards up and they've gravitated to Sam almost immediately."

"So how do we wake him up? Cas is locking the card down now. Will that do it?"

Gabriel turned his attention back to Sam, whose eyelids were fluttering. "Looks like he's coming out of it."

"Good," Dean said. "Dammit, what is taking Cas so long? Look, I'm gonna go investigate, OK?"

"Go," Gabriel said. Sam groaned and he cupped a hand around the hunter's jaw. "Sam?"

"Unh," Sam said intelligently, his eyes still closed.

"Sam."

His extraordinary green-hazel eyes flickered open. "Gabriel?" He looked stricken. "Oh, thank God." The archangel blinked at this pronouncement.

"How are you feeling, kiddo?" he asked.

"Awful," Sam said honestly. "Gabriel, I had the strangest… I don't know what to call it. Dream? Vision? Oh, God, it was horrendous."

"What did you see?" Gabriel asked softly.

Sam told him.

The older woman who opened the door looked ravaged with grief. Mary had never met Asa's mom before, but the resemblance was clear.

"Hi," she said awkwardly.

"I'm Lorraine Fox. Asa's mom."

"Mary Winchester." She held out her hand. Lorraine looked at it but didn't take it.

"No you're not. Asa told me about you, but… you'd be my age. So how…"

"It's a long story," Mary said ruefully.

"I'll bet." God, this woman was prickly. She'd just lost her son and Mary could sympathize but why the hostility?

"I'm sorry-" she began lamely.

Lorraine tossed her head. "You should be. Like I said, Asa told me about you. You're the reason my son didn't become an astronaut."

"Astronaut?" Mary repeated, baffled. Lorraine beckoned her into the house and led her to a homey looking kitchen. She took a wooden box from the top of the fridge and handed it to Mary. Inside were hundreds of postcards, all addressed to Mary. She blinked.
"Here. Asa wrote those to you over the years, but couldn't send them because you're so mysterious."
She shook her head.

"I saved his life," Mary defended.

"What am I supposed to say to that?" Lorraine scoffed. "After you, Asa got so… Hunting was his whole life. He never married. Never had a family, kids. And now… enjoy the wake." She turned on her heel and walked away, leaving Mary to gape after her.

"She's angry and she's looking for a scapegoat," Alicia said as she entered the kitchen. She gave Mary a weak smile but her eyes were red. Mary opened her arms and they hugged tightly. "You'd think hunters would be used to death. Even one of our own," Alicia said into Mary's shoulder. Mary rubbed her back in soothing circles.

"It doesn't get easier," she admitted. "And if it does, well that's a sign it's time to leave the life."

Max appeared with an empty beer bottle in his hand. "Mary! You made it." He frowned at Alicia wrapped around Mary but didn't comment. She disengaged herself and Mary hugged Max briefly.

"How are you holding up?" she asked.

"OK, I guess. It's not like we knew him all that well. But…" Mary nodded in understanding.

"So, did you get the books?" Max asked, changing the subject.

"Just one. The Path of the Dead. They're in my car, I'll give them to you before you leave."

"So what happened to the other one? I thought you said this guy had two."

"Constance McBride was one step ahead, it seems. She convinced his wife to hand over the Codex Retorta." Mary's mouth pursed. "What she wants with that book is anyone's guess."

"Why do you say that?" Alicia asked.

"I assumed you knew about it," Mary said in astonishment. "It's notorious after all. Mythical, almost."

"We just knew it was a grimoire. A dangerous one," Alicia told her.

"Well, the legend is that the book contains the instructions for making a soulforge," Mary said.

"Ugh," Max said with feeling.

"Agreed," Alicia said, shuddering. She opened the fridge and peered inside before grabbing another beer. "Max, Mary?"

"Sure," Max said, holding his hand out.

"Definitely," Mary added. Alicia handed two beers over and opened her's with a bottle opener before handing it to Mary.

"Let's talk about it later," Max said and gave them a wave before wandering off.

"She OK?" Mary asked Alicia.

"Not really. Mel's death hit her hard, and then this…” she trailed off, looking forlorn.
"And what about you?" Mary asked gently.

"Me?" she sighed. "I guess I'm taking Mel's death less personally. Asa's death is harder for me, I suppose." Her hand slid around Mary's waist and tugged her closer. She gave her a warning look. "I'm not trying to hit on you. I just need some human contact, is all."

Giving in, Mary settled her arm around her. "OK. But remember I'm old enough to be your grandmother."

"Whatever," Alicia said, leaning her head on Mary's shoulder.

Dean hurried down to the basement, worry gnawing at his insides. Cas had assured him that locking the card they'd found in the safe would only take a few moments. When he entered the room, it was to see a scene of shocking devastation. Cas was flat on his back, his eyes serenely closed. Around him were shards of wood and glass, shreds of paper and other detritus Dean couldn't identify. It looked as though a bomb had gone off. The safe door was hanging on it's hinges and as far as Dean could tell, everything inside had been obliterated. How this had failed to make any sound, or set off any of the bunker's myriad alarms and wards he couldn't say. The only thing left intact was the carved ebony and ivory tarot card box, sitting insouciantly on the floor.

"Cas!"

The angel groaned and opened his eyes. "What happened?"

"I was going to ask you the same question," Dean said. "Are you OK?"

Cas blinked slowly. "I think so." He touched a hand gingerly to the back of his head and frowned at the blood that came away on his fingers. "Ouch."

"Ouch? You are hurt, lemme see," Dean crouched down and turned Cas's head so he could inspect the damage. "I think it's just a cut. What I don't understand is how it happened at all?"

"Angelic power," Cas said sourly.

"Can you heal it?"

"No, but if it is as superficial as you say, it will be all right." The angel pulled himself upright and looked around the room. "Wow."

"Wow is right," Dean agreed. "What are we going to do now?"

"Meaning?" Cas winced and put his hand on the back of his head again.

"The cards are the only thing that survived. Look."

"Of course they are," Cas said sarcastically. "Is Sam awake?"

"He was beginning to stir when I came down here. Hey, easy does it." Cas had lurched to his feet and was swaying alarmingly.

"I'm fine," he said unconvincingly. "I think we should just leave everything here for now." He hobbled off towards the exit and Dean frowned. He didn't like leaving the deck out in the open like this but he didn't really feel like touching them right now. Who knew if they'd blow his arm off or something?
When Dean and Cas entered the TV room it was to see Sam still stretched out on the couch with Gabriel perched on the edge beside him, holding one of Sam's hands.

"Sam, you're awake," Dean observed. "You missed all the excitement."

"Believe me, I didn't," Sam said quietly. "What happened?"

"You look like you've just faced down a hurricane," Gabriel said to his brother, who grimaced.

"I feel like that too," he agreed. "The tarot cards struck back."

"I warned you they might," Gabriel said, sounding worried.

"Yeah, well, they almost blew Cas's socks off. The basement room where the safe was is basically destroyed. Cas and the deck of cards are the only things not damaged."

"I wouldn't say that," Cas said, wincing.

"So how do we get rid of them?" Dean demanded.

"I had an idea," Sam said. "Remember Magnus's fortress? Could that contain them?"

Dean considered the idea. Certainly the strange mansion was inaccessible by normal means although that was more about keeping people out than keeping things in. "I don't know. It wasn't really designed for containment."

"What are you talking about?" Gabriel asked.

"Cuthbert Sinclair, the Man of Letters who was expelled, you remember we mentioned him before," Sam said wearily.

"The magic user? Yes."

"He had this big house that has no entrances in the real world, no real existence. He described it as invisible but you can't walk through an invisible object even if you can't see it. Maybe it's some kind of pocket dimension? Anyway, it's warded up the kazoo and he did keep a lot of strange and powerful artifacts there. Sam and I have been slowly clearing it out since Sinclair… uh… died. The cursed objects have been cleansed or destroyed if possible, or locked away here if not." Dean sighed. "We had to kill the creatures in the zoo. The books are all in the library, except for the really powerful grimoires which are still there. And there were some magical but not cursed items that are mostly here now. Some of the less powerful items we've sold on or given away. The more powerful things and the few things we couldn't identify are still in the mansion of course."

"This is the man who had the First Blade," Gabriel said.

"Right," Dean said, shifting under the archangel's intent gaze.

"If he could contain the First Blade there, it's possible it could contain Michael's Tarot. I think we should visit the place and inspect the wards," Gabriel decided.

"OK," Dean said. "Do you want to go now? The deck's lying out in the open in the basement since Cas and I didn't dare touch it again. I don't much like the idea of it being free to do what it wants to Sam."

"If Sam is up to it, then yes, let's go. If not, I recommend we spend the night in a motel," Gabriel said. When Sam began to struggle into a sitting position, he placed one hand on his chest and gently
held him down. Sam didn't fight back, Dean noticed.

"I can manage," Sam said testily.

"Great," Dean said. "Let's go."

Of course, the site in the woods was not exactly in the bunker's back yard and so after several hours driving Dean was getting tired. Gabriel had insisted that he share the backseat with Sam, in case he had another incident, but the sight of Sam lying in the archangel's lap, Gabriel's hands threading through his hair or stroking his sleeping face made Dean antsy and irritable. Cas was sitting silently in the passenger seat, apparently lost in thought.

"Are you going to tell me what Sam's vision was about?" Dean said suddenly. Cas started and Dean could feel Gabriel's gaze on his back. A quick glance in the rearview mirror had him meeting the archangel's eyes.

"From what Gabriel said, it sounds like Necropolis," Cas said.

"That city you told me about. The one that Gabriel says is impossible to reach, that Necropolis?"

"Yes. From what he described, he was in the Fane. It's a kind of temple." Cas worried at a stray thread on his coat.

"And the big obsidian block was what, some kind of altar?"

"Exactly."

"And the ring?"

"I don't know. Gabriel, what was your interpretation?" Cas looked over his shoulder at his brother.

"It could be a symbol or allegory," Gabriel said. "A symbol or allegory for what, I couldn't say."

"Are you still insisting that Necropolis is out of reach?" Dean asked. "Even though Sam's now having goddamn visions about the place?"

Gabriel leaned his head back on the seat. "I don't know. I feel like that's all I say these days but without my Grace, I'm powerless to investigate. We have to trust that Heaven has the problem in hand."

"Forgive me if that doesn't fill me with confidence," Dean snarked.

"I'm no happier about it than you are," Gabriel assured him. "But we're short on options."

Sam whimpered and Gabriel returned his attentions to the hunter, soothing him with whispered words. Dean gripped the steering wheel harder, feeling the unfamiliar shape of it make his sense of wrongness all the sharper. As soon as they got these stupid cards squared away, he was going to focus purely on getting Baby back on the road. Enough of these distractions. A cracking sound and Cas's hand on his knee made him jerk in surprise.

"Dean, if you apply that much pressure to the steering wheel I think it might break," Cas said. Dean pried his hands loose and huffed out a breath. "Sorry. I've got a lot on my mind." He made a meaningful glance behind him and Cas frowned in response but didn't say anything. "I think we need to stop. I need some sleep and I don't think Sam's up to driving."
"Of course," Cas said in that soft, deep voice that Dean found so soothing. "Next motel we see."

It had taken another hour to come across a motel and Dean was dragging with exhaustion by the time he pulled into the lot. He didn't even argue when Cas snagged a key from his hand and gave it to Gabriel before herding him off to their room. He collapsed onto the bed as soon as they entered.

"Dean, you really should take off your shoes," Cas said. Growling, he sat upright and unlaced his boots before glaring challengingly at the angel.

"Anything else you want me to take off?" he snarled.

Cas's face went red and Dean almost swallowed his tongue. Yes, now that he thought about it, it did sound sort of suggestive. But Cas didn't get those kind of double meanings, did he? The look on his face made him wonder.

"Your jeans," Cas said hoarsely. "You'll sleep better without them."

Dean had taken his pants off in front of the angel a thousand times. More. He'd never thought anything more of it than he would taking them off in front of Sam. Until now. He cleared his throat, hoping Cas wouldn't notice his inner turmoil. He stood and unable to face the angel while he did this, turned his back and undid his belt before unfastening the jeans and shucking them to the floor. He didn't dare turn back, just climbed into bed and closed his eyes, focusing on keeping his breathing even.

After a moment he heard the bed creak as Cas moved and then the soft sound of pages turning. Swallowing hard, he pushed it all out of his mind and tried to sleep.
Chapter 18

The next morning, Cas presented Dean with coffee and a danish. The thoughtfulness of the gesture made him a little maudlin and he couldn't put his finger on why, so he pushed it aside. Another less welcome thought followed on its heels.

"Cas, is there something going on with Gabriel and Sam?"

"You've asked me this before," the angel said mildly. "I don't think my answer has changed."

"I'm not blind, OK? He touches Sam. A lot. And last night in the car, he had Sam in his lap." Dean swallowed a mouthful of coffee and waved his pastry in emphasis.

"I don't know what to tell you," Cas said. "They've become friends. Nothing else as far as I am aware. Gabriel cares a great deal about Sam. I don't think you need to worry."

Dean looked at him, his mouth twisting. "Maybe if he didn't flirt with him so much I wouldn't."

"Does he?" Cas said, looking intrigued. "I hadn't noticed."

"No offence, Cas, but you never notice."

"That's not true," the angel said indignantly. "If you're talking about people flirting with me, I'm just not comfortable with it. Ignoring something isn't the same as not realizing it exists."

"Really?" Dean said. "All this time on earth and sex still weirds you out?"

Cas's mouth pinched. "No. It does not 'weird me out'." He made air quotes with his fingers. "I'm not interested in casual sex with strangers, no matter how many waitresses you attempt to pick up on my behalf."

Dean got the sense that this conversation had gone completely off the rails. He wanted to object to what Cas had said, point out his hypocrisy or the slightly telling qualification he'd used when he realized the implications of it. Stating specifically that he wasn't interested in casual sex with strangers sort of implied he might be interested in non-casual sex with someone who was not a stranger. Dean couldn't breathe, couldn't think straight. Stars flashed in front of his eyes.

"Dean?" Cas said. "Dean, what's wrong? Breathe, Dean!" The angel gripping his shoulder tightly jarred him out his funk.

"Uh, sorry," he said lamely. "I uh, got distracted."

"I can see that," Cas said carefully. When Dean didn't respond he added, "Dean, did I say something wrong?"

"What? No, no. I… I'm sorry. About the waitresses and uh… making you uncomfortable."

Cas gave him an indulgent smile that made Dean's heart stutter. "It's OK. I shouldn't have made a big deal out of it. I know you're not doing it to make me unhappy."

"But it does make you unhappy?" Dean clarified. Cas nodded. "OK. Then I'll stop. I don't want to make you miserable, Cas. I want to make you happy."

Cas's smile widened. "I know. Thank you."
"Cas, do you ever…" He broke off. Dean Winchester was a man of courage. Ask anyone. But he wasn't brave enough to ask this question. "You know what, never mind. We were supposed to be talking about Sam."

"Why are you so worried?" Cas asked.

"Are you kidding me? Sam has something of a monster fetish, you know."

Cas bristled. "Gabriel is not a monster."


Cas took an unnecessary breath. "I was unaware that Sam experienced same sex attractions," he said cautiously.

Dean raised his eyebrows. "I thought you told me angels were genderless."

"We are. But Gabriel's vessel is not." Cas's mouth turned down. "Nor is mine."

Dean blinked. "Do you wish your vessel was female?"

"There are reasons I would prefer it, yes," Cas said with surprising honesty.

"Wow," Dean said in surprise. "That's a pity. I uh… I kinda like the one you've got." He bit his lip at that admission.

Cas didn't seem to take it the way it sounded. "You're used to it, you mean," he said. How had this conversation gotten so badly off track again? "And you didn't answer my question."

"I don't know the answer," Dean admitted. "I've never seen Sam with a guy but that doesn't mean anything."

"So despite no evidence that Sam would be interested in Gabriel in that way, you're concerned that… what? My brother will seduce him?"

"Stop," Dean said. "I don't even want to think about it."

"Why not?" The angel was like a dog with a particularly tasty bone.

"Because it's weird. He's my brother."

"And Gabriel is mine. What is your point?" Cas was much closer to him now, his eyes fixed on Dean's.

"I… uh… I don't know anymore."

"Good talk," Cas said, stepping away and Dean burst out laughing.

"You son of a bitch."

Cas cocked an eyebrow at him and Dean couldn't suppress an involuntary shiver. "Sometimes you need someone to shake up your preconceptions, Dean."

Sam blinked open crusted eyes and winced at the bright sunshine filtering through the thin motel curtains. He groaned and threw one arm over his face. A few moments later, he heard the door open.
"Please tell me you have coffee," he said desperately.

"I do. And breakfast," Gabriel said.

Sam rolled over and dragged himself into a sitting position and seized the cup the archangel had set on the nightstand.

"Oh, yeah," he said with relief.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Gabriel asked.

"Honestly, not great but better than yesterday," Sam admitted. "What the Hell happened to me? I was having trouble keeping track of things."

"Short version is those tarot cards are still doing creepy shit to you, so we're gonna take a look at Sinclair's hidden mansion to see if it might be a more secure location to stash them," Gabriel explained. He looked nervous suddenly.

"OK, so what's the problem?"

"Well, if the cards are the cause then locking them away at a location some distance from your home should help. But why would they make you have visions again? And visions of Necropolis? Something doesn't fit here."

"I've never stopped having the visions, technically," Sam corrected, his head beginning to throb again.

"Wait, what? But Dean said-"

"Dean doesn't know. It's not… a secret, exactly. But my abilities always freaked him out. For a short while I thought I'd burned it out but after Cas took away my hallucinations of Lucifer and the worst of my memories of the cage, they started coming back. Not regularly. Maybe once every few months at the most. And mostly at night, which is why I was able to keep it quiet." Sam's mouth twisted. "One of the cards appeared in the vision, the same one Dean and Cas found in my bed frame."

"The Eight of Cups?" Gabriel recalled. "Odd."

"Why, odd?" Sam asked cautiously.

"So, the first card that manifested, the Ace of Cups, is about future relationships. In readings it typically comes up as a sign you're about to meet someone, fall in love, et cetera. The Eight of Cups is about leaving a situation that's no longer working for you." Gabriel rubbed at his chin thoughtfully. "Doesn't that strike you as odd? These are very personal cards. What's the objective here, assuming the deck is trying to manipulate you?"

"So we've been assuming that the cards were created with the purpose of manipulating me into killing Lilith," Sam said, his face paling alarmingly. "But what if they were meant to come into play later? What if they're meant to influence me into saying yes to Lucifer?"

Gabriel stared at him, stunned. "Father," he breathed. "You're right. It makes a lot more sense in that context."

"Which means I'm in trouble," Sam said. "Lucifer's out and about somewhere on earth. How long before he tries to convince me to serve as his vessel again?" At the look on Gabriel's face he added, "Don't tell me to just say no. You know it's not as simple as that."
"Oh, no," Gabriel assured him. "I wasn't going to say that, I know how the link between an angel and their True Vessel works. But Luci seems remarkably uninterested in you right now."

"You think he won't come after me?" Sam said incredulously. He gulped down more of the coffee.

"I'm not saying he never will, just that it's clearly not a priority right now. Which gives you time to plan and prepare. And I can help you with that." Gabriel gave him a smile and Sam couldn't help but smile back.

"You mean other than saying yes and tossing myself in the Cage again?" he asked dryly.

Gabriel's smile broadened. "I think we can probably come up with a better solution if we put our heads together."

Sam's head swam suddenly and he swayed. When Gabriel started forward he held up a hand. "I'm OK. Just a little dizzy."

"Humans don't get dizzy for no reason, Sam," Gabriel said seriously.

Sam swallowed the last of his coffee and rested his head against the headboard. "Don't fuss. I'm OK, it'll pass in a moment."

Gabriel frowned at him unhappily and then came and sat on the side of the bed and placed a hand against Sam's forehead. "You're burning up."

"I am? I don't feel feverish. Other than the dizziness." Gabriel's hand strayed to his face and he was too tired to demur. The archangel cupped his head and stroked his thumb along Sam's jaw. It felt so good, Sam's eyes drifted closed and he leaned in to the touch.

"Sam," Gabriel whispered. Sam opened sleepy eyes and looked at him. Perhaps it was the headache but the archangel almost seemed to be glowing. His amber eyes regarded him, warm and serious. Sam felt a curious sensation, like being suspended in mid-air. If he moved or spoke, the spell would be broken, but in this one moment he felt almost breathless with awe.

"Gabriel?" he said softly, the tone of his voice questioning even if he wasn't sure what the question was. Gabriel leaned forward and the last vestiges of Sam's thought processes scattered. Gabriel's hand slid behind his head and Sam's eyes widened as he realized how close the archangel was. How his mouth was pink and soft-looking and he wanted- His mind came slithering to a halt as a sliver of alarm began to break through the heady sensations and he jerked back suddenly. Gabriel reacted immediately, scooting away from Sam with a look of consternation.

"Sorry," he said, withdrawing and going over to the window.

Sam didn't know what to make of it. But he couldn't lie to himself about what was happening here. He'd never considered the idea of being attracted to another man, but now the thought had crossed his mind, it was undeniable. Panic began a steady beat in his veins, he wasn't homophobic but he didn't know what was happening to him or whether he could trust it. There was a sharp rapping at the door, followed by Dean's bellowing about hitting the road in half an hour. Sam gave him a vague response and heard him stomp away muttering.

"Sam-"

"Gabriel-

They both fell silent. Sam scrubbed a hand over his face and rallied his courage. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make things weird."
Gabriel couldn't have looked more surprised if he'd tried, Sam thought. "You didn't make things weird," he said, sounding bewildered. "That was my fault."

If Sam had been confused before, he was utterly at sea now. "Your fault?" he repeated as his world tilted sideways. "I don't understand."

Gabriel wouldn't look at him, turning to stare determinedly out of the window. He swallowed hard but remained silent in a way that became increasingly oppressive. Sam cast about for something to say.

"We need to get moving," Gabriel said suddenly. "I'll leave you to get dressed."

"No, Gabriel, wait." But it was no use, the archangel made his escape and Sam wasn't dressed enough to chase after him. "Dammit." He sighed and headed to the bathroom.

Dean raised his eyebrows as Gabriel came running out of the motel room he'd been sharing with Sam, looking a little wild around the eyes. He'd lined up a dozen zingers by the time the archangel reached the car but Cas placed a restraining hand on his arm, distracting him so that he left them unsaid. Cas squeezed his elbow, although what message he was trying convey Dean wasn't sure.

"Is Sam still in the bathroom?" he said.

"He's still not feeling well," Gabriel replied, his voice wobbling in an alarming fashion.

"So what are you doing out here? What if he passes out in the shower?" Dean demanded. He stormed off towards the room, leaving Cas to eye his brother speculatively.

"Say nothing," Gabriel advised icily.

"Of course," Cas said. "Because nothing strange is going on here."

"Shut your cake hole," Gabriel snapped.

Cas grimaced at him. "What did you do?"

"Nothing," Gabriel said, his shoulders slumping. "Because I'm a fucking coward."

"What does that mean?"

"I think I might have given myself away to Sam. He's too nice to just reject me outright of course." Gabriel shook his head mournfully. "So in short, I just made it weird."

"I'm sure Sam isn't offended," Cas said reassuringly.

"I'm sure he's not offended too," Gabriel replied. "That's not the point. The point is I'm pathetic. He must think I'm a total loser."

"I don't understand," Cas admitted. "Why would he think that?"

"What, you're not worried about what Dean would think if he knew how you felt about him?" Gabriel retorted.

"What makes you think he doesn't know?" Cas asked, blinking. "I've never said it outright but I don't think he can have missed the signs. He's just not interested in me in that way. I came to terms with this years ago."
"Oh, Father, I had no idea you were delusional," Gabriel declared. "Of course he doesn't know. Are you mad? He's completely oblivious."

"I think you're wrong," Cas said mildly. "But I'm not going to argue with you. We were talking about Sam. Are you sure there's nothing there?"

"No," Gabriel said. "I don't know. With those damn tarot cards lurking in the background, who knows what's real and what's induced by enchantment?"

"Well, then," Cas said, as if that settled it. "We get the cards locked down and then you'll know." Gabriel looked terrified and Cas pulled his brother into an impromptu hug. "Courage, brother."

"Easy for you to say," Gabriel snarked. But he knew he was being unfair.

"You have to have faith."

"Come on," Alicia said suddenly, pulling away from Mary and heading out of the kitchen.

"Where we going?" Mary asked, following him.

"To say goodbye to Asa," Alicia replied. They walked down the hall and into the room where Asa's body had been laid out under a shroud. Mary took a deep breath and pulled it back to look down at his face. Too young, she thought. Her reverie was interrupted by two red drops that spattered onto his forehead and she looked up in horror to see one of the other hunters she'd seen when she arrived, bound to the rafters and obviously dead. Alicia swore.

"Randy. Hell." She dashed out of the room and Mary ran after her. She burst into the living room.

"Guys, we need to leave. Now."

An older woman with a kind face and dark hair looked at him puzzled. "Alicia, right?"

"Yes. Look, Randy's dead!"

Max stood up. "What happened?"

"Someone gutted him and roped him to the ceiling. That's what happened," Mary told her. A hunter she'd been introduced to with the unlikely name of Elvis entered the room looking irritated.

"Anyone know why the water's shut off?" He gagged. "God, what's that smell?"

Max and Alicia looked at each other in horrified recognition. "Sulfur." The lights flickered.

"It's a demon," Mary stated.

"It's him," a bearded hunter said.

"Who are you?" Mary asked. "And who are you talking about?"

"Bucky Sims, one of Asa's buddies. We hunted together a lot. I'm talking about Jael. He's a crossroads demon. And he hangs people. It's his thing. Snaps their neck, slits their throat. He's a real piece of work."

"Hanging?" Max said sharply. "Like with Asa?"
"He's the one that killed him," Bucky said. He walked over to the door and tried to open it but it wouldn't budge. Elvis trotted over and added his strength and bodyweight but they could only get it open a bare inch before it slammed shut again. "Son of a bitch."

"You're wasting your time," Max said, waving his hand over the door. Glowing red sigils appeared, malevolently flickering. "The whole house has been warded, inside and out."

"What does that mean?" the woman whose name Mary didn't know said.

"It means we're trapped," Alicia said.

It took Dean longer than he expected to find the spot where he needed to stand in order to open the entrance to Sinclair's fortress. And it didn't help to have three pairs of eyes nervously watching him as he did it. So it was with considerable relief that he opened the door and led them all inside. Gabriel looked around, whistling in surprise as he took in the artifacts and books still stored here.

"No wonder you suggested this place," the archangel said. "It's very impressive."

"Yeah, Magnus was a piece of work but he was talented," Sam agreed. His eyes kept flicking to Gabriel and then darting away in a manner that made Dean wonder if they'd fallen out. Neither of them had spoken much in the car and that had left poor Cas trying to make conversation. Which, Dean had to admit, the angel sucked at.

"So what do you think?" he said, aiming the question at Gabriel. "Will this be secure enough to store those cards?"

"Are there any lockboxes here? Or a safe?" the archangel asked.

"Yeah, there's a couple of safes. One here, behind this painting." Dean swung the painting away from the wall to reveal a small safe. "And a larger one back here disguised as a… uh whatever this is."

"It's a sideboard," Sam said quietly.

Gabriel inspected the ornately carved wooden cabinet and nodded. Inside was a steel safe, warded and spelled not only to repel intruders but clearly designed to contain powerful cursed objects.

"This is perfect," he announced. "It's much better than the one in the bunker. And Castiel can add some additional protections." The seraph flashed him a quick smile.

"Right. It's decided then," Dean said. "Uh, how are we going to transport the cards here? I don't really like the idea of driving around with them in the trunk."

"Let's go back to the bunker and then Gabriel and I will return here. The cards can't influence us," Cas suggested.

"Are you sure? I mean, I'd hate to be wrong about that, Cas."

"He's right," Gabriel said suddenly. "We can't be sure we're immune."

Cas gave his brother a frustrated look. "Well, what do you suggest?"

"Maybe we need to recruit some help," Gabriel said, looking shifty. Dean narrowed his eyes at the archangel.
"Who did you have in mind?"

"A reaper. Don't you have one on speed dial?" Gabriel said. Dean considered the idea. Billie seemed to blow hot and cold at the best of times but she did like maintaining the status quo.

"Couldn't she just drop these cards into the Empty?" Sam asked.

Gabriel looked pained. "It's not an experiment I'd like to try. The last time Dad dropped something that powerful into the Empty, there was a small explosion. You may have heard about it, humans call it the Big Bang."

"You what now?" Dean exclaimed.

"Oh, yeah," Gabriel said. "This was when Amara was still out and about, trying to sabotage everything Dad created. Michael had this bright idea of creating a kind of cuff that would bind her power and in typical fashion, didn't wait to get approval. He and Luci went ahead and made the horrid thing and Dad went nuts. Didn't want to actually put cuffs on his own sister, you know? So he threw it into the Empty and well… boom!"

"So the Big Bang was an accident?" Sam said, his mouth dropping open.

"Pretty much. A happy accident, as it turned out. But yeah, basically came from a fit of pique."

"So the plan is to call Billie and ask her to transport the cards here?" Cas said, trying to bring the conversation back on track.

"If you think she'll play along," Dean shrugged. "I'm game."

"Look, back in '97, Asa was working on this case in Yellow Knife, all right? A possession of a First Nations girl. Got real bad, real bloody." Bucky's mouth went tight with the memory.

"Was it this Jael?" Mary demanded.

Bucky nodded. "Asa exorcised him, but not before Jael killed the girl. He made her tie a noose around her neck and he made Asa watch. An exorcism ain't like an angel blade."

"Yeah, it's not permanent," Mary agreed.

"Exactly. Right, so five years later, Jael– he came back, and he came for Asa."

"How so?" Mary watched Bucky carefully. Something didn't seem right here. He was… talking too much.

"Asa was seeing this woman, right? She had a kid," Bucky screwed up his face as he tried to remember her name.

"Marlene," Lorraine supplied.

"Yeah, Marlene. Jael got into her. It didn't matter that he was killing people, he wanted Asa to know it was personal. He gets off on it."

"Yeah, and now he's here. Possessing someone," Max said.

"Yeah, but who?" Mary asked.
"Alicia wasn't in the room when Randy died. The rest of us were," Elvis asserted.

"I was getting a drink," Alicia said indignantly. Everyone stared at her. "I'm not! Throw some holy water on me, see what happens."

Bucky patted down his jacket for a flask and but came up empty. "Anybody packin'?"

"We can just make more," Elvis said, rolling his eyes.

"Uh, no we can't. The water's off, remember?" Mary said.

"She knew it," Elvis said, pointing at Alicia. "You knew that."

"Oh, come on," Alicia said impatiently. "How would I know that in a house full of hunters, not one of you would have holy water? You're insane." She coughed.

Max slowly walked over to Alicia, his face disturbed. Mary shifted into a fighting stance.

"Alicia?" he said cautiously.

She giggled. "Alicia's not here right now." Her eyes flashed red. "Leave a message." Pulling back her arm, she punched Max. "Oh, you're a fun group. We're gonna have a good time tonight." Her head went back and the demon smoked out, into the fireplace.

"It's gone," Elvis said with relief.

"Alicia, are you…" Max wrapped his arms around his sister.

"It's not gone. It's just not in Alicia anymore," Mary insisted. "Lorraine, is there anyone else in the house?"

"I don't know." Lorraine sounded tired and stressed. "People have been coming and going all day."

"Okay, we're gonna pair off, we're gonna search the house– for people, not for demons," the unknown woman ordered.

"Who are you?" Mary demanded.

"Jody Mills," the woman said. "Who are you?"

"Mary Winchester."

Jody gasped. "Sam and Dean's mom? Aren't you supposed to be… Wow." She pulled Mary into an impromptu hug. "Just wow. OK. Back to the plan. If you find the demon, yell. We'll find you. And if your partner gets possessed, run."
"Gabriel," Billie said distastefully, looking around the small clearing in the woods. "I should have known you'd end up teaming up with the Winchesters." She cast a disdainful look at Sam and Dean. "What do you want?"

"A favor," Gabriel said bluntly.

She glared at him. "And what makes you think you've the right to ask me for anything?"

"Let's call it mutual interest," the archangel said. "Sam was given a powerful magical artifact, one too dangerous to be allowed to just lie around corrupting humanity wherever it goes."

"Is this another one of Michael's toys?" Billie said, folding her arms across her chest.

"What else?" Gabriel agreed. "A pack of tarot cards that appear to be sentient. I think he had them made to manipulate Sam during the Apocalypse. They never actually came into play at the time but they're activated now and with the original purpose defunct and their creator out of action, they seem to have gone rogue."

Billie hissed through her teeth. "Archangels. I swear, you are the worst. Sentient objects designed to influence humans?" She shook her head in dismay. "I don't know what you think I can do about them. If I toss something like that into the Empty, the resulting explosion would probably destroy creation."

"We have a secure location to lock the cards down. The problem is transport." At Billie's outraged look, Gabriel added. "I'm not trying to be insulting."

"You'd damn well better not be. Do I look like UPS?"

"No. But Castiel is too underpowered to do this safely, and my Grace is under lock and key. You're the only one here powerful enough to resist their control." Gabriel gave her a speculative look. "Unless of course you'd rather just unbind my Grace? Then I can take care of the problem myself."

Billie started laughing. "Always an angle, Gabriel. All right, I'll be your courier." Gabriel drooped slightly in disappointment. "Sorry, but I can't undo what the boss did. Not that I would if I could, watching you squirm is far too enjoyable."

"You always did have a sense of humor," Gabriel said sourly. "OK. We'll drive back to the bunker and call you to pick up the cards."

"And the delivery point?"

"Is the invisible mansion right here," Dean said. "Sam and Gabriel are going to hang out here and they'll let you in when you arrive with the cards."

"We are?" Sam said in surprise.

"I don't want you going anywhere near those cards unprotected," Dean said firmly. "Cas and I can manage. You just sit tight and wait for Billie, OK?"

Billie clapped her hands together. "Are you done?"

"Yes," Sam said. "Thank you, Billie."
"Oh, don't thank me yet," the reaper said with a chilly smile. "I'm not doing this out of the goodness of my heart."

"I figured as much. What do you want in return?" Gabriel asked.

"Ideally, a Winchester to reap, but I'll settle for a favor. For me to redeem sometime in the future." She arched a brow at Gabriel.

Sam shifted uncomfortably. Owing a reaper an unspecified favor did not sound like an awesome idea. But they were short on options. He just didn't like the way she was looking at Gabriel one bit.

"Deal," Gabriel said, offering her his hand. She shook it firmly and then nodded to Sam and Dean. "I'll be seeing you soon." She vanished.

Dean blew out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "OK, Cas. Let's hit the road."

As soon as his brother and Cas had left, Sam reopened the entrance to Sinclair's fortress and went back inside, letting Gabriel follow him.

"So that's the real reason you wanted to bring a reaper on board," he said, trying not to feel the sting of disappointment. He couldn't say why he felt almost betrayed, of course Gabriel wanted his Grace back. But if he got his Grace back, then that meant he would leave. Why would he want to hang around the bunker with him, Dean and Cas when he could be anywhere in the world, doing whatever he pleased?

"No, but it was worth a try," Gabriel said. Sam couldn't interpret the look on his face.

"Well, I'm sorry it didn't work out," he managed. He walked over to one of the bookcases and pretended to browse the titles there, just so he didn't have to look at Gabriel.

"It was a long shot anyway," Gabriel said casually. Sam heard his footsteps and turned around to see the archangel studying him. "Are you OK, Sam?"

"What? Oh, yeah, I'm fine," Sam lied, moving away and wandering over to examine the painting over the mantelpiece.

"You don't seem fine," Gabriel told him. He sighed in resignation. "We need to talk."

"Do we?" Sam said a little desperately. "I-" He looked down to see his hands were shaking. "I'm really OK. Really."

"Right," Gabriel said sarcastically. "That's why you won't look at me or talk to me or even stand anywhere near me." Sam felt trapped. "Sam, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"I'm not uncomfortable," Sam denied. Gabriel canted an eyebrow at him and it made him quiver. Oh shit, this was not good. "I'm just nervous about those stupid cards. What if something goes wrong?"

"Billie's smart and powerful," Gabriel assured him. "She can handle it."

"Yeah, but what if-" Sam realized that Gabriel had moved closer and his mouth closed with a click. The archangel's whiskey colored eyes were fixed on his, and Sam's train of thought completely derailed as he found himself swept up that same heady feeling he'd experienced that morning. His mouth was dry and his hands were shaking more than ever. Unconsciously, he stepped back only to find the bookcase preventing him from moving away.
"You sure you're not uncomfortable, Sam?" Gabriel said, his gaze boring into the hunter.

"I… I thought you said you were sorry," he said defensively. "But I feel like you're trying to discomfort me now."

"I just want the truth," Gabriel told him. "I can't fix something if you won't talk to me."

Sam gazed at him, trying to figure out where the archangel was going with this. "I don't know what you want me to say."

"This morning," Gabriel said, pushing his hands through his hair. Sam's fingers twitched with the urge to do the same. "I behaved inappropriately and I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to make you feel... like you obviously feel." He turned away and began pacing. "I don't hold it against you, Sam. It's perfectly natural. I'll deal, OK."

Sam couldn't speak. Gabriel had picked up on that brief flare of attraction he'd felt this morning and then again just now, and was trying to let him down gently. He felt crushed and on the heels of that thought was another; he was in way deeper than he'd realized.

"No," he said. "I'm sorry. You shouldn't have to deal with this. It won't happen again, I promise."

Gabriel whirled around and pinned him with a stare.

"What are you talking about?"

Sam faltered, confused. "I… well, you… I thought maybe you realized I..." He couldn't get the words out. Gabriel came closer and that definitely didn't help. "Oh, God. I don't even understand it, how can I explain it to you?"

"Fuck," Gabriel said. "Fucking hell." Throwing caution to the wind he raised his hands to Sam's face.

"What are you doing?" Sam said, although he didn't pull away.

"It's a test," Gabriel said and kissed him.

All of Sam's mental faculties immediately ceased working. His entire focus was on the soft lips pressed to his, the tingle of arousal that seemed to spread from his mouth across his entire body. He opened to the pressure of Gabriel's tongue and groaned as it swept inside. Desire pulsed within him and just as he was about to reach out and pull the archangel closer, Gabriel retreated.

"Oh my God," Sam said. "What was that?"

"Bad news," Gabriel said shakily. "This enchantment has taken a much deeper hold of you than I'd thought."

"I don't understand," Sam confessed. "How can you tell all of that from… uh… a kiss?" He felt strange, light-headed.

"The cards want… are trying to force you to… be with me," Gabriel said, looking like he wanted the ground to swallow him up.

"I… what?" With his back still pressed to the bookcase, Sam was forced to sidle away from Gabriel in alarm.

"Don't panic," the archangel said. His face was blank and Sam hated it. "Now we're aware of it, we
just have to be on our guard for any… unusual behaviors. Just for a few days until we get the cards locked away for good."

"So, when you kissed me," Sam's voice broke and he cleared his throat. "Nothing we felt was… real?"

"No," Gabriel said. He didn't meet Sam's eyes, but that was understandable. He must be mortified, Sam realized. An archangel, captured by some stupid enchantment into making a fool of himself with a human. He felt sick. This was worse than that horrid British woman and her unpleasant spells. But it made a ghastly kind of sense, why he was suddenly questioning his sexuality when it had never been in question before.

"I…" Sam pushed away from the bookcase and walked away, covering his face with his hands. "I… can't…"

"Sam, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that," Gabriel said miserably. "But there wasn't any other way to be sure."

"It's… well, it's not OK, exactly," Sam said, dropping his arms and wrapping them around himself. "But I'm not mad at you. I… God, this is awful."

"I know," Gabriel said soothingly.

"And you… This must be worse for you," Sam added. Gabriel gaped at him in horror. Did Sam know?

"How do you figure that?" he asked, his heart fluttering in his chest.

"Are you kidding? I can't be anyone's idea of a dream lover, let alone yours. I've seen your tastes, remember?"

"Sam, I was showing off," Gabriel said, wondering if it was a good idea to defend himself like this.

"Showing off or not," Sam said. "I can't imagine you're too thrilled."

"Sam," Gabriel said. "You're wrong. If this were real, with no magic pressuring you into things you don't want, then anyone would be thrilled. I swear. But it should be on your terms and driven by your desire, not some trick."

"How am I supposed to tell?" Sam said desperately. "How can I ever trust anything I feel or think ever again?"

"All right, devil's trap," Mary said. "Everyone steps inside, if someone won't get in…" She shrugged.

Max began sweeping ashes from the fire onto the floor and began drawing out the sigil. "What kind of devil's trap?"


"I like a Fifth Pentacle of Mars," Max pouted. "It's got more character."

"Because character is really what matters right now," Alicia said sarcastically, rolling her eyes. Max kept sketching and nobody noticed when Mary slipped out of the room. He only looked up
when Jody crouched down next to him.

"Max… This is awkward, I'm owning that, because I know you and Mary are close. But the
demon… I think it's in her." She looked over to where Mary was now standing next to Bucky.

"She looks okay to me," Max objected.

"I may not know much, but I know people don't "look" possessed. No, I saw her sneak out of the
room when you started working on the devil's trap. Where did she go? I mean, I know she's a
Winchester but…"

Alicia sidled up. "What's going on?"

"Jody thinks that Mary-"

"No, I don't think, I know!" Jody yelled. "I know she's a demon."

Bucky stepped away from Mary, going for his knife.

"Hey," Mary said.

"Kill her! Use the knife! Kill her now!" Jody shrieked.

yourself."

Alicia glared at her. "That's because she's not herself. Are you?"

Jody's eyes flashed red as she laughed. "Can't blame a girl for tryin'."
"I'm not obsessed," Dean denied. "Didn't I just leave the two of them alone in Sinclair's house? Haven't I let them share a motel room on their own? Sam's a big boy, he can take care of himself."

"Really?" Cas said. "So, if you're cool with it, why not let things run their course? Why tie yourself into knots about what they may or may not be doing?"

"Honestly? Because I don't want to pick up the pieces when Gabriel decides he's bored and takes off," Dean snapped.

"And why would you think there would be pieces?" Cas pressed. "Sam's no stranger to the one night stand or the casual fling."

"I get the feeling this is more than that," Dean said. "Don't give me that look, Cas. I know my brother, OK? I've been watching Sam and he's constantly looking at Gabriel. Or looking for him. And when they're together, Sam's more relaxed and happy than I've seen him my entire life. Except maybe with Jess."

"I don't understand," Cas complained. "If being with Gabriel makes Sam happy, then what's the problem?"

"I told you, eventually Gabriel is gonna move on. And if I'm right, Sam will be devastated." Dean's mouth thinned. "Better they don't start down that road."

"You might be right," the angel allowed. "But the heart wants what it wants, isn't that the saying?"

There was an expression on Dean's face the angel couldn't interpret.

"Yeah, that's what they say." He sounded bitter and Cas found himself hating whoever had made his Dean so sad.

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"I had so hoped you'd kill Mary Winchester. Imagine the wailing from the Winchester boys. Wouldn't that have been a riot?" Jael declared with Jody's mouth.

"Yeah, super fun," Mary said sarcastically. Drawing the angel blade she'd lifted from the other room while Max was drawing the devil's trap, she charged at Jody. The blade sliced into Jody's arm before Jael pushed her backwards, the blade falling to the floor.

"Boring," Jael said. She clapped her hands and everyone collapsed, immobilized. Mary struggled vainly against the power but it was no use. Jael kicked the angel blade away, out of reach.

"I have been inside all of your heads. I know all about you. For example, the twins. Too frightened to tell anyone that they actually came to say goodbye to their daddy."

Lorraine stared up at her from the floor in shock, the realization that the twins are actually her grandchildren visibly sinking in.

"Or the grieving mother who hated the fact that her son was a hunter so much she'd hide his gear, she'd sabotage his Jeep, anything to keep him from hunting. Not that it worked. Could've tried harder, huh?" She pointed at herself. "And this meatsuit, she actually fantasized about a life with Asa. Can you believe that? Like that worthless man-"

As she monologued, Bucky managed to shake off her influence and got up off the floor. He sneaked up behind her. "Shut your filthy mouth."
She grabbed Bucky by the neck and forced him to his knees. "And you. Bucky. Brave, brave Bucky. I was there that night. Tell these nice, stupid people what you did. Tell them what you took from me. Asa was mine."

Max and Alicia had also managed to get to their feet and they both started chanting the exorcism rites.

"No!" Jael exclaimed, throwing Max across the room. Alicia kept going. Jael flung out an arm to throw her through a glass door.

"Tell them!" Jael demanded.

Mary had picked up the exorcism chant and the demon was looking increasingly desperate.

Bucky began to scream. "Aah! I killed him! I killed him. I killed Asa."

Jael threw Bucky to the floor, but it was too late for Jael. Mary completed the exorcism with a gasp and Jael smoked out of Jody's body and descended back to Hell.

Jody blinked and then groaned. "Well, that... sucked."

Lorraine was staring at Bucky in horror. "Bucky, what did you do?"

"I'm gonna have to go out and get something to eat," Sam said, eyeing Gabriel nervously. "You wanna come?"

"Sure," Gabriel said. "But we haven't got a car."

Sam grinned. "There's a diner about two miles from here. We can walk."

"Two miles?" the archangel groaned. "Walk? You're a savage."

"Then stay here," Sam said.

"No, no, I'll come. Ugh." Gabriel grumbled as Sam put his boots on and opened the magical portal to the woods.

At this time of year, the sun had already set and the moon had yet to rise, so there wasn't much light. Sam had brought his flashlight and he was just about to turn it on when Gabriel's hand landed on his arm.

"Wait."

"OK…" Sam looked down at Gabriel, barely able to make out his features in the low light.

"Look up, Sam." Gabriel was pointing towards the sky. The stars were bright, the line of the Milky Way was clear and visible as a band of color across the sky. A sense of peace descended over Sam.

"Cool," he said. A shooting star flashed across the sky and he gasped.

"Make a wish," the archangel prompted. Sam smiled. He hadn't wished on a shooting star since he was a kid.

"I don't know what to wish for," he admitted.
"Don't you?" Gabriel said softly.

Sam gulped nervously. Everything was such a mess. Should he wish for these feelings to be real? Or should he wish for things to go back to how they were, before Gabriel had reappeared? The lurching sensation of loss in his stomach only made him feel worse. It's not real, he reminded himself.

"OK," he said, thoroughly unnerved. "It's this way."

Gabriel was silent as they walked, although he occasionally tilted his head at some sound Sam couldn't hear, or gazed deep into the forest at something Sam couldn't see. It underlined the fact that, in the end, Gabriel wasn't human, and Sam knew that even when not under magical duress, his choice of bed partners was sometimes more than a little dubious. He flushed as he realized he was thinking about Gabriel in a sexual way again and was relieved when his phone buzzed.

"Hello? Oh hey, mom."

"Sam, how are you?"

"I'm OK. How's the hunt going?" Sam thought his mom sounded stressed.

"Not well," Mary said. "It looks like Constance has the Codex Retorta, the book that includes the recipe for a soulforge."

"Dammit," Sam swore. "So we think she's the one behind the hybrids?"

Mary sighed. "Probably. But why? What is she really after?"

"No idea. So what's next? Did you follow up on the info I sent you about her apartment in Chicago?"

"Yes, and it checks out. I'm heading there now, I just had to make a slight detour for a friend's funeral." That explained how tired she sounded, Sam thought.

"OK, well, let us know when you get to Chicago. Maybe we should come and meet you." He heard his mom take a deep breath and knew what was coming next.

"Let me check it out first," she said. "Can I talk to Dean?"

"I'm not with Dean," Sam explained. "It's a long story. Call him, I know he wants to speak to you."

"OK," Mary said. "Good night. I'll call again in a few days."

"Love you," Sam said.

"You too, baby." She hung up.

As he'd talked they'd reached the road and the diner was in sight. "See. That wasn't so bad was it."

"It's all right for you," the archangel said sullenly. "I have to take two steps for every one of yours."

"Should have chosen a taller vessel then, shouldn't you?" Sam teased.

Gabriel looked up at him, his eyes bright. "I thought you liked this one." Sam froze and he winced. "Sorry. That was… in poor taste."

"No, no. It's fine," Sam said, waving him off. "I'm being oversensitive. Now let's eat, I'm famished."
Chapter 20

Crowley stared at his mother in consternation. "Tell me you're not serious."

"Why would I lie to you about this?" she said airily.

"Because the instructions to a bloody soulforge in the hands of that stupid cow Constance is a fucking disaster!" he barked. "I thought you said not to worry!"

"That was before I learned that she also has the Book of Winter," Rowena said, her ruby-painted lips pursing. "As powerful as it pains me to admit she is, there's a limit to how much damage she could do with a soulforge because she's not capable of keeping it well fed. Or at least so I believed. With the Book of Winter in her hands however, that changes the calculus."

"Run that past me again?"

"The Book of Winter isn't about winter the season," Rowena said, adopting a didactic manner. "Although I'm sure the root is similar. It refers to wintercearing, the Anglo-Saxon concept of sad-with-years. All the spells and curses within are about inflicting terrible suffering. And unlike most grimoires, many of the spells are either designed for groups or have a modification to make them work on a group."

"Well, that's terrific," Crowley said sarcastically. "So what do we do now?"

"I don't see that we have to do anything," Rowena said. "I've put the Winchester boys on her tail. They'll clean up the mess, albeit by creating some mess of their own."

Crowley eyed her suspiciously. "Why are you so keen to palm this off on them? You neither like nor trust them."

"Maybe not," Rowena allowed. "But there is a certain efficiency to them in some situations. You point them at a monster and click your fingers. And problem solved!"

"All right," Crowley said. "I'll give you that. But in the meantime, how bad can it get?"

"Honestly," Rowena said, looking serious for a moment. "Very. But I don't think Constance is stupid enough to follow the map so I think the damage will probably be minimal."

"Map?" Crowley said, his eyebrows coming together in puzzlement. "What map?"

"There's a map in the back of the Codex. Nobody knows where it leads because nobody can figure out what it's a map of." Rowena looked smug. "Except me, of course."

"I'll bite," Crowley said, wishing she'd just get on with it. "What is it a map of?"

"Waypoints," she said. "The waypoints to Necropolis."

Crowley looked at her. "Necropolis."

"You've heard of it then?" She looked almost proud. "Nasty place, or so I've heard. I'm not stupid enough to follow the map, in fact I considered taking it out of the book and destroying it when I realized what I had. But I never got the chance."

"Please spare me the sob story," Crowley grated. "If you could figure it out, how hard would it be
"I figured out what it was but I hadn't quite oriented it to actual landmarks on earth because once I realized where it was leading, I stopped working on it and destroyed my research. For anyone else, that's where the Book of Winter comes in," Rowena sighed. "The real power of that grimoire isn't in its spells though they're powerful in their own right. The real power of the Book of Winter is the curse in the back. The curse of Téleia Gnósi. Perfect knowledge."

"Perfect knowledge is a curse?" Crowley said. "Who knew?"

"Of course it's a curse," Rowena scolded. "Perfect knowledge of any topic you can think of. What everyone around you thinks of you. How, when and where you will die. How all your loved ones will die. Or the way to Necropolis."

Crowley shook his head in confusion. "So why does anyone need the map in the Codex Retorta at all?"

"Because anyone cursed with Téleia Gnósi soon goes mad and kills themselves. No witch is going to be crazy enough to cast it on herself. You could cast it on another, get them to annotate the map sufficiently to be able to follow it. But to pass the waypoints safely there's a test. Having the Codex Retorta's map is one way to prove your worthiness."

"But you think Constance is too smart to follow this map, or use this perfect knowledge curse to figure it out?"

"I think she, like me, will not want anyone to be able to get into Necropolis. If she figures out that's what the map is, I expect she'll come to the same decision I did. Necropolis makes Hell look like Sunday School. It's a brutal, frightening place. I would not even send my worst enemy there."

She was so vehement, her teeth bared and her eyes wide, that Crowley sat back in astonishment.

"What's there that so terrifying?" he wondered.

"There's nothing in Necropolis that you do not bring with you, or so they say." She drew herself up to her full height, which admittedly was not that high. "If that doesn't scare you, you're even stupider than I thought."

"Mary Winchester?" A voice called out as Mary left her motel room and headed for her car. The voice was vaguely familiar, with a British accent. She turned her head.

"Mick, wasn't it?"

"Mick Davies, yeah. You, uh, got a minute?" He nodded to the coffee shop across the road.

She folded her arms across her chest. "What do you want?"

He grimaced. "I'd really rather not talk out here. Come and let me buy you a cuppa."

"All right," she agreed. She didn't trust this guy, but something told her she should at least hear him out. She followed him into the coffee shop and sat down.

"So, let me paint you a picture, of a world without monsters, or demons, or any of those little buggers that go bump in the night. Of a world where no one has to die because of the supernatural. Of a new world, a better world."
Mary should have told him where to go, she knew that. But as sales pitches went, this was a doozy.
The chance to get her boys out of the life? She'd jump at that.

"I'm listening," she said.

"Organization is the key," Mick told her. "A network of hunters, carefully spread out that can be
activated at a moment's notice. And a huge research division, focusing not just on monsters and lore,
but actual R and D into better, more efficient weaponry. We have some powerful magic users and
we wed that magic to modern technology. Here you American hunters have to wait for a body to
drop before you know there's a problem. Not so for us. We use wards and detection sigils at every
possible entrance to the UK. We haven't had a single monster-related death since 1965!"

"That's impressive," Mary allowed. "But Britain's small, and an island. Quarantine is easier when
you don't share land borders with other countries."

"True," Mick admitted. "The US does present additional logistical challenges, but if you'll forgive
me, that's part of the attraction. I won't lie to you, the ultimate goal is to rid the world of monsters,
altogether. But we figure getting America on board is the next step."

"I don't know," Mary said. "You're talking about an absolutely gigantic operation. Do you work
with the government in England?"

"England's not Britain," Mick corrected. "But yes, actually, we are technically a quango."

"A what now?"

Mick laughed. "It's a stupid bit of jargon. A quango is a quasi-autonomous non-governmental
organization. We get funds from central government and we're answerable to it, but we're not in fact
under the umbrella of a department or ministry."

"OK, what does that mean?" Mary said suspiciously.

"Sorry, your federal system makes analogies difficult," Mick said. "The British government sets our
remit, and provides some of the money. We decide what to do, and how to do it. As long as we
achieve our goals and can justify how we spent those funds, we're good. But we also rely heavily on
philanthropy. Lady Toni's father, for example, has been a supporter for many years."

Mary's lips thinned at the mention of the stuck-up woman who'd kidnapped and tortured Sam.
"Reminding me about her might not have been smart."

"Maybe not," Mick said honestly. "But I'm not in the business of sweeping our mistakes under the
rug. I didn't claim to be perfect. But I think we do a lot of good." He smiled at her. "There's someone
I'd like you to meet."

"Who?"

"He's… a specialist. His name is Ketch."

"What kind of specialist?" Mary demanded.

"A hunter, like you. But he has other talents, that we deploy from time to time." He looked hopefully
at her and after a moment, she nodded her agreement.

Sam sat back, his stomach nicely full and his beer freshly refilled. "That's better," he sighed happily.
He grinned at Gabriel, who had demolished an impressively large bowl of ice cream and currently had a small blob of it on his nose. Without thinking he leaned forward and scooped it off with a finger. Gabriel went utterly still. He wiped his hand carefully on a napkin and quirked a quick smile at the archangel.

"Sorry," he said.

"It's fine," Gabriel said. "Just… unexpected."

"You wanna head back?" Sam asked.

"Finish your beer," Gabriel told him. "There's no rush." His eyes drifted away from Sam and the hunter tried not to be offended.

"Something interesting?" he asked, keeping his tone as level as he could.

"Maybe," the archangel said. "Don't turn around. But behind you, about three tables back, is a man eating alone. He's wearing motorcycle leathers and he arrived just after we did."

"So?"

"So, I think he's watching us." Gabriel's mouth turned down. "And that struck me as odd."

"Maybe he's a crook, thinking of robbing us on our way home," Sam suggested. "In which case, he's gonna get the shock of his life."

"That's a possibility," Gabriel allowed. "I'll be very glad if that's all it is."

Sam shook his head at him. "I had no idea you were so paranoid."

"I didn't used to be," the archangel said sourly. "I don't know how you mortals deal with it. I mean, I'm not at any more risk, but I'm close to powerless to stop anything happening to you."

Sam couldn't help but feel warmed by the idea that Gabriel wanted to protect him. "Don't worry. I can take care of myself."

"I know," Gabriel said. "Don't mind me. Look, I wasn't going to say anything. Except, I'm wearing a glamor. Only you can see me as I really am, everyone else sees a guy who looks like Dean."

"Oh." No wonder the ice cream moment had seemed especially weird. "Why?"

"Again, paranoia. I've been hiding for so long it's almost second nature. Here's the thing. Our motorcyclist can see through the glamor."

Sam leaned forward. "What?" he hissed.

"I'm pretty sure," Gabriel said. "I've tested him a couple times."

Sam narrowed his eyes. "Is that why you were making rude gestures at the waitress earlier?"

"Yep," Gabriel said with a grin. "Only you should have been able to see what I was doing. But he was reacting too."

"Damn. So who, or what is he?"

"Human, as far as I can tell." Gabriel looked thoughtful. "More human than you."
Sam spluttered in outrage. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Gabriel raised one eyebrow at him. "Ex-vessel of not one but two angels? Demon-blood in your veins and angel's Grace in your soul? A soul so patched and duct-taped together it's a miracle you can speak without drooling?"

"You don't have to make me sound like such a freak," Sam complained.

"You are a freak," Gabriel said. "Don't get so hung up on it. I'm a freak too. An archangel, hiding out inside a Norse God and-" He broke off, looking vaguely nauseous. Sam wondered what else he'd been about to admit to. "Well, let's just say that I've done some rather peculiar things and leave it at that."

"Wait, what was the bit about Grace in my soul?"

"I can detect Luci, Gadreel and Castiel. Luci and Gadreel will have left slivers behind from their possession. Castiel's Grace is probably from some healing he's done on you at some point in the past."

"It's kinda busy in there," Sam said, looking pained.

"Be nice to me, and when I get my Grace back, I'll take them out for you. Well, Luci and Gadreel's anyway. I'll probably have to leave the pieces from Castiel." Gabriel looked unhappy with this state of affairs.

"Why can't you take Cas's Grace out?" Sam asked.

"Because I think your soul might fall apart if I do. That would not be pleasant." Gabriel grimaced.

"No," Sam agreed. "It doesn't sound like it would be. So, what's our watcher doing now?"

"He's pretending to read a newspaper."

Sam finished his beer and stood up. "OK, let's go." He turned and looked at the man Gabriel had been talking about. Unfortunately, he had raised the newspaper rather ostentatiously in front of his face. It meant Sam couldn't get a look at him without causing a scene, even if it did look odd. They left the diner and began walking back to Magnus's house.

It was cooler than it had been earlier and Sam shivered in his jacket. "I should have brought a sweater." Gabriel took his hand and Sam started. "I thought we weren't going to-"

"Hush," the archangel said. Warmth flooded through him and he quivered with pleasure.

"Oh my God," he said without thinking. "Uh. I mean, thanks."

"It's not real," Gabriel warned and Sam's stomach flipped over. "The warmth is an illusion, just to keep you from being uncomfortable. You're actually still cold, I'm just making you feel warmer until your muscles catch up."

"We'd better get moving then," Sam said. He began to withdraw his hand from Gabriel's and was surprised when the archangel gripped him tighter.

"I can only do this with skin-to-skin contact," Gabriel explained. "Loki's power is limited that way. If you let go of my hand, you'll feel the cold again."

Sam squirmed internally but decided not feeling like he was turning into a popsicle, even if it was
illusory, was worth the mild discomfort of holding the hand of someone he may or may not be attracted to.

They walked along in companionable silence for a while, Sam gazing up at the stars. About ten minutes from their destination, Gabriel stopped.

"What is it?"

"Look," he said, pointing towards the horizon. The moon was rising, a thin silvery sliver that barely illuminated anything but looked so pretty against the purple black of the night sky. Sam's breath misted in the air as he took in the sight, and then looked down into Gabriel's eyes. His amber irises seemed washed of color in the ghostly moonlight. They were so intent on Sam he couldn't resist taking his free hand and touching it to Gabriel's face.

"What are you doing, Sam?" the archangel said in alarm. But he didn't pull away.

"Something stupid," Sam admitted. "I mean, once we get those cards locked away, maybe I'll feel totally different. But right now, this feels... real. And I need to know."

"What do you need to know?" Gabriel asked.

"What it would be like," Sam told him. "With you."

"No," Gabriel said, detaching their hands. The cold air descended on Sam like a bucket of freezing water. His eyes were wide and distressed, and Sam felt like a total shit.

"I'm sorry," he gasped. "I-"

"We need to get inside," Gabriel said briskly. "It's too cold out here." He began striding off towards the house, leaving Sam to run after him.

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"Dean, you should rest," Cas insisted.

"No," the hunter said firmly. "I can't. Not until we get these cards locked down for good and Sam is safe. We keep driving."

"Then let me drive," the angel begged.

"No offence, Cas, but you're not a good enough driver to handle a beast like this car. I'm fine. Stop fussing."

"All right, but will you pull over just for a moment?" The angel looked at him so pleadingly, Dean had to give in. He located a spot and drove the car onto an empty lot.

"OK, what is it?"

"Come here," Cas said, pulling Dean towards him. He cradled Dean's head in his hands and closed his eyes.

"What are you doing, man?" Dean asked nervously.

"Shh," Cas said.

"Did you just hush me?" Dean squawked.
Cas's eyes popped open. "I'm trying to help you. But you need to be quiet. So yes, I am hushing you. Don't make me put something in your mouth."

Dean gaped at him and then obediently closed his mouth. Cas closed his eyes again. After a moment, Dean felt his headache lift and the grittiness in his eyes recede, just as if he'd caught a few hours sleep.

"Wow," he said in amazement. "I had no idea you could do that. I feel amazing."

"It's not as good as real rest," Cas warned. "If I did this to you too often, you could die. But just this once shouldn't do too much harm."

Dean smiled at him. "Thanks, Cas."

"You're welcome."

By the time Sam caught up to Gabriel, his lungs were aching with the cold.

"Gabriel," he gasped. "I'm sorry."

"Open the door," Gabriel said impatiently. "We'll talk about it inside."

"OK," Sam said. He performed the ritual to open the hidden entrance and followed Gabriel inside. As soon as he'd closed the door again, Gabriel whirled around, his eyes burning.

"What part of, you're under a spell and can't trust what you're feeling don't you understand?" he yelled.

Sam gulped. He couldn't understand why Gabriel was so mad. Even if it wasn't real, why did he care if Sam made a pass at him? Gabriel grabbed him by the lapels and thrust him backwards against the wall, reminding Sam that despite appearances, he was still an archangel. He struggled helplessly against the hold.

"I said I was sorry," he said again.

Gabriel growled with frustration and to Sam's shock, dragged his head downwards and crushed their mouths together. The kiss was a fierce battle of tongues and teeth and Sam was instantly dizzy with arousal. He panted desperately as Gabriel plundered his mouth, his hands pulling the archangel's body flush against his own. There was no mistaking the fact that Gabriel was as into this as he was, regardless of how it had started out.

Gabriel tore his mouth away and staggered backwards, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. "Don't you understand?" he said wretchedly. "You can't keep tempting me like this, Sam. I'm not a good enough person to resist. And when the day dawns that we clear you of this damnable enchantment, you're going to hate me for it!"

Sam couldn't process what Gabriel was saying for a moment. "Are you saying… What the fuck are you saying?"

Gabriel's face was flushed with a combination of arousal and chagrin. "Nothing. It doesn't matter. But this has to stop."

"No," Sam said, feeling like he was on the edge of understanding something huge. "Wait. Wait. I… You're… Holy shit."
Gabriel looked devastated in that moment. His eyes were red-rimmed and shimmering with unshed tears. "You've figured it out."

"You practically yelled it in my face," Sam said ruefully. "Jesus. Gabriel, I'm sorry. I'm an insensitive prick." He swallowed hard, determined to clean up the ungodly mess he'd just made with his stupid curiosity and poor impulse control. "How long have you been in love with me, Gabriel?"

Gabriel slumped down into a chair, staring into the ever-burning fire. "It feels like forever. I wanted you the moment I laid eyes on you. I fell for you the day I saw you learn about your destiny and you spat your defiance in the teeth of my brothers and their spite." Gabriel shook his head. "I was in denial for a long time. I did still toss you into TV land, after all."

"And then you helped us. I always wondered why you changed your tune. I don't know we were all that convincing." Sam came over and sat opposite Gabriel, regarding him with mournful eyes. "I'm really sorry."

"Will you stop apologizing?" Gabriel said. "I get it. You thought we could just have a quick tumble in the hay, no harm, no foul, even if you did decide to file it under bad ideas later. What's the worst that could happen?"

"And I didn't consider how you might feel about it," Sam concluded. "Which was selfish of me, and I'm embarrassed because I don't think I'm a selfish person." He sighed. "I need a drink. There's some brandy here somewhere I think." He got up to look for it, more for something to do to mask how appalled he was at his own behavior than any real desire to drink it. Eventually he found some cheap bourbon that Dean must have left here, since it didn't seem like the kind of thing Magnus would drink. He poured himself a glass and then looked over at Gabriel. The pain in the archangel's face made his chest squeeze. He'd done that. It wasn't one of his finest moments.

"I found some bourbon. You want some?"

Gabriel nodded, not looking at him. Sam grabbed another glass and brought the bottle and glasses over to where they were sitting. He pushed the filled glass at Gabriel and then poured more bourbon into his own. They stayed there quietly, Gabriel watching the fire and drinking steadily. Sam watched Gabriel and matched him glass for glass.

If he'd thought himself confused before, it was nothing on how he felt now. Learning that Gabriel had been secretly in love with him, all this time, seemed almost unreal. Could this too be an effect of the enchantment? It didn't seem possible, but then Sam didn't think a lot of things that had happened over the last few weeks were possible. And they'd happened anyway. It was the Winchester curse.

His stomach ached. The enchantment would soon be gone and he'd be left with this painful, secret knowledge, but without any remaining attraction to Gabriel? That sounded unsustainable and Sam realized that this horrid spell was going to rob him of a friend. Anger flooded his veins at the stupid, painful reality of it all and all of a sudden he hated Michael with a passion for what he had wrought. And he hated himself, for not being smart enough to realize the implications of pushing his luck this evening.

"Sam," Gabriel said, turning to look at him. "Please don't do this to yourself."

"Why not?" Sam gritted out. "I deserve to feel the full weight of my own idiocy."

"Self-loathing isn't healthy for anyone, and you're not starting out with an even keel," Gabriel said. He reached out and grabbed Sam's hands. "Please, Sam. I've already forgiven you."
"Well, isn't this touching," Billie said.

Gabriel dropped Sam's hands like they were a hot potato. "Billie. Have you got the cards already?"

"She can't have," Sam said. "Even if he drove all night without stopping, Dean wouldn't get back to
the bunker for another few hours."

"You're right. I'm here to discuss my favor," Billie said.

"It's a bit early for that, wouldn't you say?" Gabriel replied.

"I wouldn't say so," Billie said. "After all, I need to know you're not going to balk."

Which meant Gabriel was not going to like what she was going to ask for, Sam thought.

"OK, hit me."

"I want a cup of the letalis aqua. I think you can get it for me."

"Now, just wait a second," Gabriel objected. "Why would you want that?"

"I don't have to share my reasons with you," Billie said. "But I can't enter Necropolis. Reapers were
explicitly banned from the place. Rather odd, for a place called City of the Dead, don't you think?"

"You know why you were banned. It wasn't anything personal," Gabriel said tightly.

"Personal or not, I want some of that water. That's my price." She looked altogether too pleased with
herself and Sam found himself clenching his fists. "Unless of course you're willing to give me Sam's
soul instead."

"Never," Gabriel declared.

"Well then," Billie said. She raked Gabriel with a look and Sam dug his nails into his palms. They
couldn't afford to piss her off and she knew it. Was reveling in it.

"It would be easier to agree if I knew why you wanted it," Gabriel pointed out.

"Perhaps. But I'm not here to make your life easy. Last chance or I walk away." She examined her
fingernails idly.

"All right," Gabriel said, giving in. "Fine. I'll do it. Don't destroy the world with the power it gives
you, will you?"

She ignored him. "I'll see you later." And then she was gone.
Chapter Twenty-One

At a bland motel in Indianapolis, Mick Davies sat down at his typewriter and set down his beer. He removed the cover, and typed Reporting in.

CONNECTION SECURED - PROCEED

This is Mick Davies, filing Status Update Bravo Three. As instructed, I've been attempting to make inroads with the American hunters. But unfortunately, there's been a few setbacks. In short, the American hunters have proven… difficult. As for the Winchesters… Well the boys are not yet on board but their mysteriously resurrected mother, Mary Winchester, seems more amenable.

WHAT DOES KETCH THINK?

Ketch likes her. Which is weird because Ketch doesn't like anyone.

ANY TRAIL ON THE McBRIDE WITCH?

I think Mary has her tail. I'm pleased to report that she is willing to work with us once she has dealt with McBride. I'll pass on a few toys to help with that and I think it'll be a done deal.

GOOD. CONNECTION CLOSED.

Mick sighed. Apparently Toni was still pissed at him for breaking up her little torture party. He didn't care, it had been obvious to him from the start that you couldn't break a man who'd literally been to Hell and played host to the devil himself. No, a man like Sam Winchester had to be seduced, either literally or figuratively. Except Ketch and Toni were the only ones with any taste for using sex as a weapon, Toni had screwed that up royally and Ketch was strictly humans only and had apparently put Sam in the not-human category. So Mick had decided that showing the British chapter of the Men of Letters in a more favorable light, making Sam see that they could work together and teasing him with some of the more impressive toys and resources was the way forward. Where Sam led, Dean would follow. Mick had little time for Dean, the man was a competent hunter and Ketch seemed to have some grudging admiration for the man's skill. But he was nothing special. Sam on the other hand, was very special indeed. One might say… unique. But the edict from back home had been clear. Both Winchester men were to be brought in house. Especially Dean. Not for the first time, Mick found himself wondering why.

"Dammit, she's not coming," Dean said. "I think she double-crossed us."

"Maybe she's busy," Cas offered.

"Busy doing what?" Dean snapped.

"Reaping, I would imagine," Cas replied. He patted Dean's shoulder. "She'll be here."

"Impatient, aren't we," Billie said. Dean almost jumped clear out of his skin.

"Fuck!"

"I would take that as a hint," Billie said with an arch look at Cas. He gave her a puzzled look. She smiled and Cas was reminded of a shark.

"All right, enough chit-chat. The cards are in the basement. Come on." Dean stomped away towards
the basement and Billie sashayed after him. Cas followed, brooding over the reaper's words. When they reached the basement room, Billie took in the devastation with a cocked eyebrow.

"I can see why you needed some help," she commented.

"Right," Dean said. "That's the deck, there." She picked up the ebony and ivory box and examined it.

"I see. What an unpleasant object." She looked at Dean appraisingly.

"Yeah," he agreed.

"Ever the conversationalist," she said. "Very well. I'll deliver this and be on my way."

"And the favor you asked for?" Dean asked.

"The debt is Gabriel's. You don't need to worry." She looked so delighted Dean began to get a very bad feeling.

"This isn't about Sam is it?"

She curled her lip in contempt. "Not everything is about you Winchesters."

She vanished and Dean huffed out a breath. "I hope we're doing the right thing here, Cas."

"Yes," the angel rumbled. "So do I."

Dean's phone rang and he saw his mom's number. "Hey, mom."

"Hey Dean," she said. "I spoke to Sam earlier, you guys split up?"

"It's a long story," Dean told her. "Everything's OK, don't worry."

"All right," she said. There was a pause. "Is Gabriel still hanging around?"

"I thought you'd worked out your differences," Dean said sharply. "We did," Mary said dubiously. "I'm still not sure I trust him."

"Yeah, well, he'll get bored and take off sooner or later. How's the hunt for Constance going?"

"Slow," Mary admitted. "But the lead in Chicago was a solid one. I've been staking the place out, and she's definitely living there. And attending school. It's... really weird, actually. What is she playing at?"

"Beats me," Dean said. "So what's the play? Want me and Sam to come up and we'll take her out?"

"I don't know," Mary said. "I'd really like to get more of a handle on what she's up to first. I get the feeling going to school isn't some insanely deep cover."

"Neither do I," Dean agreed. "But I'll be damned if I can figure out how nursing factors into breeding armies of monsters."

"And still no word on Lucifer?"

"None. He's keeping a very low profile. Which... isn't really his style and I'm just waiting for the other shoe to drop. Unless we're all wrong and Amara really did kill him." Dean rubbed his mouth.
"Sam gets back tomorrow. You want us to call you then?"

"No, no, it's fine. Let me keep working here and I'll call you when I think it's time to bring her in."

"OK, mom. Stay safe."

"Love you, baby," she said. "Say hi to Castiel for me." She hung up.

"Mom says hi," Dean told the angel.

He smiled. "She still doesn't want us to help capture the witch?"

"No," Dean said. "She wants to try and figure out why Constance would suddenly put her world domination plans on hold to go train as a nurse. Which, other than the hot uniforms, I can't figure out either."

"You don't need actual training to wear the uniform, do you?" Cas asked curiously.

Dean gulped at the unbidden image of Cas in a nurse's uniform. "Uh, no. Look, uh, never mind. I'm dead on my feet here. Lemme catch a couple hours and we'll figure out a plan later."

"So, this letalis aqua is another thing hidden away in Necropolis?" Sam asked.

"Yes. It's a fountain, of sorts. The legend says that if you drink of the spring, you will achieve the pinnacle of power," Gabriel explained. "Unless you're human of course. Then you just die, hence the name."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, if a demon were to drink it, they'd become a Prince of Hell. If Castiel were to drink, he'd become an archangel." Gabriel looked thoughtful. "I'm not sure what would happen to a reaper."

"Could they become Death?" Sam suggested.

Gabriel's eyes went wide. "Perhaps. I don't know."

"What about you?" Sam's face had gone strangely blank, like he was suppressing his emotions. Gabriel didn't care for the look.

"What about me?"

"Could drinking this letalis aqua unbind your Grace?" Sam's voice cracked curiously at the end of his question.

Gabriel sighed. "I doubt it. I really don't know what it would do to me and I don't care to experiment. The power doesn't come for free, you know."

"I should have guessed," Sam said. "What's the price?"

"The legend isn't clear. When Necropolis was open, the only ones stupid enough to drink from it were humans, who dropped dead on the spot, and one demon."

"Who?"

"Asmodeus. That's how he became a Prince." Gabriel looked pensive. "Asmodeus is crazy. I don't know if that's the price he paid or if he was always nuts."
"Great," Sam said sarcastically. "So Billie drinks this letalis aqua and becomes as powerful as Death and madder than a box of frogs."

Gabriel laughed. "Nice image. Yes, that's possible. Which is why I'm thinking of double-crossing her."

Sam gaped at him in horror. "What?"

"Don't worry," Gabriel said. "I've got it all under control." He smiled encouragingly at Sam, giving him a lurching sensation in his stomach. Not real, he repeated in his head. Remember, it's not real. It didn't seem to help.

"What do we do when Billie gets here with the cards," Sam asked nervously, trying to ignore the feelings inside him.

"Maybe you should be elsewhere in the house," Gabriel suggested. "This can't be the only room."

"There are bedrooms upstairs," Sam told him. "And other rooms here on the ground floor."

Gabriel took a breath. "Why don't you settle in upstairs, in one of the bedrooms," he said.

Sam stared at him, the mere mention of a bedroom making him feel flushed. "Uh, OK," he agreed.

"Get some sleep," Gabriel emphasized. "I wasn't implying anything." Sam tried not to look disappointed. "You're not going to feel that way once we get Michael's Tarot locked down."

"All right," Sam agreed. "I guess you're right." He sighed. "Goodnight, Gabriel."

Gabriel squeezed his hand. "You'll thank me in the morning." Sam quirked a fake smile at him and headed upstairs.

The master suite was a luxurious and overdone as anyone who knew Magnus might have imagined. The bed was simply enormous, and Sam figured some clever spellwork meant that every time he and Dean had spent the night in the mansion, the sheets were mysteriously, magically clean for the next time they needed the rooms. He lay there, listening for the sound of Billie returning. There was a tightness in his chest he was honest enough with himself to admit was jealousy. Which he knew was totally ridiculous. But he began to drift and soon fell sound asleep.

Sam wasn't sure what had woken him but listening carefully, he could hear the sound of voices. With a feeling that he was being stupid and childish, he crept out of bed and opened the door.

"...was Michael thinking, making something like this?" Billie was saying.

"You know my brother," Gabriel reply came drifting up. "Always overdoing it."

"What do you want me to do with it?"

"Put it in this safe here. OK." Sam heard the door of the safe close. "Done. Thank you, Billie."

"I'll hold you to your side of the deal," Billie said. "Don't think you can wiggle out of it."

"Perish the thought," Gabriel said, sounding wounded. "I do wish you'd tell me why you want some of the letalis aqua."

"No, you don't," Billie said. "You think you should care, so you're making a play of it. But I know you better than that."

"No," Gabriel said. "You really don't."
"I'll be seeing you," she said.

Sam considered going back to bed, but knowing the cards were now in the house, even locked in the safe, made him edgy and nervous. Unfortunately, facing Gabriel was almost as nerve-wracking. Rallying his courage, he descended the stairs and returned to the library where Gabriel was standing, staring into the fire. He looked up when he heard Sam's footsteps.

"She's been and gone?" Sam asked.

"Yep," Gabriel said. "You know, I'm not sure we thought this through very well. How do we get back to the bunker? Is Dean coming to get us?"

"No, we'll drive," Sam told him. "In fact, I'd kinda like to hit the road now if you don't mind."

"Wait, I thought we didn't have a car," Gabriel said, his eyebrows coming together.

Sam couldn't help but laugh. "There's a car here. Dean and I try to make sure there's always one here for emergencies."

"But… you made me walk all the way to that diner!" Gabriel squeaked in outrage. "Two whole miles, each way!"

Sam gave a lop-sided shrug. "I felt like a walk. You assumed there wasn't a car and I didn't correct you."

"You tricked me!" Gabriel exclaimed. He looked utterly gob-smacked.

"Come on, it's not that big a deal." Except it was because maybe Sam would not have behaved so idiotically last night if he'd not been spellbound by the beautiful night and more beer than he'd have drunk if he'd been driving. "Are you really that mad?"

"I won't forget this," the archangel warned, but he didn't look angry.

"So, can we leave? I'd really like to put some distance between me and the cards."

Gabriel nodded, and followed Sam through the house to the garage where an old red Plymouth stood waiting. Sam activated the secret garage entrance and then climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine. Gabriel got in the passenger seat and Sam drove out of the garage, the entrance closing automatically behind him.

"What time is it?" Sam asked.

"A little after 4am," Gabriel told him. Sam's face twisted as he made a quick calculation in his head.

"OK, I think we can try and do this in one straight shot if you want." Of course, Gabriel thought sadly, Sam probably didn't want to share a motel room with him, not now.

"Let's see how tired you get," he suggested. Sam's mouth pinched but he nodded and then turned on the radio.

Gabriel sighed inwardly, this was going to be a very long drive. He was going to have to leave the bunker, of course. Now Sam knew about his ridiculous, unwanted love, things were going to be far too awkward for him to stick around. He should be angrier at the young hunter for forcing the issue last night, but he was honest enough with himself to admit it had been partly his fault too. He should have distanced himself from Sam the moment he'd realized what was happening, not taken
advantage of every opportunity to spend time with him, knowing each precious moment might be the last.

And then there was Billie and her insane demand for water from the letalis aqua. He wondered what she might do to him if he didn't follow through, and then wondered if he even cared. What was the worst she could do? Grace-bound or not, he was still an archangel. But she might take it out on Sam and Gabriel couldn't bear that. They should make him an honorary Winchester, he thought ruefully. He'd made himself as ridiculously self-sacrificing and willing to destroy the world to save Sam's sorry hide as Dean.

Pain throbbed in his chest as the magnitude of his loss pressed down on him. He stared out of the window, desperately trying not to let the tears that gathered in his eyes become outright bawling. He was millions of years old, for crying out loud! Why was he letting one human, with a lifespan like the blink of his eyes, tie him into all these knots? Thinking like that only made the pain sharper, so he pushed the thoughts away and tried to focus on something else. Lacking inspiration, he closed his eyes and forced himself into sleep.

The car was unnaturally quiet, even though the radio was playing. Sam was used to a fairly constant stream of chatter from Gabriel and for the archangel to be silently curled in his seat with his head turned away was almost painful. He'd expected to feel different this morning somehow, maybe seeing him as just a friend or even perhaps not even that. So he was surprised that he felt exactly as he had last night, he still found the angel incredibly attractive and he was still teetering on the edge of feeling so much more. Perhaps it was going to take longer for the enchantment to wear off, or maybe putting more distance between himself and the cards would be key? He didn't want it to be. Now, more than ever, he wanted to keep these insane, uncomfortable desires and feelings. He shouldn't, but then he was never very good at resisting things he shouldn't do.

Gabriel seemed to have fallen asleep and his head fell back to reveal the tracks of tears on his face. The sight almost made Sam lose control of the car. The archangel was grieving and it was his fault. He'd tempted and taunted him beyond endurance and the fact he'd had no idea Gabriel felt so strongly about him was no excuse. And maybe there was no reason to grieve at all, maybe these feelings wouldn't go away, maybe they really were real. But he didn't know for sure and it wouldn't be fair to pretend otherwise.

Sam wanted to scream at the unfairness of it all. He'd been feeling increasingly lonely and dissatisfied with his life, wishing he could have someone to share it with the way Dean had Cas, even if neither of them was willing to actually make it a romantic relationship. And Gabriel was a shockingly perfect fit. Funny, smart, knowledgeable, and even without access to his Grace, Sam wouldn't have to worry about his safety. And the way he made Sam's mouth dry and his body ache with need... Sam shifted in his seat as his jeans became uncomfortably tight. Damn. He really needed to think about something else. A quick glance at Gabriel's tear-stained cheeks soon killed any sense of arousal.

What a mess. Sam had no idea what he was going to do, but one thing was clear. Gabriel was probably planning on skipping out as soon as they got back to the bunker. Somehow, he had to convince him to stay. All the other problems could wait.

Constance didn't look a day older than the last time Mary had seen her, more than thirty years ago. The nursing scrubs were more than a little incongruous however. She left her apartment every morning, bright and early and rode the bus to campus. She worked, studied, ate with other students. All totally normal student stuff, except none of the other students was a two-hundred year old witch from County Clare, Ireland.
Eventually, Mary realized that observing her habits was not going to yield any more information, so she changed her clothes and her approach. Checking over her fake Illinois private investigator's license one more time, she headed off to the school.

"Mrs Williams will see you now," the young receptionist told her, his floppy hair drooping in his eyes in a way that made Mary's fingers twitch. He showed her into a square office with a tiny window and a wilting collection of potted plants. Mrs Williams was a stout woman in her early fifties, with curly auburn hair and bright green eyes.

"Ms Parker, was it? How can I help you?"

"This is all confidential," Mary warned. "I can't stress that enough."

"Yes, yes," Williams said. "But you know, I'm limited as to what I can tell you. There are laws governing student privacy you know."

"I'm aware," Mary said wryly. "So, Miss McBride is in the midwifery program?"

"Yes," Williams confirmed. "That's a matter of public record, as I'm sure you've already checked."

"Of course. And did she say why she chose that particular specialty?" Mary cursed internally as she saw the woman's face shut down.

"Like I say, privacy. She wrote an essay as part of her application, all our students do. But I'm not at liberty to share that with you." She eyed Mary speculatively. "You know, it would be easier to answer your questions if I knew what you were investigating. Ms McBride isn't married or in a serious relationship, so you're not that kind of PI. So why are you here, Ms Parker?"

"All right," Mary said, making a show of giving in. "My employer believes Miss McBride to be the same woman who misled him into employing her to care for his sick wife, two years ago. Going under the name Bridie Constance. She made a mistake which caused the lady's unfortunate premature demise. If it was a mistake. There were some curious aspects to the case that made my employer think she might have been more actively involved in his wife's death."

"I see," Williams said, her lips pursing. "That's a serious charge, Ms Parker."

"I know," Mary said, making a solemn face.

"But if this is a criminal matter, shouldn't the police be investigating?" Williams looked like she was trying to catch Mary in a lie. But she was prepared.

"Of course. But my employer and I are genuinely not sure Miss McBride and Miss Constance are the same woman. Their names are similar, and they have very similar physical features. But that's hardly a positive identification. My job is to definitively ID Miss McBride as Miss Constance and then pass that information on to my employer, who will take it to law enforcement. Or definitively ID her as a different person and we move on, keep looking for the real criminal."

"Well, I'm not sure what more I can do to help," Williams said. "I can get you the names of some of her classmates. One of them might be willing to talk to you."

"That would be really helpful," Mary smiled. Williams nodded and left the room. She could hear her talking to her administrative assistant so she didn't have much time. But Williams had helpfully pulled McBride's file and had left it temptingly out in the open on her desk. Mary leaned over and flipped through it, taking shots of each page with her phone. When she heard the woman returning, she quickly closed it and sat down again, pretending to reading though her email on her cellphone.
"Here we are," Williams told her, handing her a sheet of paper. "Now if there's nothing else?"

Mary shook her hand. "No. You've been a big help. Thank you."

Hurrying back to her car, she sat and went through each photograph in turn. Modern technology still confounded her sometimes but boy was it useful. She located Constance's entrance essay and began to read.

The car swerved alarmingly, jolting Gabriel from his slumber. He looked over at Sam, whose eyes were wide and a little bloodshot.

"Are you OK?" he asked.

"I'm tired," Sam admitted. "I think I dozed off for a second."

"How much further is it to the bunker?"

"Six hours, maybe seven." Sam looked exhausted. Gabriel frowned, he must have driven for at least fifteen hours straight.

"That does it, we have to stop. Find a motel, sleep in the car, I don't care. But you'll kill yourself if you keep going like this, Sam." Sam looked like he might argue and Gabriel held up a hand. "I mean it. I won't let you do this."

"All right," Sam grumbled. "I'll pull over at the next motel I see."

Gabriel pulled out his phone and called up the map. "Where are we? Sam, I don't see anything for miles."

Sam sighed. "How many miles?"

"At least sixty. You don't have another hour in you." Gabriel placed a hand on Sam's arm without thinking and the car lurched again.

"OK, OK. What about somewhere we can just stop and grab a couple hours. A state park or something like that. Or you can drive, if you want."

Gabriel seized on that idea. "Let me drive."

"OK," Sam said, pulling over. He climbed out and staggered around the car, and Gabriel scooted over into the driver's seat. He let Sam get settled and then accelerated away.

It was a measure of just how wiped out Sam was that he fell immediately into a deep sleep. Gabriel swallowed past the lump in his throat at Sam's peaceful expression.

The sound of someone hammering on his door jerked Dean from a confused dream about falling down elevator shafts and landing in swimming pools.

"Dean!" Cas said urgently from the other side of the door.

"Wha' issit?"

"Arariel's hurt." Cas sounded frantic. Dean dragged himself out of bed and opened the door, forgetting he was wearing his boxers and nothing else. The angel's eyes widened at his state of undress.
"Where is he?" Dean asked sleepily.

"Outside," Cas told him. "I need your help to bring him in here, the wards are repelling him and I can't seem to deactivate them."

"Oh, yeah, no you can't. I'll do it, hold on while I get dressed." Dean closed the door and located his jeans and a t-shirt before heading to the control room. The Men of Letters had been a paranoid bunch, that was for sure. As legacies, him and Sam could operate the wards but they'd yet to figure out a way to get the system to recognize Cas as a legitimate user. Once he'd lowered the wards, he headed to the front door to see Cas crouching by a crumpled figure on the ground.

"Cas, how bad is he?"

"Bad," the angel said. "Help me bring him inside."

Dean nodded and picked up the unconscious angel's feet as Cas lifted Arriel's shoulders. They awkwardly maneuvered him inside the bunker.

"Where are we taking him?" Dean asked.

"My room," Cas said. "It's the closest."

Once inside Cas's room, they laid Arriel on the bed and Cas began to examine him.

"What's wrong with him?"

"I'm not sure," Cas said. Dean watched as he touched the other angel with delicate fingers and suppressed a worm of jealousy that began to curl uncomfortably in his gut. Arriel, or at least his vessel, was a good looking man of around Sam's age, with softly curling sandy hair and a beautifully sculpted face that reminded Dean of old paintings of the archangel Michael. That was not a comforting thought.

"This is… I can't understand what's happened but his Grace is… cracked," Cas said in horrified amazement.

"Cracked?" Dean said. "That can happen?"

"Yes, but it's very unusual. Dean, can we lock the bunker down until we figure this out? I don't know who did this to Arriel and I don't know if they could track him here."

Dean nodded. "Good idea. I'll do it now." He dashed out of Cas's room and headed back to the control room.
Cas looked down at Arariel. "Brother, can you hear me?"

"Castiel?" Arariel said faintly, sounding confused.

"Yes," Cas said. "Arariel, what happened?"

The angel's eyes flickered open, and Cas jerked back in revulsion. Arariel's eyes were… changed. There was no other way to describe it. Arariel's vessel had blue eyes the last time Cas had seen him. But now they were like a kaleidoscope, shifting iridescent colors that warped and danced in a way that seemed profoundly unsettling.

"I've seen it, Castiel. The Gate is open. The City has awoken."

"OK, we're locked down," Dean said from behind him. "Oh, hey, he's awake."

"Yes, but look at him," Cas said

"We're all dead, Castiel. There's no escape." Arariel's eyes rolled back in his head and he began to twitch and jerk.

"He's having some kind of fit," Dean said in alarm.

"I know," Cas said, pressing down on his brother's shoulders. "I've got it." He closed his eyes and poured his Grace into Arariel, trying to patch the crack in his brother's Grace. More and more he channeled until finally the seizure ended and the crack began to close. Once it had fully patched, Cas staggered back and his legs gave way beneath him. Dean caught him before he hit the floor.

"Woah, I got you. You OK?"

"I've drained… myself…" Cas said tiredly, his head lolling back. "I… need… rest…"

"OK," Dean said. After assessing the situation for a second, he slid his arm under Cas's buckling knees and lifted him up in his arms. The angel's head tucked neatly under his chin and Dean couldn't help but stare down at him for a second. Cas's long dark lashes stood out starkly from too white skin and the wave of tenderness that overcame him almost threatened to make his knees fail too. Swallowing hard, he carried the angel out into the hall and down to his own room.

He carefully placed Cas on his bed and after a moment's hesitation, removed his shoes and trenchcoat. Cas was unnaturally still, without even a breath or a heartbeat to tell him the angel was still alive. But he knew Cas didn't need to do those things, and only performed to make the humans around him more comfortable. Unconscious as he was, those things would cease. It didn't make him feel much better.

As much as he would have loved to get some coffee or a bite to eat, nothing could have convinced him to leave Cas's side until he had some indication that the angel hadn't overtaxed himself to the point of no return. He leaned over and stroked his fingers over Cas's face and was gratified by the way the muscles shifted in response. He blew out a breath he hadn't been aware he was holding. Cas was alive, just exhausted. A few hours rest and he'd be fine. Dean could leave him to sleep and recharge. But…

He was tired. He'd only gotten a few hours sleep since they'd returned to the bunker. Nobody would
blame him for wanting to grab another hour or two. He could of course have gone and slept on Sam's bed instead, but for some reason he was reluctant to do so. And this bed was plenty big enough for the two of them. That decided, he toed off his boots and settled down beside Cas, and let himself drift off to sleep.

"I've got to say, you took some finding, Moose," a new voice said from the backseat. Gabriel looked over his shoulder to see a bearded man in an immaculately tailored suit sitting there as though he belonged there. His eyes widened in surprise at the sight of Gabriel's face.

"You're not Dean," he said.

"No," Gabriel agreed, turning back to face the road. "I'm not. I don't like demons in my car. Leave."

The man's eyes narrowed. "Who are you? What are you? You clearly know what I am."

"I won't ask again."

"I have to wonder why you're asking at all," the demon said. "You're clearly powerful enough to smite me into next week."

Sam stirred and his eyes opened slowly. "What's going on?" he mumbled. Then he looked over into the back of the car. "Crowley? What are you doing here?"

"Where's Dean?" Crowley asked, ignoring Sam's question. "Who the Hell is this guy?"

Sam rubbed his hands over his face. "I'm really, really not in the mood, Crowley. You can't show up unannounced and start making demands. What do you want?"

"I have information," the demon said. "Mother deigned to tell me something I thought you should know." He gave Gabriel a sidelong glance. "But it's really for your ears only."

"You can say it in front of... him," Sam said carefully. He was not going to reveal Gabriel's identity, thankfully.

"Ugh. Fine. Be mysterious. The witch you've been chasing, Constance McBride. She has two grimoires, the Codex Retorta and the Book of Winter." The demon looked disturbed. "And inside the Codex Retorta is a map of the waypoints to a place called Necropolis."

Gabriel slammed on the brakes, sending the car into a skidding stop and whirled around. "Say that again!" He was aware his Grace had flared briefly in his eyes. Apparently the binding didn't stop that from happening when he was pissed.

"Uh, Sam? Who is this?" the demon squeaked.

"Never mind that, Crowley," Sam said. "Answer him."

"The Codex Retorta has a map of the waypoints to Necropolis?" The demon, Crowley, was staring at Gabriel with wide eyes.

"How good is the map?" Gabriel demanded.

"I don't know, I've not seen it. Mother says it's incomplete, but there are ways around that." Crowley looked pleadingly at Sam.

"OK. Thank you for letting us know," Sam peered at him curiously. "What made you come here,
"Nobody was answering the phone or even the door," Crowley said. "I only found you because one of my demons saw you having dinner with Dean last night near Sinclair's fortress. He didn't mention your uh... other friend here."

"No," Sam said. "Well, thanks again, Crowley. We'll be in touch."

Crowley nodded and after one final considering look at Gabriel, vanished. Sam pulled out his phone and dialed Dean's number. It rang through to voicemail.

"Dean, call me as soon as you get this." He hung up and called Cas. When the angel's stumbling message played, he hung up again. "Gabriel, where the Hell are Dean and Cas?"

"Don't panic," the archangel advised. "There's probably a perfectly rational explanation. Go back to sleep. Dean will call when he picks up your voicemail."

Sam took a deep breath and tried to calm his sense of foreboding. "You're right. He probably just went out and found himself in a cellphone blackspot." He didn't look convinced but he did let his eyes close again and within minutes was asleep once more. Gabriel gnawed at his lip and kept driving.

As Gabriel pulled up in front of the bunker, his celestial senses told him a number of things. Firstly, that Arariel had been here recently, and secondly that the bunker's wards were shut down tight. He reached over and shook Sam's shoulder.

"Sam? The bunker's totally locked up."

Sam opened his eyes and rubbed his hands over his face. "What?"

"I don't know," Gabriel said. "I can't open the wards the way you told me to."

"Something's happened," Sam said. He got out of the car and went to the bunker door. After a moment the hidden garage door opened and Gabriel eased the car in, Sam following on foot.

The bunker was so quiet and Sam's stomach flipped over.

"Dean?"

Nothing.

"Cas?"

Silence.

"OK, let's start with Dean's room," Sam said. "None of the cars were missing from the garage so they have to be here."

"Unless someone took them away," Gabriel said darkly. Sam glared at him and strode off towards his brother's room.

He should have knocked. After all, he really did think Dean was here, so why didn't he knock? But alarm at the way the bunker's wards had been closed and the cumulative stress of the last few days had taken their toll, and so he burst into Dean's room in a state not far from panic. The sight that greeted him, of Dean asleep on his back with Cas curled around his body, made his jaw drop.
"Did you find… oh my!" Gabriel sounded amused. Sam wasn't. His sense of unease increased.

"Dean?"

His brother flung one arm over his eyes. "What?"

"Dean, what's going on?" Sam resisted the urge to go over and shake his brother, but it was a close run thing.

"I dunno what you…" Dean finally opened his eyes and met Sam's alarmed expression with one of confusion.

"Should I start with the bunker being on lockdown, or the fact you're in bed with Cas?" Sam demanded.

"In bed with… oh. Yeah. I can explain that," Dean said doubtfully. How had he gotten into this position? He touched a hand to Cas's shoulder, but the angel remained still. "Uh. Arariel showed up," he remembered. "Cas said his Grace was cracked. I dunno what that means but he was in bad shape. I guess Cas drained his own Grace healing him. So I brought him down here and… you know I was tired and it was still early, so I figured I should get some more sleep. And I didn't want to leave him alone because I was worried, you know. If he'd drained his Grace too badly, if he needed help and I wasn't here." He was talking too much, babbling away as Sam and Gabriel gaped at him. "Anyway. Uh." He stumbled out of bed and made a shooing motion with his hands. "Gimme five minutes, I'll meet you in the kitchen," he said.

"Where's Rary?" Gabriel insisted.

"Oh, uh, Cas's room."

Gabriel practically ran out of the room. Sam canted an eyebrow at Dean and then followed the archangel down the hall.

Mary sat back and took a few deep breaths as the information in the file began to rearrange itself in her mind with the other clues she'd picked up as she'd tracked McBride. Whatever the witch was up to, the nursing school front was clearly just that, a front. The only reason Mary could come up with was that it gave her access to somewhere that an ordinary member of the public couldn't reach. But the building wasn't all that old and Mary had found nothing in the property records of the city that suggested anything untoward in the area. She sighed with frustration. Accessing the school probably wasn't the goal. And the way she seemed to be deducing herself to her studies… Mary's head came up. What if learning something of midwifery was the goal. What would that mean? She picked up the phone.

"Hello?" Alicia's voice was wary.

"Alicia? It's Mary."

"Hey," she said warmly. "What's up?"

"How are you both doing?" Mary said, stalling for a moment.

"OK, I guess. Max is better, although neither of us is really over what happened."

"Of course," Mary said sympathetically.
"But you didn't call just to hear my voice. What's going on?" Alicia didn't sound offended, just amused.

"I've tracked McBride to Chicago. She's attending nursing school here, specializing in midwifery," Mary told him. "I thought maybe she wanted access to something here, the library, one of the buildings on campus. But I can't find anything that sounds like something she'd be interested in."

"Midwifery," Alicia mused. "You think that's not a random choice?"

"I'm beginning to wonder, yes." Mary chewed on her lip. "But I can't make the next connection."

"Neither can I," Alicia admitted. "Let me ask Max." She called out for her brother and then responded to an unheard question. "OK, he's coming."

"Mary," Max said delightedly. "Alicia said you've found McBride."

"Yes, and I'm trying to figure what she's doing here." Mary summarized the information she'd given to Alicia.

"Oh… God. I had a nasty thought," Alicia said. "What if she's crossbreeding the creatures she's making with the soulforge."

"Would that work?" Mary said in surprise.

"For some of them, maybe," Alicia said doubtfully. "I really don't know."

"I've got a nastier idea," Max piped up.

"Go ahead," Mary told him.

"Didn't you say some angels were missing?"

"Cupids, yes, according to one source," Mary agreed.

"Nephilim. Maybe she's breeding nephilim to use as the basis of her monster-making. Much easier than trying to breed full angels with other monsters."

"I think I want to be sick," Alicia complained. "You're suggesting she's kidnapping humans and forcing them to breed with angels? That's vile."

"I said it was a nasty idea," Max retorted.

"It is," Mary said. "But if it's true, where are the humans coming from?"

"Check the missing persons stats," Max said. "If I'm right, she's probably harvesting close to wherever she's keeping those angels captive. If she's sticking around in Chicago, my guess is that they've seen a spike in missing women and she's probably doing this somewhere in or near the city."

"OK," Mary said heavily. "I really don't want this to be true, but it's more plausible than anything I can come up with."

"Let us know what you find," Max insisted.

"Of course," she said and hung up.
Gabriel shoved open Cas's door to see Arariel lying on the bed, his eyes serenely closed.

"Rary?"

The angel opened his eyes and Gabriel gasped at the peculiar multicolored medley they'd become.

"What the Hell happened to you?" he demanded.

"Necropolis," Arariel slurred. "The Necropolis Gate is open."

"Rary, all the gates were destroyed or damaged beyond repair." Gabriel said, although he wasn't sure he believed that anymore.

"No," Arariel denied. "One was left. The Illini Gate."

"What? Why?"

"Lucifer… hid it. Don't know why, but his Grace was all over it. It was warded so well, you couldn't see it unless you travelled the waypoints to it." Arariel closed his eyes again.

"Brother, did you open the Gate?" Gabriel asked, his voice quivering. Sam placed a hand on his shoulder, but the archangel shrugged it off.

"No. It was already open," Arariel said. "And I went straight through."

"To Necropolis? That's impossible!" Gabriel grabbed Arariel by the arms and shook him. "Arariel, what did you do?"

"I went through the Gate," Arariel said almost dreamily. His eyes opened again and Gabriel felt dizzy staring into their polychromatic depths. "You should too. A new day is coming, Gabriel."

"Damn it," Gabriel swore. "Where is this Gate, Arariel?"

"Starved rock," Arariel said, and promptly passed out.

"We better go talk to Dean," Sam said.

Once Sam and Gabriel had left the room, Dean let himself sit heavily on the bed. He patted Cas absentely on the hip as his mind raced.

"What are you doing?" the angel said blurrily.

"Oh," Dean said, almost choking in shock. "Sorry, man. I didn't know you were awake."

"Awake or asleep, my question still stands," Cas said stiffly.

Dean stood up and moved away from the bed. "Sorry. I wasn't uh… Never mind. How are you feeling?"

"Awful," Cas said ruefully. "But my Grace will recover."

"Sam and Gabriel are here," Dean told him. "They uh… found us in bed together." When Cas's eyebrows rocketed upwards, he added. "Fully dressed!" Fuck. He wasn't making this better.

"I don't understand."
"Well, I had to carry you here," Dean said, floundering. "And then, well, I was still tired. I... didn't think you'd mind. I'm sorry. I should have used Sam's room."

"No! No. It's fine," Cas said. He looked a little startled. "I'm just surprised."

"You are?" Dean blurted before he could stop himself.

"You're not usually comfortable with me being in close proximity," Cas said. Dean felt like a terrible person, was that really what Cas thought?

"It's nothing personal," he defended. "I don't do touchy feely stuff with Sam either."

"I am not your brother," Cas said sternly, meeting his gaze with a steely look in his eye.

Dean gulped, unsure where this conversation was going. "I- no, I guess you're not. Not if you don't want to be."

"I do not."

"When I said you were family, that was a good thing you know," Dean said.

"I know," Cas said, his tone softening. "But it's... inappropriate."

"OK," Dean agreed, not understanding and feeling slightly hurt.

Cas sighed and got off the bed. He came around to stand in front of Dean, his hands on the hunter's shoulders. Dean met his gaze steadily, the swirling blue depths seeming almost hypnotic.

"Dean, I am not human. I cannot be family to you, and I don't want to be."

Dean nodded miserably. "OK. I get that. I-" He was cut off by the appearance of a harried looking Sam with Gabriel in tow. Cas let his hands fall as he stepped back.

"We've got trouble," Sam said without preamble. Dean straightened.

"What is it?"

"Rary passed through the Illini Gate into Necropolis," Gabriel said heavily. "That's what cracked his Grace and his mind as well. He's still under the influence of that horrible place."

"How can someone be under the influence of a place?" Dean asked.

"Necropolis is more than just a physical dimension," Cas explained, putting a hand on Dean's shoulder. "You could say it's a state of mind."

"A crazy state of mind," Dean retorted.

"Indeed. Arariel's mind must have snapped under the strain."

"He never was very strong," Gabriel commented. "Damn. I'd hoped being locked down for so long had robbed the city of it's power."

"Why do you care?" Dean asked.

"Because I have to go there to pick up the letalis aqua for Billie."

"That's the favor she demanded. I'd prefer not to crack my Grace or my mind while I'm at it."
"I thought you said there was no way to enter Necropolis." Dean folded his arms and glared at Gabriel.

"I thought there wasn't," Gabriel pointed out.

"But you agreed to Billie's deal anyway?" Dean frowned at the archangel in consternation.

Gabriel sighed. "What choice did I have? But the more I think about it, the more I think it's a ruse. I think she wants to know how to get into the City."

Sam's head was spinning. "I'm totally confused. Didn't she say Reapers were forbidden to enter Necropolis?"

"They are. So, in order to enter, she needs the letalis aqua. She drinks that, she becomes something… other, in order to enter." When Sam opened his mouth to object, he smiled sadly. "It's impossible. The ban on Reapers is absolute. She'll be little more than a scorch mark on the floor by the time it's done."

"I don't care," Dean said. "I don't like the idea of opening a way into this place."

"None of us do, but I could have led Billie on a merry dance for years. After all, the City was supposed to have been sealed. But if Rary was able to enter, that means others have done so before him." Gabriel looked so troubled, Sam had to resist the urge to fold the diminutive angel into his arms.

"Why couldn't Arariel have been the first to enter?" Cas said curiously.

"Could you open the Gate?" Gabriel said pointedly. Cas shook his head "Exactly. Only an archangel has that kind of power. Or maybe a Prince of Hell. I don't know if the Alpha's could do it, but I don't think there are many left anyway. That doesn't leave many options on the table."

"Lucifer. Dagon. Ramiel. Asmodeus." Cas ticked the suspects off on his fingers. "The remaining alphas are the Alpha Vampire and the Alpha Borderwalker that we're aware of. All the others are dead. I can't see either of them being interested in Necropolis."

"And it won't be Asmodeus," Gabriel asserted. "Or Ramiel."

"What makes you so sure?" Dean said, his eyebrows diving over his nose.

"Ramiel doesn't care. He's happy with his little life, ignoring Heaven and Hell both. He was the most detached of the angels Lucifer forced to Fall. Asmodeus… Well, let's just say that he has been there before and won't be in a hurry to return and leave it at that."

"So, Lucifer or Dagon?" Dean said. "What do we know about Dagon?"

"Not much," Cas admitted. "Unlike Ramiel, Dagon is not a fallen angel, but her loyalty to Lucifer is unquestioning. When the Apocalypse was happening, Dagon was working behind the scenes to support Lucifer's agenda. And she is rumored to have met you, Sam, at least once."

"I don't remember meeting anyone called Dagon. I guess she must have… wait, Ruby had a friend." Sam's mouth pinched in remembrance. "OK, not a friend exactly. But there was another demon she used to meet with, when she was supposedly tracking Lilith. Her name was… Dana? Darla? Something like that. Maybe that was Dagon."

"Probably," Cas agreed. "The point is if Dagon is involved, she's working for Lucifer. So it's not
really two suspects at all."

"But since we're having no luck tracking Lucifer, maybe Dagon will be easier to find?" Dean said hopefully.

"I wouldn't bank on it," Gabriel said sourly.

"So what do we do about Arriel?" Sam asked.

"I'll have to contact Heaven," Cas said. "They'll send someone to pick him up."
Mary eyed Ketch with a snarl, unimpressed that Mick had sent someone to keep tabs on her. "What are you doing here?"

"Mick said you were tracking a witch, one who's caused a lot of trouble," he said mildly. "I thought you might appreciate some help."

"If I needed help, I'd have called my boys. I know I said I'd think about working with you people, but if you push me, I'll say no." She put her hands on her hips, one hand ready to grab the gun in the small of her back if needed.

Ketch held up his hands in surrender. "I'm not trying to get in your way."

"Really?" Mary said skeptically. "So why are you here?"

"I'd like to see you in action," Ketch admitted. He looked almost embarrassed. "Everything Mick said about you made me… curious."

She rolled her eyes at him. Did he think she was some wide-eyed ingenue? "Fine. You wanna help? Stay out of my way."

"All right," Ketch said. "I get the message. I'll give you what I have and then go."

"Give me what you have?" Mary asked.

Ketch shrugged carelessly although he seemed to be watching her closely. "Mick dug out what we had in our databases about Constance McBride. Most of it was nothing you don't already know, I'm sure. But there's a few things that might interest you."

She held her hand out and he gave her a blue folder. Flipping through it, she found credit card statements that listed several charges to Starved Rock State Park, about three weeks before Mary had arrived in Chicago.

"Where's Starved Rock?"

"West of here, along I-80. On the banks of the Illinois River." Ketch looked rather proud of himself, although it wasn't clear why.

"What's there?"

"We don't know," Ketch said. "I was hoping we might go and look." He gave her a optimistic glance and grinned at her. She couldn't help but smile back, damn him.

"Fine," she said, throwing up her arms in mock surrender.

"Excellent," he said. She eyed his motorcycle leathers and then looked around for a bike. "It's parked around the corner," he told her.

"Good," she said. "I'll follow you."

"Oh come on," Ketch said seductively. "We don't need to take your car as well. Ride with me. It'll be fun, I promise."
Truth was, she believed him. The idea of riding behind him on a powerful motorcycle was already more appealing than it should be. She started to shake her head but something about the way he was looking at her stopped her.

Leveling a look at him, she said. "OK. But no funny business."

"The very idea," Ketch murmured, looking affronted. But the twinkle in his eyes remained.

The angel who turned up to collect Arariel called herself Paschar and was inhabiting the vessel of a woman who looked like a school teacher or perhaps a librarian. Average height, wearing a cream silk blouse, a navy pencil skirt and a thin cardigan, she carried herself with an air of authority. She pushed past Cas with a barely concealed look of contempt. Sam wished Gabriel were here to cut her down to size but he'd decided it was better if Heaven didn't know he was alive, at least until he'd figured out how to unbind his Grace. Sam couldn't blame him for being suspicious of how Heaven would react if they found out he was back.

"What happened?" Paschar asked as she examined Arariel.

"We're not sure," Sam said. They'd agreed to tell her at least a version of the truth. "We were on a hunt on Vancouver Island and we came across this cave with these strange carvings. Cas said it was a dangerous object that he needed to report to Heaven. Arariel came to investigate and then he turned up on our doorstep like this. He hasn't been very coherent so it's been difficult to find out much, but Cas said his Grace was cracked."

"Castiel, is there any reason you can't speak for yourself?" Paschar asked, lifting her eyes to briefly meet Cas's before returning to Arariel.

"Healing Arariel took a lot out of me," Cas said warily. "Sam's doing a better job of explaining what happened than I could."

"Very well." Paschar straightened and looked at the pale, strained faces of the Winchesters. "So, how much do they know?"

"Not a lot," Cas said. "Only that the cave leads to an alternate dimension. A dangerous alternate dimension."

"Good enough," Paschar said crisply. "I'll take it from here. Joshua is… most displeased, Castiel."

"I'm sure he is," Cas said tiredly. Paschar regarded him closely.

"You're weak," she observed.

"Healing Arariel's Grace-"

"Should not have depleted you so badly. Tell me, when were you last in Heaven?" She stepped closer to him and Sam laid a restraining hand on Dean's arm as his brother's face transformed into a snarl.

"Last year." Cas's shoulders slumped, as though this admission was shameful.

She shook her head and pursed her lips. "I see. So you're not Falling then?"

"Not as far as I know," Cas said in a low voice. "But I am… out of favor in Heaven, which makes recharging my Grace much slower."
"Castiel, we need more information about the cave you found. With Arariel out of the picture-" She smiled at him but there was nothing pleasant about it.

"You want me to take over the investigation?" Cas replied in surprise. For some reason, this seemed to make the lines on his face look deeper.

"In a word, yes. After all, if you manage to deal with the problem to Joshua's satisfaction, then you'll be able to regain Heaven's good graces. If not…” She spread her hands. "No big loss."

"Thanks," Cas said drily.

"You're welcome," she said, ignoring his tone. "You've a chance for redemption here, Castiel. Don't knock it." She clasped Cas's hand and closed her eyes. He gasped and began to glow slightly.

"Woah, wait a minute! What did you just do?" Dean demanded.

"It's OK, Dean," Cas rumbled, his eyes shining. "Paschar just recharged my Grace, that's all." He turned his head back to her. "Thank you."

She shrugged and picked up Arariel's body, slinging him rather unceremoniously over one shoulder. "We'll be in touch."

Sam and Dean watched her leave. "Cas, is this gonna be dangerous?" Dean growled.

"Not excessively so," the angel told him. "I will be very careful. Arariel had no idea what he was getting into. I will simply have to take precautions."

"We're coming with you." Dean's tone brooked no argument. Cas tried anyway.

"Dean, I don't think that's a good idea."

"Tough."

Mary had been right about Ketch and his motorcycle. The Norton Commando was beautiful, powerful and undeniably sexy. Not unlike its owner in fact. Pressed up against Ketch's lean, muscular back had Mary thinking all kinds of things she had absolutely no business thinking. Except… Except John was dead and she was alive and sometimes, you just had to take the things that were offered to you. She had no idea if the taciturn Brit had any interest in her, it had been a long time since she'd stopped to consider her attractiveness to anyone except John.

As Ketch roared into the parking lot of the Starved Rock lodge, she couldn't help but laugh. When they'd dismounted and he'd taken off his helmet, he peered at her curiously.

"What's so funny?"

"This lodge," she grinned. "Some people are wimps. I mean, look at this place." She gestured at the woods. "It's perfect for camping. Why would you want to stay in a hotel?"

Ketch matched her grin with his own. "Agreed. But Constance stayed here, so I figured it was a good place to start."

"She would," Mary said with a grimace. "OK. Let's go see if anyone remembers her."

They were in luck. The clerk at the reception desk not only remembered Constance, he had even given her directions to her destination. He drew on a map supplied by the hotel to show Mary and
Ketch how to find the trail to LaSalle Canyon.

"You're sure this is where she was going?" Mary pressed.

"Yes, ma'am," the young man said. "She wasn't exactly prepared for the hike, and I tried to convince her to stick to some of the easier, shorter trails but she was adamant."

"What do you mean, not prepared?" Ketch asked.

"Well, she had no daypack or proper footwear. Just sandals. And… forgive me, but a dress is just not suitable attire, especially when there are thorny bushes around. Not to mention the bugs." He looked Mary and Ketch up and down. "I'd advise you to change your clothes too if you're planning to take the same route."

"Hmm," Ketch said noncommittally.

"Thanks," Mary told the kid. She followed Ketch back out into the parking lot. "So, are we gonna go?"

"Of course," Ketch said. "He's right, though. I really should change." He unzipped his jacket and quickly removed his leather pants, which turned out to be covering black jeans. He dumped the leathers into a bag, which he had produced apparently from nowhere.

"Hey, where did that spring from?"

"Oh, it's a marvellous little invention," Ketch said. "Watch." He tapped a bracelet on his wrist and then flicked his wrist upwards and the bag vanished. "Some kind of pocket dimension, or so I'm told. Connected to this bracelet and activated at my command. I carry all my gear this way. Much easier than having to actually carry it."

"Neat," Mary said, impressed. He flashed her a smile. "OK, let's go. The map says we need to go this way." She pointed and began to stride off in the direction of the trail.

The hike from the lodge was quite long and arduous. Mary wondered how Constance had managed it, dressed the way the young hotel clerk had described. No wonder he'd tried to dissuade her. She was fit enough, but in retrospect she wished she'd been wearing proper hiking boots. Ketch's biker boots were not really ideal either and he found himself slipping in some of the muddier sections. She'd had to catch him more than once, and in fact was beginning to wonder about that. In another man, she might have suspected a clumsy pass but with Ketch… She shook her head. Best not to think about such things.

The waterfall was lovely, falling over an eroded bowl of sandstone that had exquisite layers. Normally, this area was a favorite with photographers, according to the trail guide she'd picked up, but today it was oddly quiet. Not even birdsong or insect sounds broke through. The only sound was the rushing water over the rocks and the blowing of the wind. Ketch tilted his head back, his eyes closed.

"What are you doing?" Mary asked him.

"Listening," Ketch said shortly. "Shush." Mary bristled but obeyed. After a moment he lowered his head and opened his eyes again. "Can you hear that humming sound?"

She frowned and listened hard. "Yes. I think it's coming from behind the waterfall."

Ketch nodded in agreement and began to walk along the rock carefully, his boots skidding on the
damp surface. Mary followed cautiously, trying not laugh at the unbidden image of Ketch soaking wet if he fell in the water. Behind the waterfall, the thrum of the river was louder but the humming sound Ketch had identified was also louder here. Mary looked around but couldn't see the source of the strange noise.

"I don't see anything," she said.

"No," Ketch agreed, sounding disturbed. He shivered suddenly and Mary saw his face had paled.

"Are you OK?"

"I'm not sure," he said. He rubbed at his arms with a frown. "I'm no psychic but I get this strong feeling we shouldn't be here."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Mary told him. At the back of the hollow behind the waterfall, she thought she could see something but her instincts were screaming at her to leave, to run away. Gritting her teeth, she ventured back to the spot where the feeling was the strongest and gasped.

"Ketch! Come take a look at this."

She heard the scrape of his boots as he approached, the sound was reluctant. He was as affected by the strange aura of this place as she was, no doubt.

"Do you recognize these symbols?" he asked.

"I think so," she replied. "I was on a hunt with my boys in Canada a few weeks ago. We found a cave, well it was little more than a crack in the rock really. But the symbols on it were like these. Not as crude, more artistic but the shapes look the same." She snapped a couple of pictures with her phone.

"I'm unfamiliar with the style," Ketch said. "Lore has never really been my thing."

"Nor mine," Mary admitted. "Growing up, it was Mom who did the research thing, then Dad and I would go kill the monster."

"Let's send copies of the photos to Mick," Ketch suggested. "I'm sure he'll be able to find more information in the London archives."

Mary nodded, forwarding the pictures to Sam as well as Mick Davies. Sam responded almost immediately with a text asking her to call. She eyed Ketch for a moment.

"Do you think this is what Constance came to find?"

"I don't know," Ketch said, backing away from the carvings almost absently. "They do give one a curious feeling, do they not?"

"Right," Mary said. She grimaced and looked around once more. "There's no sign she was here."

"What would you expect?"

"I don't know," Mary sighed. "I guess we have a lead to follow."

"Right then," Ketch said briskly. "Perhaps we should head back." He strode off, seeming very keen suddenly to vacate the place. Mary couldn't really blame him. This spot was beautiful, but there was that edge to it that made her increasingly uncomfortable. She hurried after the tall Brit, muttering to herself.
"Oh my God," Sam said, almost dropping his phone onto the kitchen table in his surprise.

"What is it?" Dean replied, sounding bored. He was leaning back on his chair and supping on a beer. Cas was watching him, as always. Gabriel was nowhere to be seen.

"Mom just sent me these pictures of some carvings," Sam said. "Look, they're the same as the ones from Vancouver Island and Taunton Rock."

"Another one of those waypoints?" Dean asked, looking more interested.

"I guess. Cas, take a look." Sam handed his phone to the angel and stood up. "I better find Gabriel and get him to see these. Anyone know where he is?"

"I haven't seen him since Paschar came to collect Arariel," Cas supplied. "I think he was in his room."

Sam nodded and left, heading for the room beside Cas's that they'd made up for the archangel. He tapped lightly at the door and heard Gabriel's voice telling him to come in. He opened the door to see the archangel sitting cross-legged on the bed, his head bowed.

"Hey," Sam said. "You OK?"

"Yes," Gabriel said in a transparent attempt at a lie. "What do you need?"

Sam considered whether to press the issue, but decided to leave it alone. "Mom found some carvings behind a waterfall in Illinois, just like the ones we saw on Vancouver Island. And the ones in the Taunton Rock photos."

Gabriel's head came up and his face was alarmed. "What? Show me!"

"The pictures are on my phone. Come take a look." Sam invited. Gabriel scrambled off the bed and followed him back to the kitchen where Dean and Cas were having some kind of face-off. Sam frowned at the tension in the room. He grabbed his phone off the table and gave it to Gabriel before turning back to Dean and Cas.

"Uh, what's going on?"

"Cas here thinks he's gonna just go off and investigate these carvings on his own," Dean said pugnaciously. "After we already told him we were going to come along."

"Dean," Cas said patiently. "If this is another open waypoint it could be dangerous."

"Yeah? And? Our lives are dangerous. What's so different about this?" Dean had leaned forward into Cas's space but the angel was not cowed.

"Seeing what happened to Arariel hasn't made you at all cautious?" Cas asked. "And he's an angel. Have you any idea what that place can do to a human mind?"

"No. That's not the point. The point is, why should you risk your mind either?" Dean shot back. "What are we supposed to do if you come back like Arariel did?"

"Heaven would take care of it," Cas said stiffly.

"Take care of it?" Dean yelled. "I care about what happens to you, dammit! I couldn't bear it if-" he broke off as he realized Sam and Gabriel were staring at him, open-mouthed. "Tell him, Sam," he
grumbled.

Sam sighed out loud. "Dean has a point, Cas."

"This mission was entrusted to me," Cas said stubbornly. "Nobody else need take the risk."

"Well, too bad," Gabriel said. "We are."

Sam turned and smiled gratefully at the archangel. Gabriel's eyes were shining with determination and it gave Sam a lurching sensation in his chest.

"So, what's the plan?" he asked.

"I think we should go and meet your mom," Gabriel said. He frowned suddenly. "Is she there by herself?"

"Why wouldn't she be?" Sam asked, his eyebrows rising.

"I don't know," Gabriel deflected. "But if she is alone, she's lucky she didn't get pulled in by that thing."

"Or the gate is dormant," Cas suggested.

"I don't think so," Gabriel said, shaking his head. "Look here, in the last photo." He pointed to an area almost out of frame. "That symbol is glowing."

"It is not," Cas denied. "It's just a reflection from the sun."

"It can't be," Gabriel insisted. "Look at the angles of the shadows and the light. The sun is to Mary's left. That area should be in shadow, but it isn't."

"That doesn't mean it can't have reflected off something she was carrying or something next to her."

Sam zoomed in on the area of the photograph Gabriel was pointing at. Unfortunately the resolution was too low to make out what the shape was, but it was very strange.

"I have to agree with Gabriel," Sam said.

"You would," Cas said sourly and Sam stared at him in shock.

"Do we have a problem here?" he asked pointedly.

"No," Cas said, but his mouth was drawn in a tight, angry line. He turned abruptly on his heel and walked out of the kitchen.

"What the hell was that all about?" Sam demanded of his brother, who shrugged.

"Beats me," Dean said. "He's so determined to go off and throw himself into danger to protect us, I guess he doesn't like it when we won't let him do it."

"Whatever," Sam said. "I'll meet you in the garage in twenty minutes."

Mary muttered to herself under her breath as she felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. There was no way she could answer it with Ketch listening in. And she'd prefer the boys not know she was here with him just yet. Ketch was striding across the parking lot to his bike and she hurried to catch up.
"Heading back to Chicago?" she asked.

"Yes," Ketch said. "Mick will send a team up here to investigate further. And frankly, this place gives me the willies."

Mary gaped at him, not sure if she was more surprised by the admission or the fact that he'd been willing to make it. "You don't seem like you scare easily."

"I don't," Ketch said. "Some of my colleagues consider it a character flaw. But that place…” He shivered and shook his head expressively. "I can't explain it."

"OK. Well, I guess I'll see you around," Mary said. Now it was Ketch's turn to look surprised.

"You're not planning to stay here, are you?" he exclaimed.

"Yeah, well, I thought I might keep poking around. Find out if Constance did anything else while she was here."

Ketch's expression turned to distaste. "You've invited your sons up to take a look." As she opened her mouth to deny it he held up one hand. "No, don't bother to deny it. I don't care." But his face suggested that was a lie, he looked disappointed. "I'll be in touch." He turned away from her, and she bit her lip in consternation. She didn't want him crossing paths with Sam and Dean, that much was true, but she hadn't meant to annoy him. It bothered her that it had, and it bothered her even more that she felt so conflicted over it.

"I'm sorry," she offered.

Ketch turned his head to give her a bright but oddly brittle grin. "No, you're not. Nor should you be. I told you, I'll be in touch." His look softened and he gave her a mock salute. "I'll be tracking Constance's movements in Chicago."

"OK," Mary said, feeling stupid. He produced his magical bag, pulled out his leathers and she watched him silently. "You know, Sam and Dean won't get here until tomorrow night."

He turned to look at her, his expression unfathomable. "Is that right?"

"Yeah," Mary said with a shrug. "So if you don't have to ride back to the city right now, we could… have a drink?"

A slow, seductive smile spread across his face. "That sounds capital. But if I drink, I'll have to stay the night. The Men of Letters frown on drinking and driving."

Mary gave him an arch look. "I'm sure a man of your talents can figure out a way to entertain yourself."

He laughed then, throwing back his head and letting his amusement flow through him. It was a magnificent sight. Mary swallowed, her decision catching at the back of her throat. Was she really going to go through with this?

"Come on, then," Ketch said, holding out a hand. "Let me buy you that drink."
"Hold up, Cas," Dean said as he hurried along the corridor leading to the garage. The angel turned and regarded him solemnly. "Look, are you OK, man?"

"I'm fine," Cas said stiffly.

"Really. That's why you just took Sam's head off for no reason." Dean gave Cas a severe look and the angel ducked his head in shame.

"Dean, I swore to protect you. Both of you. Going to investigate this waypoint is throwing yourselves into danger unnecessarily."

"I feel like I'm repeating myself but we do that all the freaking time. Seriously, Cas, how is this any worse than any of the crazy things we've done over the years?" Dean leaned into the angel's personal space unconsciously and hardly noticed how the angel seemed to lean in towards him too.

"Because Necropolis is more dangerous to your mind than anything you've ever encountered. Yes, you've faced any number of threats to your lives. But this isn't about a physical threat. Necropolis corrupts everyone it touches. Drives them mad. You want to know what I fear more than your death? This is it. You alive but no longer knowing who I am, who Sam is, who you are. No memories, just a shell." Cas was desperate, pleading with him.

Dean frowned at him. "Like uh… earlier this year."

"Exactly," Cas said emphatically, reaching out and grasping the hunter's shoulders. "Dean, I have to accept that one day you will die and I will be left here… alone. But seeing you descend into madness first? I don't know if I can survive that."

Dean frowned at him. "Like uh… earlier this year."

"I have to," Cas said. "I… I'm scared. Please, Dean, stay here. Let me investigate the waypoint first."

"What, so it's OK for me to deal with you coming back like Arariel did?" Dean said pugnaciously.

"I won't," Cas assured him.

"How can you possibly know that?" Dean growled.

Cas sighed and his shoulders slumped, his hands falling away. "I've been there before."

Dean's jaw dropped open in appalled shock. "What?"

"I've been to Necropolis before. More than once. I can counter its influence."

"I don't understand," Dean said. "Why didn't you mention this before?"

Cas rolled his eyes. "Because I didn't want Gabriel to know."

Utterly baffled now, Dean just gaped at the angel, his mouth opening and closing in astonishment. Cas sighed and raked a hand through his hair. "Were you ever planning on mentioning this?"
"I just did," Cas pointed out ruefully.

"Yeah, because I forced the issue," Dean snapped.

"No, I wasn't going to tell you," Cas admitted. "It didn't seem relevant."

Dean felt like his head was going to explode. "Didn't seem relevant?" he shrieked.

"No. Dean, you're overreacting." Cas said patiently.

"Damn it, Cas!" Dean blew out a breath and got his temper under control. "OK. Why?"

"Because I knew you'd react this way." Cas gave him a slight smile.

"No, why did you have to go to Necropolis?" The smile disappeared.

"I'd really rather not say."

Dean folded his arms and regarded the angel sternly. "Spill."

Cas closed his eyes. "To retrieve the Anima Licio of course."

Too much was happening all at once. Dean's head began to pound. "Is anything you've told us true?"

Cas swallowed. "Not much. Nobody knows except me and uh…" He looked sick. "Michael."

"Michael," Dean repeated, dazed.

"And now, finally, I understand," Gabriel's voice said acidly from behind Dean. " Fucking hell, Castiel."

Cas looked miserable, his face pale and drawn. "I know."

"I'm still confused," Dean confessed.

"The cards," Gabriel said angrily. "None of what we knew made sense. They were just way more powerful than anything a human could create, even one possessed by an archangel."

"You're saying Michael used that loom thing to create the creepy tarot cards of Doom?" Dean said disbelievingly.

"It's the only explanation that explains their power," Gabriel said tiredly.

"Yes," Cas said. "I wasn't sure until I actually saw them in action, but they are the cards Michael made."

"And you were just gonna keep all of this to yourself?" Dean's jaw jutted furiously as he glared at Cas.

"It didn't seem-"

"Relevant? Yeah, you're gonna have to come up with a better excuse than that."

"All right," Cas said. He sounded resigned. "Michael's not in the Cage."

Dean went white. "Is he still possessing Adam?"
Cas shook his head. "I don't know. Michael's been out for at least a year. He contacted me when we were trying to figure out how to battle Amara. He's weak after so long in the Pit. But like it or not, he's still my oldest brother and I owe him my allegiance."

"You're not serious," Dean said.

"I am," Cas said.

"So does this mean he's back in charge in Heaven?" Dean asked.

Cas shook his head. "He's in hiding. Only a few angels know he's out. He's concerned that appearing before the Host in his weakened state would be bad for morale."

"Bullshit," Gabriel said tartly. "It's all about his ego. So, what does Michael being out of the cage have to do with this?"

"Because he knows the cards are active. He doesn't know we have them. I haven't told him." Cas said, shamefaced.

"Look at you, trying to play both sides," Gabriel said. He raised one eyebrow at his brother.

"I'm not... That's not what I was trying to achieve. I don't know for sure what Michael wants the cards for. I was supposed to locate them and hand them over. I agreed to this before Sam got them from Magenta LaCroix. But once I saw them, I realized it wasn't a good idea to give them to Michael. That's it."

"So Michael wants the cards," Sam said, coming around the corner. "And you knew."

"We've been over that part," Dean said. "All right, I guess I understand. But I thought we'd agreed that secrets were bad?"

"Yes," Cas nodded. "You're right. But it wasn't really a secret at first. I just... didn't tell you. Then later, when I should have mentioned it, it seemed too hard to explain. I'm sorry." Dean clapped him on the shoulder.

"Wait, back up a step," Gabriel said. "You entered Necropolis to help Michael make the cards with Ashton LaCroix. I think we need to hear the whole story."

"Fine," Cas said. "I'll explain in the car."

Mary climbed out of bed and padded on bare feet into the bathroom. Ketch rolled over and breathed out steadily. She closed the door and stared at her reflection in the mirror. Sleeping with Ketch had not been smart, even if the man had been an inventive and attentive lover. She quivered at the memory of him slowly taking her apart and then shook her head to dismiss it. She turned on the shower and let the water heat up, jumping in as soon as it was tolerable. She washed with the quick efficiency she'd perfected when on the road with her dad, who had little tolerance for what he called needless fussiness over hygiene. Thoughts of her father brought a sting of tears to her eyes. She wondered what he would have made of all of this. He'd been right about one thing however. A hunter was always a hunter. You couldn't walk away, no matter how hard you tried. And if it was in your blood, like it was in hers, then it was your destiny.

The Men of Letters seemed to have a similar philosophy in many ways. They indoctrinated the kids very young, from what Mick and Ketch had told her. She'd been vaguely disapproving until Ketch had rather pointedly asked her how old she was when she killed her first monster. Since the answer
to that question was before her twelfth birthday, she'd grimaced at him and agreed that she was being a little hypocritical.

She climbed out of the shower and dried off on the thin hotel towels. She decided not to bother blow-drying her hair since that might wake Ketch and she'd like to sneak out while he was still asleep. But she was not lucky today, when she opened the bathroom door it was to see him fully dressed and sitting on the edge of the bed, checking his cellphone.

"Good morning," he said chirpily.

"Yeah," she said, not really agreeing but not wanting to make a scene. He quirked an eyebrow at her.

" Going somewhere?"

"I gotta get moving," she said. "Sam texted to say they'll get here in a few hours."

"And you want me long gone before they get here." It was not a question. Thankfully he didn't seem to be offended. "I understand. Let's go get breakfast and then I'll make myself scarce."

His phone buzzed and he looked down at it with a grimace. "Or not. I have to make a call." He dialed a number and held the phone up to his ear.

"Mick, what's up?" Mary tried not to look like she was interested in the conversation but the look on Ketch's face was rather disturbing. "You're not serious!" He exclaimed. "All right, I'll look into it." He hung up and gave Mary an apologetic grin.

"Something's happened."

"You could say that," Ketch said evasively. "It's not related to this case."

"You're sure?" Mary asked.

"Certain. How much do you know about varcolacs?"

Mary couldn't keep her shock off her face and Ketch blinked. "You've heard of them before."

"We killed one a few weeks ago, in Kentucky," she admitted. "We didn't know that's what they were at the time. We only figured it out later."

"They're supposed to be extinct," Ketch snarled. "And they're certainly not supposed to be slaughtering our agents in the field."

"What happened?"

"I don't know," Ketch said in frustration. "All Mick knew was that four agents were killed. One survived long enough to describe what attacked them."

"Where was this?" Mary wondered if she could get a message to the boys before they arrived.

"Florida. Deep in the Everglades. The team were there to track something else, Mick didn't specify. They were ambushed. I have to go immediately and put this thing down."

"It's not going to be easy," Mary said, remembering. "They're tough. I don't know if they have all the features of vampires, but I do know Dean shot the one we killed and it didn't even blink. He had to decapitate it in order to kill it."
Ketch gave her a wolfish grin. "I think I can manage that." He pulled on his jacket and strode towards the door. "I'll be in touch." Mary nodded, not trusting herself to say anything. She wasn't sure if she wanted to see him again or not.

"Come on, Cas," Dean coaxed. "Tell us about your little trip to Necropolis."

Cas shifted in the front seat and made an uncomfortable sound. "It was August 1982. Michael came to me and asked if I was willing to undertake a dangerous mission for Heaven, one I was never supposed to speak about. Of course, I agreed. I didn't know that Anna eavesdropped on the conversation, or that what she learned was part of why she chose to Fall."

"Wait," Dean said, blinking. "Anna knew about this?"

"Not all of it. Just that I was being sent to Necropolis to retrieve the Anima Licio. She disapproved." Cas's mouth drooped. "I guess she was right."

"So what happened?" Sam asked, leaning forward so he could hear.

"I entered the city alone. Michael and I agreed this would be the best way to avoid detection. I was surprised how easy it was to enter and pass unnoticed. I think my human vessel was a good enough disguise." Cas gave a slight smile. "James Novak Sr was an interesting man."

"Jimmy's dad?" Sam guessed and Cas nodded.

"I don't understand," Dean complained. "You and Gabriel said that Heaven sealed off Necropolis centuries ago. So who were you expecting to see there?"

Cas raised his eyebrows. "Nakhte and his followers were sealed inside the city. They've been there ever since."

"They're immortal?"

"No. Time has a different meaning in Necropolis. It's hard to explain." Dean waved him on. "As I mentioned, Necropolis twists and corrupts those who spend any time there. The people who had followed Nakhte into that place were no longer human as you would recognize them." Cas turned to stare out of the window. "Nevertheless, they didn't seem to recognize that I was not one of them. Perhaps the idea of anyone breaking in seemed too unlikely. I found Nakhte in the Fane with the Anima Licio. He was talking to it, and uh…" Cas paused as he grasped for the right word. "Petting it. It was a disturbing sight. He attacked me as soon as he heard me enter and we fought. I was injured but not severely and managed to make my escape with the Loom."

"So how did you resist Necropolis's influence?" Gabriel asked thinly.

"Michael believed that entering in my True Vessel offered some protection. And he linked our Graces together, providing me with a tether back to Heaven."

"Castiel!" Gabriel gasped, scandalized. Sam leaned back and stared at him, before meeting Dean's eyes in the rear-view mirror and shrugging his confusion.

"What's the problem?" Dean snapped.

"It's OK," Cas said. "Gabriel's right. What we did was forbidden. But it worked. My mind and Grace were unaffected by Necropolis's evil effects."
"Do I want to know why it is forbidden?" Dean sighed.

"Because it can be hard to separate the two angels once it's done," Gabriel snarled. "When Lucifer Fell, he took many of his followers with him because he'd linked his Grace with theirs. Angels who might have been redeemed were doomed to Fall. We tried to save them all but the link was too strong."

"So are you still linked to Michael then?" Dean asked. "How come he didn't drag you into the Cage?"

"No, the link was broken," Cas explained. He blinked rapidly and for a moment Sam was sure he might begin to cry. "By you."

"What?" Dean yanked the steering wheel over to the right and pulled the car onto the verge.

"When we met, in Hell, your soul wrapped around my Grace so tightly, you pushed everything else out. Including that link to Michael." Cas gazed earnestly at Dean, who couldn't look away. "It was incredible, I couldn't believe it was happening but you were insistent on stripping away anything that wasn't you or me."

Gabriel whistled in surprise, his eyes looking suspiciously moist. "That shouldn't have worked, you know," he commented.

"But it did," Cas asserted.

"I wonder why." Gabriel looked troubled now and Sam resisted the urge to reach out and touch him. "Perhaps because Dean is Michael's True Vessel?"

"That could make sense," Sam agreed. "But however it happened, doesn't this mean you wouldn't be protected if you entered Necropolis again?"

The angel frowned. "I hadn't considered it."

Dean thrust both of his hands into his hair in frustration. "So we're back at square one! It's no safer for you to go than any of us. Damn it, Cas."

"I'm sorry," the angel said miserably. "I was only trying to protect you."

"Well don't," Dean snapped. "I'm a big boy. I can take care of myself."

"Of course," Cas agreed meekly. But his eyes still flashed with defiance and Sam knew there'd be more trouble ahead.

Mary heard the distinctive throaty roar of the Impala as it pulled into the parking lot and got up to meet her boys. She was immediately aware of the tension between Dean and Castiel that suggested they'd been fighting. And to her disapproval, that Gabriel character was still hanging around too. Yes, she'd been grateful to him for what he'd done for Sam on Vancouver Island, but that didn't mean she trusted him.

"Sam, Dean," she said warmly, enfolding them both in a hug. She shook Cas's hand and then nodded politely to Gabriel. He seemed distracted and didn't notice her rudeness but Sam took on a pinched expression and his nostrils flared. She ignored it.

"I hope you're up for a hike," she said. "The trail is long and quite rough."
"We'll manage," Dean said. "How far is it?"

"It's a couple hours," she admitted. "We have plenty time to catch up. I can tell you what I found in Chicago and then you can explain what this business with the tarot cards is all about."

Dean nodded and they all listened as Mary led the out to the trail and began telling them about what she had found out about Constance McBride's activities. When she got to the Banes's speculation about nephilim and how that might tie into the midwifery course she was pursuing, Dean stopped her and pulled a face.

"You don't really take this idea seriously, do you?" he asked, looking vaguely nauseous.

"I don't know what to think," Mary told him. "If she needed an excuse to be near whatever the Hell it is I found behind that waterfall, nursing school really doesn't cut it. There are any number of ruses she could have used. So I have to think the courses are not just for show. Especially since she is not only showing up but getting good grades."

"Even if the nephilim theory is wrong, I think Max and Alicia are onto something," Sam commented. "If she's using human women for breeding purposes-" he paused as his gorge rose at the thought.

"All of Heaven would be in uproar if she were breeding nephilim," Cas rumbled. "We all hear it when one is created."

"Even in Necropolis?" Sam asked. Cas and Gabriel frowned at each other.

"I don't know," Cas said finally.

"Me either," Gabriel agreed. "It's not like we tested it out or anything."

"I'm not sure it matters," Mary interjected. "I think the breeding program part might be right." She pulled out piece of paper and handed it to Dean. "These are missing persons statistics on women of child-bearing age in Illinois. See how the numbers are really stable until last year when they increased over 400%!"

"How come this hasn't made the news?" Dean wondered.

Mary gave a soft sigh. "Because most of these women didn't have families or lots of friends making a fuss, as far as I can tell. And it's just diffuse enough across the state that nobody noticed, I guess. I had a real hard time even getting these numbers and the journalist who gave them to me wasn't sure how solid they were."

"I wonder if there are missing women from other states as well," Sam mused. "Especially those that have an Illinois border."

"It's possible," Mary agreed. "But getting the statistics is shockingly hard."

They had just turned a corner in the trail and a couple of hikers were coming the other way, breathing hard and sweat beading their faces. Mary smiled at them and they frowned.

"Today's not a good day to visit the falls," the man said, his bearded face drawn with concern.

"Oh?" Sam said.

The two hikers looked at each other and the woman nodded to her companion. "The light is just really bad in there today."
Certain there was something more to this, Sam shrugged. "Maybe the sun will come out later."

The couple exchanged another look. Eventually, the woman said, "Look, it's up to you. But we just got a really bad vibe out there, OK?" Without another word, they began walking again.

"Bad vibes," Dean repeated. "Awesome."

The waterfall was as lovely today as it had been when Mary had visited it with Ketch yesterday, and yet as the other hikers had reported, it did seem strangely gloomy even when the sun peeked out from behind the clouds. A shiver passed through her and she saw Sam and Dean do the same. Cas and Gabriel looked distinctly nervous and that made her antsy too.

"So, you said it was behind the waterfall?" Sam said doubtfully.

"Yeah," she said, pointing to the path that was almost completely hidden by bushes. "It's back here." They all followed her along the path behind the falls, sliding on wet rock and, in Dean's case, swearing under his breath.

The thrumming sound Mary had noticed yesterday was much louder today. It thudded against her skull like a migraine, making her feel dizzy and uncomfortable.

"What is that sound?" Sam groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I don't know," Mary said. "We heard it yesterday."

Dean's head whipped around like a snake. "We?"

"I wasn't the only person here," Mary said defensively, internally cursing her loose tongue. "There were other hikers too. Anyway, here are the carvings I found."

Gabriel and Cas both gasped. "This is no waypoint," Gabriel asserted. "It's the Gate."

"The Illini Gate," Cas agreed. "This must be where Arariel passed through into Necropolis."

"I wonder how he opened it," Gabriel mused, looking around for any other carvings. "There's no opening rune that I can see."

"It might be hidden," Cas said. "When I passed through the Kemet Gate, it was concealed behind a powerful glamor that my Grace couldn't penetrate. Michael was the only one who could see it."

"Hmm," Gabriel said, wandering away from the carvings and squinting at the rock walls. "With my Grace locked away, I don't know if I'll be able to find it."

"We're not gonna open this Gate are we?" Dean demanded.

"No," Gabriel said absently as he poked at a spot close to the floor. "I just wanted to know who had opened the Gate for Arariel. The list of suspects is not long but if we find the opening rune, we might be able to detect Luci's Grace, or Dagon's corruption or whatever."

"Is there a spell we can do that might help?" Mary asked.

"I don't think so," Cas replied. "Anything that can mask itself from my Grace is way too powerful to be revealed by witchcraft."

As the conversation continued behind him, Sam drifted closer to the carvings. His feet seemed almost to be dragging him there without his consciously deciding to move, until he was almost touching the
symbols. They seemed to dance in front of his eyes, a twisting, sinuous movement that called to him on some primitive level. In a trance-like state, he lifted his hand to trace the shapes and felt the tantalizing thrill of power just below the surface as he did. He'd almost completed the last rune when the sound of Gabriel's shocked voice penetrated the fog in his head.

"Sam! No!"

But whatever Gabriel had been attempting to prevent had already been set in motion. The headache-inducing thrumming sound got louder and more insistent and Sam realized that the carvings were glowing softly. And then they began to rotate around a central point which seemed to be receding into impossible distance until all Sam could see was a swirling gray-blackness that gaped in front of his eyes and he yearned for it. Without thinking, Sam tried to step forward, and only then did he realize that Dean, his mom and both angels were holding his arms and attempting to drag him away. He shook them off easily and leaped forward, unable to resist the siren song of the abyss. He felt something tug at his jacket and then everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

So here we are, at the end of book one. I'm going to take a break from this story for a few weeks while I work on other projects and return to it in the new year, with the follow-up The Necropolis Gate. In the meantime, have a lovely holiday season everyone and thanks to all of you who have kudos'd, commented and communicated privately with me. It really does help to know that people are reading and enjoying my work.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!