The Uncomfortable Adventures of Sam in Law School (continued)

by TigerLilyNoh

Summary

About the series format:
Originally this series was just going to be a collection of vignettes with little to no
overarching plot. However, a few works into it I started thinking up a story and the damned
thing grew legs and ran away. In hindsight I should've just made it all a single multi chapter
work, but in order to format it like that at this point I’d have to destroy all the kudos &
comments on the earlier works. Instead I’m just going to disregard uniformity of the series
and start the multi chapter work here. If you haven’t read parts 1-13, I definitely suggest
going back and doing so.

The Road So Far (so to speak):
Instead of going with Dean to look for their dad as he did in the pilot, Sam chose to stay at
school. It's gradually revealed that Sam's life hasn't gone as he'd hoped. Burdened with
significant emotional trauma, medical problems, the stress of school, potentially unhealthy relationships, & the reemergence of the supernatural in his life- Sam tries to figure out how to survive in his strange new world.

TRIGGER WARNINGS (previous & going forward):
Depression, Suicide/Suicidal thoughts, Child abuse, Emotional abuse, Homophobia
Sam rolled onto his side and groggily wrapped an arm around Stacy. Her fingers caressed down his abs in a distinctly suggestive manner, waking him up a bit. As he leaned in to kiss her there was a loud knock at his dorm room’s door. Sam looked over at the sound, then got up and slipped on his pajama pants before going to answer the door.

"I swear, he's always forgetting something." Sam complained aloud about Brady. Stacy shifted in the bed to take the warm spot Sam had just vacated. He opened the door expecting to find Brady without his key again, but he was so very wrong.

Dean & his dad were standing in the hallway. His dad's hair had started greying and there were a few aging scars that Sam didn't recognize, but for the most part dad was the same grizzled looking brute. Dean was tanned & leaner than Sam remembered with a highly trained unreadable face- he must've been concerned. Sam spotted what looked like a relatively recent burn peeking out below the cuff of Dean's right jacket sleeve.

Sam couldn't process their presence let alone his complex set of feelings. He wanted to throw punches or scream at them for turning their backs on him when he needed them most. He wanted to kick them out because he didn't need them in his life anymore. He wanted his big brother to give him a hug and tell him that they were alright. But before he could think of how to react, his dad stepped past him into his dorm room.

Stacy was fully awake in an instant. She grabbed the pillow she'd been using and tried to cover her naked body with it while scrambling off the edge of mattress to hide between the bed & the wall. Furcifer hissed at the sight of the two hunters, then ran under the bed. Everyone blushed from the encounter, but embarrassment was incredibly low on the list of emotions smothering the moment. Sam sidestepped to stand defensively between his family & Stacy.

"Sorry, we didn't know you had company." Dean offered, following their dad in with less confidence. He nearly reached out to tap his dad’s arm to get his attention, but John had taken another uninvited step further into the room.

"You're right you didn't know." Sam said as he looked at his dad’s invasion of his personal space. "Get out."

"Sam, we need to talk." His dad started.

"You can't just show up anytime you like and expect me to just be cool with it." Sam told his dad & Dean.

"Sam," Stacy called out, peeking from behind the bed. "I should go."

"You stay, they go."

"I still really want my clothes."

Sam nodded at the perfectly reasonable request, then grabbed her red dress from the floor and tossed it to her. She caught it one handed, before clumsily trying to slip on the little dress without getting her breasts or ass more than two feet off the ground. Sam moved so that Dean & their dad could
look at him without incidentally staring at Stacy getting dressed.

"I didn't know you had a girlfriend." Dean commented.

"That's debatable." Stacy muttered, then asked Sam. "Who are these guys?"

"My dad & brother."

Stacy froze, terrified by the presence of two hunters. All she knew about them was that their kind sought out and killed her kind. That was their life’s work. As far as she was probably concerned she was in an incredibly dangerous situation, with two killers between her and the only exit. In Sam's opinion, that was all the more reason to get Dean & his dad out of there.

Before Sam could tell them to leave again he noticed Dean's eyes taking a quick pass at the room. It was a normal impulse, but their dad's eyes noticeable lingered on a few things, staring in a more intrusive way. Sam glanced around his shoulder to see what his dad was looking at. The small table had a baggie of weed along with several pill bottles. The nightstand had an open bottle of lube and box of condoms. The drugs were a potential argument waiting to happen, but at least there wasn't anything remotely magic related.

"Excuse me, who the fuck are you two?"

Brady had returned from his shower in the coed bathroom down the hall. He was wearing a towel wrapped around his waist and stood in the doorway staring at the two strange men who were loitering just inside the door while Stacy was trying to discreetly get dressed.

"His dad & brother, what's it to you?" John responded in a tone that bordered on a growl.

"Brady, don't. I'm handling this." Sam tried to covertly ask for him to not make a scene.

Brady pushed his way into the room, which visibly confused Dean & John. The nearly naked Brady leaned over, grabbing a stocking from the floor and tossed it to Stacy. Sam noticed Dean's eyes widened slightly at the act that hinted at familiarity- maybe even intimacy. Dean put his hand on their dad's arm. Sam could almost see the pieces clicking into place in his brother's head.

"We should come back later." Dean suggested.

"Next time try calling first." Brady said as he collected his own clothes from the floor. "His number's been the same for like five years."

"Who in the fuck do you think you are?" John asked, offended by Brady's own indignation.

"His boyfriend," Brady responded without hesitation. Sam's heart was hammering in his chest. "and you'd know that if you two ever returned his fucking calls."

John stepped toward Brady, but Sam & Dean both moved to stop him. Dean pulled their dad back while Sam prevented Brady from taking a step toward John. There wasn't any doubt in Sam's mind that Brady had meant to provoke a fight, some long fantasized about opportunity to rescue Sam. Unfortunately, Brady didn't have any idea he wasn't antagonizing a trained killer. No one said anything for an uncomfortable moment, though Furcifer growled.

"Don't help, not right now." Sam suggested to Brady, before looking back at his dad. "We can talk, but not here."

"We drove 20 hours straight to get here-" John started.
"I don't care. We talk outside."

"We need to talk about a private thing."

"I'm not gonna be alone with you-"

Sam didn't actually expect for their to be a physical fight, but the idea of being alone with his dad & brother scared him a little. He could see himself feeling trapped again- maybe having an anxiety attack depending on where the conversation went.

"Nothing's gonna happen." Dean tried to reassure him.

"I'm not gonna be alone with you." Sam restated firmly. "So either we can go for a walk around campus or we don't talk, but either way you're leaving right now."

"Sam, we don't want to-"

"The police station is like a block away." Sam warned. "You don't want me to call the cops."

"You move to California and suddenly you're gay?" His dad said as soon as the three of them were outside.

Of course his dad would dwell on the relationship with Brady. He always been casually homophobic on the outside, so who knew what it meant for what was happening below the surface. Sam was fairly certain that his dad knew about bisexuality, so the fact that he'd ignored the naked Stacy being in Sam's bed by calling Sam gay was alarming. There was either some tunnel vision or blind ignorance at play, neither of which boded well.

"What do you want?" Sam tried to get them directed toward something other than his sex life.

"Someone claiming to be your doctor left a message saying you were sick." Dean explained.

"It's nothing."

"It didn't sound like nothing."

"She said there's something wrong with your head-" Sam closed his eyes & pursed his lips to prevent himself from making a face at the dismissive explanation of his medical problems.

"I get migraines."

"Is there anything else?"

"I can take care of myself."

"Is there anything strange going on?"

Sam couldn't think for a moment, completely blindsided by the question. Dean & his dad weren't just checking in on him because they were concerned about his health, they were investigating a lead on some job. Somehow he'd been dragged into a monster hunt and it involved his own family. His body was shaking, the adrenaline was kicking in for some sort of fight or flight response. He took a step backwards, away from them.

"Sammy-" Dean shifted his weight, but didn't take a step toward him.
“Don't call me Sammy.”

“Sam, there are people- your age, like you, that can- well...” Dean glanced around to make sure there weren't any passersby within earshot. "They all..."

"Can see the future?"

"No." Dean & their dad stared at Sam with somewhat candid surprise. "They can do all sorts of stuff.”

“You're some kind of psychic?” John asked. Sam looked at his dad anxiously, but didn't answer. “Do you have any idea how-”

John stopped himself from finishing the question. Sam could hear the critic & strategist in his dad's voice. His dad was probably tripping over himself trying to decide whether it was some tool they could use or whether Sam was even more of a screw up- hell, at this point he probably qualified as a full on abomination in his dad's eyes.

"Why didn't you tell us?” Dean asked, verbally sidestepping whatever fight their dad had almost gotten them into. Damage control had always been Dean's specialty.

"Why didn't I tell you? Who the hell are you two to me?” Sam's voice shook a bit, but then his voice started rising with anger. “You didn't return my calls. You couldn't come when Jess died- but now you come running for the freak show.”

"Sam, you need to come with us.” John stated. Dean's jaw clenched at the poorly timed demand.

"I'm not going anywhere. I have a life here.” Sam crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"If you care about these people you'll leave.” Dean tried to reframe the situation. “The others, they were killing people.”

“The others?” Sam’s mouth hung open a bit, stunned by a thought. “You found some of them?”

“We can talk about it in the car.” John said as he took a step toward Sam. He didn't want to talk about it in public.

“You're killing them.” Sam recoiled.

“Sammy-” Dean started.

“Don't you fucking call me Sammy!”

“They were killing people.” Dean spoke in a hushed voice, trying to get Sam to lower his own.

"Are you & dad gonna lock me up- or put me down?” Sam was shaking. “You really think taking me away from my friends is gonna be a good thing. Them I like, you two are the ones I'd go borderline homicidal on."

“That isn't funny.”

“Do I look like I'm laughing?” Sam spoke in a particularly cold tone.

Sam stared at the two of them watching him. Dean looked so tense that he was liable to spontaneously snap a tendon. Their dad was trying to keep a calm exterior, but Sam could read his little tells- chewing his lower lip, clenching & unclenching his hands by his sides, lifting his head to
try mitigating the psychological effect of Sam's height advantage- he was pissed.

"Sam, we can fix this. We'll get you help." Dean told him, again trying for some positive spin.

"For what? My visions don't hurt anyone. I've never hurt anyone." Sam huffed at a thought. "Or do you mean Brady?"

"I-" Dean started to answer, but John cut him off.

"You need to stop screwing around around this second." John ordered. "You're confused. This isn't you, it's this place-"

"Please, I've blown guys in half the states in the country." Sam shot back. John slapped him in the face. Dean's eyes widened and he took a half step toward John. Sam nearly took a swing at his dad, but managed to stop himself. "Don't you ever touch me again."

"Listen here you little shit. I didn't raise you to be some sort of back talking faggot."

"You didn't fucking raise me. You weren't even there-" John hit Sam in the face again, this time with a closed fist. Sam thought about trying to dodge, but he let it happen. Dean balled his fist, but he didn't swing at anyone when he saw that Sam wasn't turning the punch into a full on brawl.

"You think you're so tough & smart... I bet that one's gonna leave a bruise." Sam said coldly. He could feel that special calmness that came with a combat high, but he wasn't dumb enough to fight with his fists. "That's assault, that's two years in county. You know with the whole homophobic comment there's also a hate crime adder in California of up to three years and I can get a restraining order, but I won't need one. You committed the battery on school grounds during its normal hours of activity, you have no fucking clue how bad an idea that was. By the way, welcome to the Silicon Valley, where there are security cameras everywhere."

Sam waved a hand around indicating who knew how many small black glass domes affixed to nearby walls & poles. Dean subtly cringed and their dad narrowed his eyes as Sam continued.

"I can have you arrested and your car searched without a warrant. How's that gonna go for you? Possession of a sawed off shotgun is a violent felony in California- I wonder how many you're packing. The fraudulent credit cards in your wallet are a felony. Do you still take Vicodin without a prescription for your that slipped disc? Because believe it or not, but that's a felony. Between the illegal guns & drugs, it'll easily trigger the Armed Career Criminal Act sentence enhancement automatically adding a minimum of 15 years to your sentence. And if you were counting, that's also at least three felonies, including one violent felony, which would trigger California’s Three Strikes law, adding 25 years to the sentence… In total, it looks like you'd be getting out of state prison maybe somewhere in the ballpark of 95 years old.

And if you think there's a chance in hell that you wouldn't get the book thrown at you, well, I have X-rays showing dozens of fractures from when I was a minor that weren't professionally set. So, I'm gonna say this one last time- Don't you ever touch me again."

"You wouldn't." John’s voice wasn't nearly as commanding.

"I thought I wouldn't either, but then you came to my home, harassed me & my friends, and you hit me repeatedly. Now I just want you gone and I don't honestly give a fuck where you go to."

The left side of Sam's face was hot & throbbing, undoubtedly starting to swell a bit. He paused a beat to see if Dean or their dad would try to argue with him, but neither did. John was equal parts fuming & unsure what to do with himself. Meanwhile Dean had turned slightly green.
“Dean can visit, you can even call in an emergency, but if you ever show up uninvited again I will immediately throw you to the fucking wolves.” Sam told his dad, trying to use however much of their shocked vulnerability he had left. “Now I'm going to go back to my place, where my boyfriend will spend the whole day trying to do whatever he can to make me feel better. Congratulations, you've accidentally helped me get some fabulous gay sex.”

Sam flipped his dad off, then walked back to his dorm room. It took all his willpower not to look back.

Sam took a moment to collect himself outside the door to his dorm room. He reached up to check the damage from the punch to his face. The skin high on his left cheekbone & around his eye was definitely starting to swell. He cringed at the mild pain the contact caused, but also what was about to happen.

He pulled some of his shaggy hair in front of his face, looked down at the floor, then opened the door. Brady & Stacy were both dressed, sitting on the bed talking. When he entered they looked up expectantly, but he didn't go toward them. Instead Sam started digging through his small freezer, collecting a handful of ice cubes to put in a towel wrapped baggie.

“No.” Brady said in some unconscious expression of disbelief as he got up from the bed and hurried over to him. Of course the medical student would recognize what he was up to. Brady gently brushed the hair away from Sam's face and froze. Brady's normal lightheartedness completely drained from his face.

“Brady-” Sam started.

“Those fucking! I'm gonna-” Brady yelled, completely enraged.

“Don't- Don't go out there.” Sam sidestepped to block Brady from heading toward the door.

“What one of them hit you?”

“Stop.” Sam grabbed Brady's arms.

“I'm not gonna let them-”

“Just stop!” Sam's left eye was killing him, the tears on his tender skin wasn't helping. Brady stopped struggling against him to get out the door and looked back at Sam. “Please just stay here with me.”

Brady embraced him and Sam clung to him for a long while. After nearly a minute, Stacy appeared at Sam's elbow with the ice bag. He accepted it, holding it to his face for a bit. Brady led him to the bed, then helped him lay down.

“How's your head feel?”

“I have a slight headache, but I get headaches a lot.”
“Did you have it before you got hit?”

“I don't remember.” Brady's lips thinned at his answer.

“What'd you do right before you came back to your room just now?”

Sam nearly rolled his eyes at Brady's attempt to check his memory. It was a normal sort of test after a head injury, but it was still a little annoying. Despite the hit being pretty on point, he'd had worse.

“I threatened to have my dad arrested.” Sam answered. Brady nodded in an unreadable sort of way, then continued asking questions.

“Who was with your dad?”

“Dean.”

“What was I doing that made it so I wasn't here when your dad & Dean arrived?”

“What?”

“I wasn't here when your dad & Dean arrived. Do you remember where I was?”

Sam paused, trying to recall what had happened. Brady had come into the room wrapped in a towel, so he'd probably just taken a shower. He might've been asleep when Brady had left, but somehow he'd known that Brady was going to be right back- He couldn't quite sort out how he knew certain pieces of information. That was a bad sign.

“Can you take me to the hospital?” Sam asked quietly.

“Come on, we’ve got you.”

Brady drove while Stacy sat in the back seat with Sam in order to keep an eye on him. The drive to the hospital wasn't very long, but it felt like an agonizingly slow process. He couldn't tell if he was misperceiving time or if it was his fear dragging the minutes out- fear that there might be something wrong with him, fear about what a concussion might mean for his powers or possibly legitimate neurological condition- fear that maybe his dad had been watching for him to leave his dorm and was following them to the hospital.

Sam was pretty sure that Brady could sense his fear. After Sam checked in with the receptionist at the Emergency Room, Brady held his hand while they sat in the waiting area. About a half hour into their wait, Brady stepped outside for a few minutes to make a quick phone call, but as soon as he was done attending to whatever urgent matter Brady resumed his position- holding Sam's hand, head resting on Sam's shoulder, providing Sam with a headrest in turn.

When the nurse came out to get Sam she insisted on taking him back by himself. At first Sam thought it was because he & Brady weren't registered domestic partners, then he figured out what the actually concern was. After separating him from Brady, the nurse asked a series of questions designed to coax out whether Brady had been the one to hit him. He assured her that it had been someone else, but he didn't want to say who. She didn't seem convinced, though she didn't press the issue.

Unsurprisingly, he was diagnosed with a concussion and was prescribed several days of bed rest with casual monitoring by friends. Brady took them back to Sam's dorm room after Sam rejected the idea of staying at Brady's apartment for a few days. During the processing of discharge paperwork and the drive home, Sam had compelled Brady & Stacy to ask him questions meant to probe for any
other gaps in his memory. They hadn't found anything beyond a few minutes just before his family had shown up, with a little fuzziness before & after. When they got back into the dorm room, Sam let Brady undress him and get him into bed. He didn't think he needed that degree of help, but he was too tired to fight for some sort of dignity.

The next morning there was a knock at the door. Stacy had gone home with some vague promise of returning with some family recipe folk medicine that Sam had understood to mean some sort of magical healing. It had only been a few hours since Stacy had left, hardly enough time to get up to her place & back, let alone to make a potion- though maybe healing potions were the sort of thing witches just kept in case of emergencies. Brady put a hand on Sam's chest, to keep him from getting up. Brady grabbed his hoodie, then started to get up to put on some pants and get the door.

"It's Dean- just me. Can we talk?"

Brady started moving with new agitated purpose, but Sam lunged from the bed, grabbing Brady's arm. The sudden movement made Sam a bit dizzy and it was probably visible based on the way Brady hastily tried to brace him. Brady's face was screwed up in a wavering scowl as he looked back & forth between Sam & the door.

"It wasn't him." Sam told Brady. "Don't- please, don't do anything."

Brady nodded, though he was clearly too upset to risk using words -always a bad sign with Brady. He made sure that Sam was settled in bed again before putting on his pants and opening the door.

Dean stared at Brady before looking at Sam, who was seated up in the bed. When Dean saw Sam's visibly injured face he subtly planted his feet, probably in anticipation of Brady trying to tackle him. After waiting a second or two, Dean cautiously entered the room. Dean pulled up a folding chair to be near Sam's side of the bed.

Sam was suddenly uncomfortably aware that he was naked, lower body covered by a blanket, but clearly naked. Brady climbed back onto the bed to sit beside Sam- well, less beside and more behind. Brady wrapped his arms around Sam and kissed his neck just below the ear. The act of affection was undoubtedly meant to antagonize Dean, a display of male-male affection as well as some strange way of showing Brady's possessory interest. Sam supposed it wasn't as bad as it could've been- Brady could've easily slid a hand below the blanket. To his credit Dean only momentarily averted his eyes.

"Can we have a little privacy?" Dean asked.

"No." Brady answered for Sam and unconsciously tightened his hold. "He's hurt and you aren't gonna-"

"Brady." Sam gently pulled Brady's arms away from him. "It's okay."

"I'm not gonna hurt him. I've never touched him." Dean offered, thankfully being sensitive to Brady's concerns. "I just want to talk."

"Talking can do plenty of damage." Brady replied in a nearly venomous tone.

"Please." Sam squeezed Brady's hand. "I'll be fine."

Brady kissed Sam on the lips before getting up to leave. As he walked by Dean he intentionally let the right zipper of his hoodie swing wide and hit Dean in the face. For a split second Sam was ready to jump in to break up a fight, but Dean only pursed his lips at the slight.
“Your boyfriend’s kinda a dick.” Dean commented as soon as they were alone.

“Unlike you, he's not used to seeing me with a black eye.” Sam jabbed.

“That's not fair.”

“It feels pretty fair.”

They sat there staring at each other for several seconds. Sam wasn't sure whether to bring up the concussion, but decided against it. Despite his private reserve & public immaturity, Dean was actually a very clever person with plenty of experience with concussions. He'd probably recognized the possible injury as soon as the punch had landed. Except for the need to wrangle their dad, Sam would've liked to think that Dean would've taken him to the hospital himself. But that assumption was based on a person Sam hadn't known for roughly six years.

"When did you change your name?” Dean asked, breaking the unpleasant silence.

"The first few weeks."

At the time he'd been too upset with his dad & Dean to endure hearing the name Winchester on a regular basis. He changed it to his mom's maiden name, Campbell. It wasn't his favorite, but he wasn't quite prepared to make something up. Back when he was thinking of proposing to Jessica, he'd planned on taking her name, Moore, but that hadn't happen. The idea of eventually taking Brady's last name was knocked out because Brady was actually a surname- his boyfriend's given name was Tyson. It'd be too damn confusing to be named Sam Brady.

“It made it harder to find you.” Dean commented.

“That's not why I did it.” Sam clarified. “I could've been really easy to find if you’d just called me and asked where I was.”

“We both know you wouldn't have seen us.”

“I would've agreed to meet with you.” The unspoken exclusion of their dad hung in the air for a moment.

Dean pursed his lips slightly, possibly realizing that he'd misjudged their relationship. It wasn't as damaged as he'd believed- or at least it hadn't been until he'd showed up unannounced. Now Sam wasn't sure how to feel about the situation.

“We need to talk about how we're gonna deal with this psychic thing.” Dean pushed ahead to the reason why they'd come to begin with rather than risk being dragged into a moment of vulnerability.

“We aren't gonna deal with anything. It's my situation and I'm handling it.” Sam replied firmly. “I'm not about to throw away my whole life because of your & dad’s knee jerk reaction to me being a bi psychic.”

“Like I care if you fuck guys.” Dean muttered, then quickly added. “ Fucking dickbags is something else.”

“Wait-” Sam replayed Dean's words in his head. After last night he wasn't expecting to get anything positive out of their interaction. “You aren't mad about the bi thing?”

“Please, I've known for over a decade that you like guys.” Dean rolled his eyes slightly. “If anything it was the girl that was surprising.”
“How’d you know?”

“I went to pick you up from school when you were in eighth grade. I saw you kissing some boy behind the gym.”

“You didn't say anything.”

“What's there to say?” Dean shrugged with a false casualness, but didn't make eye contact.

“That it was okay. That you wouldn't-” Sam pursed his lips, unable to speak through the tightness in his throat.

“You were fine-”

“You knew that wasn't true.” Sam whispered. “You're such a fucking liar.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I used to think I knew.” Sam replied. “Distance comes to mind.”

“You know I can't go back to dad telling him to back off unless I can say that you have things under control.”

“And you realize how hopeless any attempt to take me against my will-”

“We aren't gonna fucking kidnap you.” Dean said a little offended by the thought. “It was hard enough keeping you in the car when you were five.”

Dean wanted Sam to convince him that things weren’t as bad as they seemed. Sam wasn’t sure how to do that without outing all the witches that he knew. He didn’t know just how much he could tell Dean and trust that it wouldn’t come back to bite him- either through their dad finding out or Dean taking some sort of brotherly initiative on his own. Sam decided to evade the issue, at least until he knew just how devoted a son he was these days.

“You don’t have to do everything he says.” Sam revived the years dead conversation. “If you want out, I know people here. I could help you get a job-”

“Don't.” Dean held up his hand. “I'm not quitting-”

“It's not quitting-”

“Just stop!” Dean snapped, breaking his cool exterior. Clearly the topic was something that he thought about- or maybe pointedly avoided thinking about.

“Don't you want to be something more than a killer?” Sam tried one more appeal.

“You know what I want? What I've always wanted?” Dean was trying to calm himself down. “All I ever wanted was to for you & dad to be safe- how was I supposed to do that when you both were fighting all the time?”

“You never sided with me.” Sam pointed out, voice little more than a whisper.

“How would that've gone?”

“For me? Better.”
“Yeah, well, I wanted you to leave.”

Dean’s words hit Sam harder than any punch. Sam had to place his hand on the mattress to help steady himself. He wasn’t sure how to process the statement. Dean was distant, but Sam had always assumed that the two of them had gotten along. On some level Dean had to care about him otherwise he wouldn’t have kept Sam’s secret about liking guys for four years- actually a decade based on their dad’s surprised reaction. Before Sam could think of what to say to something like that, Dean continued.

“At least if you were gone you’d be safe and I didn’t have to worry about… well, this.” Dean gestured at Sam's black eye. “And it turns out you aren't even safe. I don’t know which is more dangerous, you going with us or you staying here.”

“I’m sick no matter where I am, at least here I don’t have to watch out for dad.” Dean pinched the bridge of his nose at the statement.

“It’s not just being sick. There’s something going on with those other kids with powers. We think you might end up in danger, that’s why we came to take you somewhere where we can control the situation.”

“You & dad don't get to control me anymore, to tell me what to do for my own good.” Sam countered. “This is my fight and you can offer me your help, but I get to make the calls.”

“Sam, you've been out of the fight for years. You're sick. You're surrounded by civilians.” Dean sighed. “Whatever this is, it's big and you're weak.”

“You haven't been in my life for six years.” Sam’s voice had turned cold. “You have no idea what I am, but I promise it's not weak.”

“That's not what I meant-”

“You know, I really wanted to forgive you.” Sam groaned. “Christ, you always make things so hard.”

“I meant physically-”

“Can't you just say you're sorry? Just fucking apologize for once instead being so concerned with defending yourself?” Sam asked. “I'll forgive you and then we can pretend things aren't so fucking awful.”

“I'm sorry.” Dean offered after a painfully long silence. “About more than just calling you weak.”

“I forgive you, about more than just the ‘weak’ thing.”

Honestly, in that moment more than anything Sam wanted to hug Dean, but he knew that wasn't in the cards. It was an exceptional rare occurrence in general, not to mention the fact that Sam was technically naked. Sam self-consciously readjusted the blanket around him to make sure he was amply covered. The act killed any sort of sentimentality between them and Dean looked around the room while changing the subject.

“What's the deal with this psychic thing?”

“I get these visions of things that are going to happen- well, that might happen. I stopped one from happening, so they aren't guaranteed or anything.” Sam explained. “It’s mostly people dying. I didn’t know what they were for about a year and a half. I just thought I'd snapped or something.
Too many years of seeing what we saw finally come back to kick my PTSD into overdrive.”

“You have PTSD?” Dean’s eyes widened subtly, but he didn’t make any faces betraying judgment.

“I’ve been doing better lately. I really like my therapist.” Sam stopped himself from suggesting that Dean find a therapist. At the very least hopefully just knowing that Sam saw one had destigmatized it slightly. He decided to turn the conversation back to something Dean was probably more comfortable with. “Tell me about your leads.”

“Dad & I have been working with a hunter named Gordon Walker. We met him about a year ago. We were investigating a demon- dad thinks it might’ve killed mom.” Sam’s curiosity was piqued by mention of a demon, but he was completely floored by the mention of their mom. They never talked about Mary- Sam had only ever heard his dad mention her during the occasional evening of intoxicated lamenting. Evidently Dean had been working the case long enough to forget the earth shattering nature of anything having to do with either demons or their mom because he continued without elaboration. “Gordon was going after another thing that kept intersecting with us. He asked us to help him with a hunt. When we got to the town there was already something going on- it was like a virus that infected people, made them crazy & violent. The virus was demonic.”

“There's a demonic virus out there-”

“We contained it.” Dean replied with his professional tone that always made Sam uncomfortable.

“You killed them.” Sam speculated. When Dean didn't respond Sam moved on. “Was that when you killed the guy tied to the chair? The one who said that something wasn’t in him.”

“What?”

Dean’s composure cracked. He scooted his chair back a few inches, but didn’t take a defensive posture. Sam realized that Dean had no idea what his visions actually looked like. To Dean he’d just been talking about some random encounter and Sam had spontaneously known some intimate detail about it. Under different circumstances Sam might try to mess with Dean, but there was too much potential for harming their fragile relationship.

“I saw it, in one of my visions. I didn't know it was a psychic vision back then.” Sam shook his head. “That must’ve been mid-December.”

“We wasted them in early January.” Dean stared at him, visibly unnerved by the range of Sam’s power.

“I tried calling.” Sam covered his face with his hands, accidentally touched the injury, then put his hands down. He’d halfheartedly tried to reach out to Dean after the vision- if he’d known it was really and that there was potentially time to stop it he would’ve done more. Maybe lives could’ve been saved. “God, I feel like I might throw up.”

Dean picked up a trash can and passed it to him. Sam rested his forehead on the rim of the metal container. Thankfully there weren’t any used condoms or other pungent contents to encourage vomiting.

“A few weeks later we found out what Gordon was hunting.” Dean continued. “People in their late teens to mid twenties, with powers, most of them with a parent that had died in a nursery fire when they were exactly six months old.”

Sam lifted his head up from the trash can to stare at Dean. Ever since finding out about that he had some supernatural aura he’d been concerned about the possibility of hunters or something similar
coming after him. Now he knew that he was part of a larger group of people, who really were being hunted. Through some blind luck he had changed his name after moving to the fringes of hunter territory- or at least far from where all the Midwest & rural hunters ventured. He might be harder to find than the average person, but he couldn't let his guard down.

“Does he know about me?”

“Not as far as I know. If I'd known you were having psychic visions I'd have just killed Gordon right there & then.” Dean sighed. “Now I've gotta go find the guy again.”

“He's not the kind you can talk out of things?” Sam asked, causing Dean to just shake his head. Sam rubbed his face, carefully avoiding his eye. “I can't believe this whole mess could be that old-when I was only six months.”

“What?”

“Something gave me these powers, the same as them. The fires can't be a coincidence. Maybe it did it when we were babies?” Sam mused. He briefly considered telling Dean about the demonic mark on his soul and the whole mess with the many Hells, but he didn’t want Dean to get startled. The last thing he needed was for Dean to suddenly decide that their dad was right and that Sam was in over his head- Well, Sam wasn’t about to argue that he had the situation tidily in hand, but at least he was the best person to try pulling it all out of a nosedive. “I'm trying to figure out what happened. I've been looking online-”

“You gotta be careful with that.”

“I am careful-”

“I know you are, but I'm serious.” Dean pursed his lips. “Gordon works with other hunters on this stuff. And I don't think they're the kind to give you a pass on account of you being a- that you used to be a hunter.”

“How does he find them?” Sam asked, both hoping to figure out how to protect himself and to use the method himself to locate the people from his visions.

“I don't know. I guess I'll have to find out before I kill him. I'll let you know if I can get anything out of him.” Dean shifted in his seat. “I know you don't li-tolerate the killing much. Me killing Gordon and his buddies, is this gonna be a problem for you?”

“He's killing people and he'll try to kill me…” Sam found that variable being removed from the equation hard to argue against. “I appreciate the help.”

“Don't thank me yet. I haven't done anything.”

“Even just the intel is helpful.”

“I'll keep you updated.” Dean assured. They stared at each other for a few seconds, not sure where to go after just discussing Dean's intention to murder someone.

“I have to ask for a big favor from you… I don't even know how to…” Dean raised an eyebrow while Sam took a moment to consider his resolve. “If dad touches Brady I'll kill him. I'm not even exaggerating. If he tries to hurt Brady… I need you to make him understand that that's a line he can't cross.”

“You're serious?” Dean's mouth hung open slightly in disbelief at Sam’s threat- hell, Sam could
barely believe it.

“I'm not gonna let him mess up anything else that I care about.” Sam explained. “I couldn't take it if...”

“Are you two serious?” Dean clearly wasn't thrilled by the possibility.

“I think maybe yeah. We've been on & off for a few years.”

“Does he treat you right?”

“He worships the ground I walk on.”

“Damn well better.” Dean muttered, then his gaze settled on the bruising around Sam's left eye. “He takes care of you?”

“Yeah.” Sam assured. “He's a med student, very nurturing for a dickbag.”

Sam let a little smile spread across his face to show Dean that he was trying to lighten the mood. Dean tilted his head from side to side in acknowledgment of his earlier undue insult to Brady, but he didn't actually apologize.

“Are you really sick?” Dean asked after a moment. “Not the concussion- I mean the brain thing that your doctor called us about.”

“I don't know. With the psychic thing it's hard to know where one stops and the other begins.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“I don't think so.” Sam replied reflexively, then sighed. “There's one thing I was... if... God, this is awkward.”

“You can't have my kidney.” Dean offered to make Sam smile.

“Nothing so serious.” Sam replied despite it being a lie. “...I have Brady listed as primary on my advanced healthcare directive- so if I can't make medical decisions he can decide for me, but with the two of us being guys and we aren't... I don't know how well that'd hold up if dad fights it. I've got you listed as the backup in case Brady gets blocked out. If it comes to it, please do what Brady thinks is right.”

Dean stared at him with a stillness that Sam recognized as fear. If there had been any minuscule doubt that Dean was listening to him before, it was gone. He wasn't prepared to hear Sam talk about his living will- Sam was barely prepared to voice his concern that it might become necessary at some point. Dean took a long while to process what Sam had said. Sam appreciated that he wasn't reacting on impulse with something as important as this.

“You're asking me to side with some guy I don't like over dad?” Dean finally asked.

“I'm asking you to respect my decisions if it comes to it.”

Stacy's “holistic medicine” wasn't an instant fix by any means, and that was probably for the better. It would've been hard to explain away unnaturally effective healing to someone with a specialization in pharmacology. Though Sam thought that Brady had periodically seemed so distracted since getting back from the hospital that maybe he wouldn't have noticed at all. Despite not resolving the black eye, the chalky potion that Stacy gave him had stopped his concussion symptoms and
eliminated the lingering pain.

Once the swelling had gone down on the second day, Sam had allowed himself to be dragged to the mall by Stacy. He wasn't really one for shopping- that usually required disposable income, but he decided sacrifices had to be made. The bruise on his cheek and circling his eyes had turned purple with a thin sickly yellow green bordering it. In general he didn't care about bruises, but he didn't want the injury to come to the attention of Dr. Neves, or his very concerned professors, the student services faculty- basically anyone who might attempt to investigate.

He'd never worn makeup before, but he supposed there was a first time for everything. Stacy had tiptoed around the word “makeup” and instead only referred to it as “color corrector” or “concealer”. When he assured her that he wasn't embarrassed her face lit up like a child on Christmas morning- or at least how he had seen it on tv. He briefly considered backsliding a bit on his professed comfort with the makeup experiment when he saw Stacy immediately grab a shopping basket.

“You can't see the bruise unless you're really looking for it.” Stacy offered as she hovered beside the saleswoman, who was doing a demonstration on Sam. The saleswoman held up three tubes of lipstick for Stacy to choose from- definitely a mauve. Stacy nodded in approval as the lipstick was applied, then continued. “I can help you with the concealer until you get the hang of it- or any of the other makeup too.”

“You know, just because I like men doesn't mean I'm effeminate.” Sam commented before pressing his lips on a folded tissue at the saleswoman’s instruction.

“Wait till you see yourself.” Stacy replied, then grabbed some eyeshadow from a nearby display and handed it to her accomplice. “When we're done I can take a picture of you in full glam and you can text it to your dad. Show him what that punch in the face turned into.”

“No thanks.”

“Picture of you in makeup with Brady's dick crammed halfway down-”

The saleswoman jerked slightly, smudging the eyeliner.

“Listen you need to back off.”

Sam could hear Brady talking to someone in his dorm room. He opened the door in a minor panic at the thought that maybe his dad or Dean had come back. Instead he saw Brady staring down at Furcifer, who was looking up at him with an expression of equal annoyance. Both Brady & Furcifer turned to see Sam walk in.

“What's going on?” Sam asked. His heart was racing from the left over adrenaline and newfound concern that Furcifer might pull something.

“Your cat got in here again. And he's being aggressively affectionate.” Brady replied, but Furcifer let out a little huff before hopping onto the bed to watch them in comfort.

“He's not my cat”

“Unless you're planning on dumping him on the side of the highway he's basically yours.” Brady shot back, colder than Sam would've expected. “If he keeps showing up.”

“I don't know how he gets in.” Ignorance felt like the safest & simplest lie. “How am I supposed to stop him? He's a cat. They don't understand privacy.”
“He likes you. Just make him go away.”

“Again, cat.” Sam gestured at the tabby. “It's not like I control him.”

“At least put him outside when I come over. At least to start.” Brady conceded some ground.

Sam opened the door. For a split second he started to merely nodded at the hallway to let Furcifer know to leave, then he realized how much that would've undercut the argument that he didn't control the cat. He walked over to his bed and tried to pick up the tabby. Furcifer rolled onto its back, inviting a belly rub. Sam scooped up Furcifer, who started purring obnoxiously. The tabby looked back at Brady over Sam's shoulder, meowed, then gave Sam's neck a gratuitously slow lick before allowing itself to be placed in the hallway.

“Are you wearing makeup?” Brady asked once the door was closed and Sam had gotten further into the room.

“Stacy's idea.” Sam shrugged as he put the bag of cosmetics down on his table.

“My dick is really confused right now.” Brady said with an uncomfortable expression on his face. He tilted his head to the side, chewing his lower lip as his eyes swept Sam a few times. “Maybe play with your hair a bit—”

“I'm taking this off before you decide you like it.”

Sam dug through the bag and pulled out the makeup wipes. He carefully removed the lipstick and upper eye makeup, but tried to leave as much of the concealer that was hiding his black eye as possible. Brady peeked in the bag, then withdrew a tube of lipstick.

“Stacy said she'd take it if you didn't like it on me.” Sam explained.

“Do you like it?”

“Eh, not in particular.” Sam shrugged while throwing away the used wipe. “It's not bad, just not my thing.

“Then she can have it. You're most attractive when you're confident.” Brady leaned in to kissed Sam but stopped short. His eyes looked tired in a way that Sam wasn't accustomed to. Sam wondered how much sleep Brady had actually gotten in the last two days. He'd been tense, but in that moment he just seemed off.

“What's wrong?”

“You uncovered the bruise a bit.”

“Shit.” Sam glanced around trying to remember where he might have a mirror.

“Here.”

Brady grabbed the makeup and started applying it to Sam's cheekbone. Sam sat, watching Brady carefully work in ominous silence. Normally helping Sam with his makeup would be the sort of thing Brady would've spent hours joking about, but so far not even a mischievous smile.

“Are you okay?” Sam asked.

“I'm fine.” Brady said flatly. His eyes flickered up to confirm Sam's skeptical reaction before amending his answer. “I'm just stressed.”
“About what?”

“I have a project that I’m working on. Its deadline is creeping up on me.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Just be patient with me,” Brady requested, then glanced back at Sam's watching eyes before adding. “And keep taking care of yourself. I might not have the time or energy to bring you food or hold you down to the bed if you get in one of your moods.”

Sam was caught off guard by the last part. Aside from the concussion, he'd been feeling pretty well for a couple weeks and Brady hadn't needed to take care of him during that time. The reference to one of Sam's “moods” was clearly directed at his mental health- he wasn't sure why Brady would bring it up. It made Sam feel a bit anxious, unsure if maybe he hadn't noticed some symptoms.

“I'm doing better.” Sam countered, less self-assured than he would've liked.

“You're long overdue for one of those manic periods.” Brady commented as he worked with the makeup.

“I get insomnia.” Sam corrected.

“You also get hypomania.” Brady replied. “I've seen you pull three consecutive twenty hour days where all you do is study & organize every fucking thing in the room in some bizarre new ingenious way.”

“I haven't done that in years.” Sam said defensively. “I'm on some medication that helps me sleep.”

“Are you taking mood stabilizers?” Brady’s eyebrow rose, but he didn't meet Sam's eyes. “I've seen you taking a lot of pills in the last week or so. It's good for me to know what you're on in case something happens.”

“Endep & some edibles. They help with my anxiety & depression-”

“They're probably helping keep you out of the other end.” Brady commented, making Sam feel strangely under the microscope and defensive.

“Stop fucking gaslighting me.” Sam snapped, pulling back from Brady. “We were talking about you.”

“I'm not gaslighting you. You have diagnosed mental disorders- probably one or two undiagnosed-”

“Don't fucking do that.” Sam sat up more so that he was looking down at Brady. “Don't fucking attack me because you want to change the subject. Don't try to pull one of your fucking tricks, not with me. Not when I'm just starting to feel- things… again.”

The expression of annoyed inconvenience that had grown on Brady’s face over the last minute wavered visibly into something much less clear. His mouth moved slightly, but in an uncharacteristic moment he couldn't find any words. He leaned back in his chair, then put down the concealer. He wasn't on the offensive anymore. He'd been caught in whatever the hell he'd been doing.

“I'm sorry.” Brady's voice was quieter than Sam was used to hearing. “I didn't mean to do that to you, I just… I shouldn't have done that.”

Brady was easily the most manipulative person that Sam knew when he wanted to be. It wasn't a
quality Sam liked, but at least Brady avoided using truly underhanded tricks on him. That was part of the unspoken rules of their relationship. They both knew that Sam had insecurities that were off limits to Brady's morally dubious interpersonal skills. Based on Brady's distressed reaction he hadn't meant to lapse into such a potentially devastating attack. Something was very wrong.

“You haven't talked to me about your therapy appointments since…” Brady began, then closed his mouth and huffed. He wasn't prepared to talk about their fight and Jessica's death. “You don't need to tell me everything. I know that you probably talk about me- and that's fine, but I'd like to know what's going on with you.”

Sam noticed that they were still talking about him. Brady wasn’t being as aggressive anymore, but he was still being evasive.

“I'll talk to you about my therapy sessions,” Sam started, earning a faintly hopeful look from Brady. “But first we're talking about you.”

“There's nothing to talk about, I'm just stressed.”

“Bullshit.” Sam crossed his arms in front of his chest. “You aren't the only one who can pick people apart. You've been agitated, even after my family left. You've been really clingy lately-”

“I'm not clingy.”

“I feel like you're gonna pee on me to warn the other dogs-”

“Well if you-” Brady started to joke around in a brand new type of dodge, but Sam cut him off.

“No dumb sex jokes.”

“I'm worried about you.”

“Yeah, well I'm worried about you too.” Sam did let up.

“My problems aren't the kinds of things you need to worry about.” Brady tried to derail Sam once again.

“How am I supposed to know that unless you fucking talk to me about them?” Sam threw his hands up in frustration. “You want us to have a relationship again- like a real one, something that means something- you have to give a little on your end.”

“I give you everything.” Brady said taken aback.

“No, you only give me your best. I want your weakness too. You don't get to be the strong one all the time. You don't get to be the suave one-” Brady leaned in quickly and kissed him. Sam returned the penetrating kiss for a moment, then gently pushed Brady off of him.

“You're perfect and you have no idea because you're such a fucking idiot.” Brady argued. He stared at Sam with an oddly defeated expression. “My dad would kill me if he found out about us.”

“Your dad?” Sam blinked at him, completely thrown by the statement straight out of left field.

“I'm worried about what he'd do if he walked in on us.” Brady elaborated. “Yours punched you in the face and I- I couldn't do anything to stop it. It got me thinking about my dad.”

“Are you worried about getting cut off?” Sam asked. He'd only ever heard of Brady's relationship with his dad within a monetary or networking capacity. “You know I don't care about money.”
“I know.” Brady exhaled a pain laugh. “I'm worried what he'd do to us. He's a powerful asshole with very firm ideas for how things should go. And we- like us together don’t fit in his plans.”

“Is your dad a mob boss or something?”

“No, but he might as well be.” Brady shook his head. “I'm worried he’ll want to see me in late April or early May.”

“End of the school year?”

“About then.” Brady gave a noncommittal shrug. “If he shows up without warning like your dad did. I just don't want anything to happen.”

“Wait,” Sam's stomach knotted. “are you worried about him getting violent?”

Brady pursed his lips, trying to figure out how to respond for too long.

Brady had never really talked much about his family. His dad was some hot shit businessman, who’d barely contacted his son in the last five years. Sam had never heard Brady talk about his mom- Sam had always assumed the subject was too sensitive to talk about. Maybe she'd died or was just emotionally dead, smothered by the same oppressive force that had turned Brady into what their classmates had liked to describe as a snake. Sam had the vague impression that Brady had siblings or cousins, but wasn't sure how many or their genders. Every single relationship with the family was strained. Sam had known that Brady didn't like his dad, but his concern about physical violence brought the whole thing to another level.

“Did he hurt you?”

“This is why I didn't want to talk to you about it.” Brady gave as a non-answer.

“Brady, this is fucking serious.” Sam grabbed Brady's shoulders. “If he's violent you need to tell me.”

“He's violent.” Brady said, but didn't elaborate. “I've got this thing coming up. He's gonna pop back up in my life- our lives. I don't want you getting hurt.”

“Don't meet with him.”

“He’ll come to my place. He’ll find me.” Brady countered. “I'm gonna have to see him one way or another, I know it.”

“Just lie to him.”

“I plan to.” Brady assured. “I'm just... worried.”

Sam was pretty sure the word Brady had been searching for was scared.

“Have you ever been in a fight?” Sam asked, desperate to know how bad their circumstances really were. He could probably get back into good enough shape to fight off a single attacker without too much effort, but he didn't know whether Brady was remotely capable of defending himself.

“I fought that guy that tripped you during our first year.”

“You blindsided him into a brick wall. That's not a fight.”

“It was a short & strategic fight.”
“That's it, grab your coat.” Sam said as he got up. “I'm teaching you how to defend yourself.”

“You can't risk getting hit in the head again so soon after your concussion.” Brady warned.

“Trust me, you aren't gonna be able to hit me in the head.”

“You…” Brady opened his mouth to say something, but decided against it. Sam watched Brady put on his coat. As they walked out of the dorm in search of a sparring area it occurred to Sam that Brady hadn't asked where Sam had learned to fight, but honestly Sam was just relieved to not have to come up with another lie.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is a bit longer than I'd normally do for this series. It's actually two different segments that I thought fit particularly well together based on the (obvious) theme of fathers & sons. There's a lot going on in it, but I just felt it would feel disjointed having this spread out.

I'm not gonna lie, I felt a bit bad making Brady twist the dagger on Sam with the gaslighting. Personally I hate those sort of attacks, but effective's effective and Brady isn't the kind of guy to give an attack anything less than his all.
Sam climbed out of bed and started wandering around his room trying to figure out where his pajama pants had last been thrown. His groggy search was interrupted when he noticed an unwelcome scene on his table. Furcifer was seated on the card table, carefully batting at a feathery lump. The tabby was finishing the final touches on a display of five dead sparrows arranged in a pentagonal shape. When Sam stopped to stare slack-jawed, the cat looked up at him with a smile of feline pride.

“What the…” Sam exhaled. Furcifer walked over and tried to rub against him affectionately, but Sam pulled back. He’d heard of cats bringing their owners dead animals before, though he’d never heard about cats diligently positioning them. He couldn’t tell if Furcifer was trying to summon a ghost or was telling Sam that it thought he was an incompetent hunter - that felt right, maybe it was a convoluted ex-hunter joke? “I don't want any dead birds.”

Furcifer tilted its head skeptically, then pawed one toward Sam. Sam moved to stand on a different side of the table, but the cat just redirected its efforts. When Furcifer pushed it too close to him, Sam quickly nudged the dead bird away from the edge of the table. It was still a little warm. Sam pulled his hand back, then went to wipe his hand on his clothes, but remembered that he wasn’t wearing anything. Realizing he was completely naked, Sam tried his best to cover his dick with his hand that hadn’t touched the dead bird. He quickly scrambled around looking for clothes, put on his pajama pants one handed, then pointed sternly at the cat.

“I’m gonna take a shower and when I get back I want them gone. I'm serious. Don't bring me dead things.” Furcifer started biting and swatting at the rejected offering turned toy. “Don't eat it - fuck it, just don't make a mess. I expect the table cleared when I get back.”

Sam scrubbed his right hand repeatedly in the shower, then disinfected his thankfully empty table when he returned. He very briefly considered trying to give Furcifer a bath in the sink, but he suspected that would incite solid black eyes and a flurry of slashing wounds. Regardless of his potential bravery, by the time he started seriously considered washing the cat, Furcifer had already begun napping on his bed - the damage had been done.

He gave up on trying to mitigate the spread of germs and left to catch the train up the peninsula to San Francisco. Rather than simply walking across the street to wait at the train stop, he lingered in the dorm building’s reception area until it was almost time for the 10:35am northbound train. There wasn't any point standing out there exposed when he could just as easily wait by a security camera, a live witness, and far from train tracks that lacked any barrier to prevent people from being pushed into oncoming locomotives.

Sometimes Sam worried that he might be getting a little paranoid. Even away from obvious physical hazards he kept catching himself looking over his shoulder for his dad, Brady's dad, that Gordon Walker guy, or some as yet unidentified demon. Though after those rough few days dealing with his family and concerns about Brady's family it was hard to think his fears were entirely unreasonable.
So he took a couple extra moments to assess his surroundings and take additional precautions on his journey. On the plus side, the train stop across the street from campus was only a single platform, which meant that a person couldn't follow him without at least being spotted. Once safely on the train, Sam could get off at any of a dozen or so stations up the peninsula. He boarded without any trouble, taking a seat far from the eight passengers that had already been onboard.

As the train passed the stop for Palo Alto, part of him felt a little pang at the thought that it been so long since he'd visited Brady's place. The swanky apartment was only a few blocks walk from the train stop, right near Stanford. Back in undergrad Sam used to stay there regularly- once for an entire summer while Sam was transitioning between academic scholarships. Going back there felt strange, like returning to the past itself and that was a luxury Sam didn't have. Too much had happened since the last time he'd slept in that bed. Too much was happening in the moment. Even Sam & Brady’s relationship was changing - recovering, growing for the better it seemed, but the change was frightening too.

After finding Brady and Jessica, he'd spent years trying to emotionally heal enough to be in long term committed relationships. Growing up, the constant loss of any friends he'd incidentally made at school had left him with an intense fear of abandonment that manifested more as a fear of attachment. Each time he'd said goodbye was a lesson not to say hello. But once he was stable at Stanford, with two lovers who were devoted to him, he had to start learning to be close - to be intimate in a way that went beyond sex. He'd dared to love them both in different equally sincere ways and in a span of just one horrible month he'd managed to lose them both in different ways. The experience had set him so far back that when the train zipped by Brady's neighborhood, Sam could only barely whisper an experimental “I want you to be my boyfriend again.”

Trees and buildings whipped by the windows as they continued north, away from his romantic drama in search of new dramatic quarry. He needed to get some more intel about demons and Stacy knew a guy who knew a guy or some such tenuous lead. But it was better than nothing, which was what he'd been stuck with for far too long. His tangled love life could take the back burner for the day. He was out on business.

Sam got off the train at his usual stop, then hopped a bus and started walking through Chinatown to the apartment building where Stacy lived. As he was walking, one of the sidewalk food merchants that he vaguely recognized flagged him down. The older man didn't bother making any smalltalk, instead simply collecting a bag full of fresh produce and a half dozen tea eggs while Sam waited. He gave Sam the bag with a barely comprehensible statement about it being for Denny Chen - Stacy’s dad and leader of the coven. Sam wasn’t sure how he felt about having achieved the status of presumed courier for the Chen family, but the man also gave him a tea egg for his effort so the errand wasn’t without its perks.

In the last two months he’d probably visited the coven ten times. It felt like he knew the faces of most of the local coven members, if not their names. He was much easier identified by the coven members and coven affiliated locals, after all they only needed to learn one new name and he did tend to stand out in a crowd thanks to his height.

The form of recognition Sam hadn’t expected was that his eyes kept lingering on figures that he found oddly suspicious for reasons he couldn’t immediately identify. His first thought was that the man and three women loitering down the street from Stacy’s place were hunters, but that didn’t survive much scrutiny. The group was younger than hunters tended to be and they were unarmored, or at least any weapons they might be carrying would’ve needed to be incredibly small to fit in those skinny jeans. They might’ve been tourists, but they weren’t eyeing their surroundings with happy interest, they were clearly doing some sort of recon. Sam pretended to tie his shoe, then peeked
through the crowded sidewalk in order to get another look at them. His growing familiarity with the scene told him that they might be witches, from some other coven.

“There’s a group of four kids, possibly witches down the street.” Sam told Dennis & Stacy as soon as he got into the cramped third story apartment. Without even really thinking about it, he brought the bag of groceries into the kitchen and started putting them away.

“Were they doing anything?” Dennis asked, looking up from his newspaper with an unalarmed interest.

“Just scoping things out as far as I could tell, but I don't know all your subtle moves.” Sam admitted, then added. “They were watching the scene like hunters almost - well, hunters that aren't running in guns drawn, the cautious ones. Basically, trying to figure out what the hell’s going on.”

“We'll put some people on them, but it’s probably nothing.” Dennis assured as he got up from his seat at the dining table. He patted Sam on the back to convey his appreciation, before pulling out his cell and walking down the hall to make a call.

“We’re having some mild border tensions with Tenderloin.” Stacy explained. She grabbed a tangerine from the bag and started peeling it before continuing. “They did some kind of major ritual last night and it threw off all our spells. We nearly had a routine unwelcome spirits purge turn volatile. The covens might not get along, but it’s common courtesy to give a warning if you’re gonna pull something that’s big enough to screw with other people. The last thing any of us need is to accidentally rediscover the formula for Greek Fire.”

Sam briefly reflected on the fact that it had been roughly 100 years since a huge portion of San Francisco had burnt down and decided that some anniversaries were best left unacknowledged. The city had been rebuilt, it was definitely best that it stay that way.

“You think the Tenderloin kids on the corner are a bad sign?”

“Not really. I wouldn't blame them for watching to make sure we aren't mobilizing anything.” Stacy shrugged as she popped a tangerine segment into her mouth, then held a few out to Sam, who predictably accepted them. “These little tiffs always spill a few witches onto the streets watching to see which way the wind’s blowing. Extra feet on the ground don't really mean much today or tomorrow as long as nobody's feeling really dumb.”

“Should I be worried about that last part?”

“Muggles do dumb stuff all the time, it doesn't stop you from getting out of bed in the morning.” Stacy shoved the last bit of fruit into her mouth.

“I don't know, some mornings.” Sam replied, only partially joking.

After finishing up with the groceries, Stacy led Sam a few blocks over to another building that was controlled by the Chinatown coven. It was another combination of commercial businesses on the first two floors with a few apartments above them. They ascended a narrow carpeted staircase that creaked a bit too loudly for Sam's liking, then entered a small jewelry store. There were several displays of ornate gold charms & carved jade. Sam nodded to an employee that he'd seen around, but couldn't remember her name.

“Have you seen Wren?” Stacy asked the woman once the door to the shop was closed behind them.

“He's counting.” Sam couldn't tell if she was trying to be cryptic because of his presence or if that
was just some routine slang.

“Make sure we don’t get any tourists walking in.” Stacy requested before gesturing for Sam to follow her into a back room.

They made their way through a storage room filled with boxes labeled in pictographs and some sort of scribbles shorthand that wasn’t based on any language Sam had seen. Through another door they found Wren sitting alone in a windowless room filled with filing cabinets. He was diligently working at a desk weighing out small gems on a scale. When he saw them enter he made a note in a ledger, then looked up at his guests.

“Incoming or outgoing?” Stacy asked as she reached for a sapphire. Wren slapped her hand away with a straight edge he’d been using to divide piles.

“Outgoing.” He answered. “So quality check & weigh in has to be perfect.”

“Big haul?”

“The routine materials plus about ten special requests.” Wren glanced up apologetically. “I still can’t find your solitary rook’s wing if that’s why you’re here. Turns out birds don’t like being born with only one wing.”

“Actually, Sam here is looking for some help networking.”

Wren sat up more in his chair in order to look Sam over with his keen appraiser’s eye. Sam hoped it wasn’t obvious how shocked he was at being so close to a literal handful of precious gems. In all his life he’d barely seen 5% of that hoard in one place. Wren smiled at him, amused or intrigued by hopefully something other than Sam’s surprise.

“Oh, you’re the one looking for a demon hook up.” Wren recalled.

“I heard you might know someone who could get me in touch with a demon.” Sam nodded. His request sounded a bit like jumping into the deep end now that he was voicing it aloud, but he’d need to start stepping up his efforts if he wanted to outpace whatever was happening to him.

“I know a guy who’s a goods runner for the Quiet Market—”

“Quiet Market?” Sam raised an eyebrow. “Do I want to know?”

“Flip side goods- spell components, things the non-humans need, things made from non-humans—”

“Lovely.” Sam commented as he pictured a literal bazaar of vampire livers & djinn pituitary glands. Actually, the mental image brought up a weeks-old concern that he’d had. “Do they sell pieces of psychics?”

“Well that’s a gross thought.” Stacy’s casual smile faded at the idea.

“It’s good to know all the potentially interested parties.”

“Haven’t heard of anyone looking for psychics, but you guys aren’t very common.” Wren pointed out. Sam tried to stop himself from physically reacting to the fact that Wren knew he was a psychic. “Do you want me to ask if there’s a demand for that sort of thing?”

“Can you do it without making people think you have access to some?”

“I can put out some anonymous feelers for quotes.” Wren offered.
“Any chance potential buyers might investigate?”

“I’ll get you a quote from the L.A. marketplace. The price should be about the same, but if anyone goes looking they’ll start in the wrong half of the state.” Wren suggested the precaution, then opened his mouth to say something, but an alarm on his watch went off. He swore under his breath and turned it off. “We can talk Market next time. To answer your actual question, I’ve got this guy, he just made some kind of new deal with a demon a week back. You could go see him today if you want.”

“When?”

“He’s been more or less anchored to the same pub for the last three days, so anytime really.” Sam raised an eyebrow wondering why the guy would be at a pub for so long and what that meant when Stacy asked Wren.

“Are you coming with?”

“I’ve got a pretty strict deadline. One of the suppliers out of Vancouver is itching to cut her stay short. I’m guessing drama up at her home base. These merchants that straddle borders like that are always running into problems. Anyway, she’s moving all her goods at discount day after tomorrow. I’m sure it’ll break into an auction.” Wren turned to Sam, then added for his benefit. “Reps from the covens, private collectors, mystical healers, even your rich new agers– Fucking preps. Anyway, I need to get some assets turned liquid since it sounds like she doesn’t want to cross the border with anything sketchy.”

“Are a hundred karats in diamonds not sketchy?”

“Less sketchy than a mummified human leg.” Wren explained earned subtle gestures of acknowledgement from both Sam & Stacy.

“It’s really gonna take you a day or two to count all this?”

“It’s delicate work spreading the withdrawal over all our pots so I don’t drain anything dry.”

“Where’d you go to school for - what business or accounting?” Sam asked with literal academic curiosity.

“I dropped out of SF State halfway through getting my BS in botany.” Wren replied. “The Quiet Market, she’s always been my mistress and one day I left school for her. You know what they say, do what you love.”

Stacy leaned against Sam on the bus ride to the pub. She wasn't nearly as affectionate with him as Brady, but their relationship was considerably younger. If he was completely honest he didn’t quite know what to think of her. She was a much more lighthearted person than he was used to, somehow prioritizing the often conflicting impulses of indulgence & loyalty. It wasn’t that she was dumb or simple- she just liked to make things simple. He didn’t understand how she could see such a shitty world around her and still swing her feet playfully on the bus ride- maybe it was the drugs? Either way, she was nice to him and barely asked for anything in return anymore- except for sex. Her hedonistic tendencies definitely manifested on that front. He wrapped an arm around her to make her more comfortable.

“How’re you doing?” Stacy asked. “And word from your family?”

“Supposedly they're somewhere in Nevada, heading east.” Sam pursed his lips. “Getting a few
hundred miles between them & us is definitely helping.”

The encounter with his dad & Dean had been an unexpected mixture of closure & freshly opened wounds. As far as he was concerned things with his dad were done for good. Before being punched in the face there had been a chance that when push came to shove Sam would have his back, but at that point it was taking all of Sam's habitual altruism to not actively hate the man- something between neutrality & resentment would have to suffice.

Dean was another matter. He seemed to still care about Sam in his own special way. All concern with no coddle- whatever the minimum level of expression was necessary to convey some familial connection, yet the unflinching commitment manifested in bold actions like deciding in an instant to kill multiple people to help protect Sam. Granted, killing was a go to technique that Dean used to solve problems. But Sam sincerely appreciated that his big brother had tried in other smaller ways- he'd confided, he'd eased up on Brady a bit by the end, & he’d opened back up to communicating. Things with Dean were back to what Sam considered a good family relationship- well, at least by the standard Sam had had prior to two months ago.

One of the unforeseen consequences of spending so much time with Stacy was that Sam had finally gotten to know a family that actually got along. Stacy lived with her parents & her maternal grandparents, along with about eight cousins & two aunts that lived in neighboring apartments in the same building. He had been visiting her enough that he knew all of her family by name and had even started learning a few in jokes.

Despite not wanting to complicate things too much, their dynamic had shifted slightly after her mom had accidentally walked into Stacy's bedroom while they were making out... in bed... naked. Thankfully the bed sheet had been covering them and it wasn't some patent sexual position like him on top of her with her knees on either side of him, but he was still embarrassed all around. He'd hidden in the bedroom while listening to Stacy get what he imagined was the sex talk- he couldn't tell the tone of the conversation since Cantonese was a tonal language. After that all of Stacy's relatives had made extra efforts to make him feel welcome. He didn't really have the heart to explain to them that the two of them were more fuck buddies than boyfriend & girlfriend. Eventually things would clear up, but for the moment he was reserving his effort for actual problems. Demons & impending death took priority over breaking it to mama Chen that she didn't have a future son-in-law lined up.

He was absentmindedly playing with the lace fringe on Stacy’s indigo blue dress when he realized that he had no idea how old she was. His initial fear was that he was taking her to a bar and she might get carded, but for an uncomfortable moment he wondered if he'd been having sex with a minor for the last few months. He'd met her at the concert, but the show wasn't 21 years or older.

“Uh, just wondering...” He tried to play it cool. “How old are you?”

“Twenty nine.” She replied, causing him to let out a subtle sigh of relief. “What's it to you?”

“You're just so... youthful. I got a little... uh-”

“You had a child bride scare?” Sam shrugged to confirm her guess.

He was a little surprised to hear that she was five years older than him. When it came down to it he supposed she was a bit immature, but not when it came to the important stuff. Maybe it was a slight impulse control problem? He probably wasn't one to judge- throwing stones in emotionally fragile houses or some such metaphor. At least she seemed sincerely happy most of the time. He supposed that was an underappreciated asset in this complicated times.

“You seem too happy to be older than me.”
“We're you a happy kid?”

“No.”

“Then I think you need to reconsider your yardstick.” Stacy suggested. “Are you happy now?”

“You mean with the demon shit, fighting with my family, maybe dying from magical brain cancer…” He rested his head against Stacy so that his mouth & nose were in her hair, it smelled like bubblegum.

“Well when you put it like that-”

“-The weird thing.” Sam continued. “I've been worse.”

It was only mid afternoon when they entered the almost entirely empty pub. Stacy ordered a beer with some justification about her not having to drive or operate heavy machinery. This really was his show and Stacy was primarily there as his chaperone into the flip side. On the plus side she was opting for a beverage with a low ABV, meaning she really was prepared to jump into action if needed.

“Juan?” Sam asked a middle aged man sitting at the bar with a well established pile of peanut shells in front of him. The man glanced over at them and raised an eyebrow. “Wren told us we could find you here.”

“If you're here to break my kneecaps come back next week.” The man muttered into his pint of beer.

“Actually, I just wanted to talk.” Sam assured. Juan pushed out the stool next to him, offering the seat to Sam.

“Is this about work?” Juan looked up through his eyelashes at Sam while emphasizing the last word, then tilted his head toward the bartender who was only a few feet away.

“Related.”

“Hank, can you give us a few minutes?” Juan instructed the civilian or muggle depending who was asked, who shrugged.

“If the place burns down while I'm taking a smoke it's on you.” The bartender commented while walking outside.

“If you want something moved you've gotta go somewhere else.” Juan started.

“I just want information.” Sam explained. “I heard you met a demon, made some kind of deal.”

Juan laughed for almost an entire minute in a wholly unwelcome move.

“Oh man, why do you want anything to do with her?” Juan wiped an amused tear from his eye. “Trust me, demons are just trouble. Stick to the heartbeats. If it doesn't have a pulse just back off.”

“I've already got demon problems. I'm currently trying to figure out a way out of this mess.” Sam justified. “Can you tell me about the demon you met?”

“God, she was something else.” Sam almost thought he sounded pleased. “Gorgeous with this voice like music and then she stabs you in the back- a lot like my first wife.”
Juan made a little grunt of pleasure at some memory. Sam couldn't tell if he was fondly remembering some interaction with the ex-wife or the demon.

“How'd you find her?”

“She found me. I was in a fuck-awful jam. One of my packages got stopped at customs and I'd already run the payment because…” Juan hesitated, but blew off his concern. “well, I cut some corners- thought it was an easy run. Big mistake- anyway I needed $100k in order to personally refund the cash down. I was about ready to rob a bank and she showed up, literally on my doorstep.”

Sam was temporarily caught up trying to imagine the implications of transferring $100,000 as part of a presumably illegal transaction without having any collateral in hand. The system seemed deeply flawed, granted Juan had admitted to cutting corners, but Sam thought it would be dangerous to accidentally screw over a coven or anyone else that might purchase items from the Quiet Market.

“What happened?”

“I'm not an idiot. I invited her in.” Juan saw Sam's confusion. “When something higher up the food chain corners you, you don't just blow them off.”

“Fair enough.”

“Anyway, we got to talking & drinking- I maybe had too much to drink cause I did most the talk when it was all said & done.” Juan rocked his head from side to side. “She liked talk, I think. She also was pretty handsy- not that I'm complaining about that part.”

A small smile spread across Juan’s face. Sam couldn't tell, but he wouldn't have been surprised if the guy had had sex with the demon. Based on the sidelong glance Stacy gave him, she'd just made the same assessment.

“So she wasn't… uh, aggressive?” Sam had no idea how to phrase the question without making it an innuendo. He mostly wanted to know if she was violent, but there were so many more ways of doing harm that weren't encompassed in the word. Any sort of nuance, such as an aggressive inclination, was worth knowing about.

“I mean she definitely went in for the kill. Whether she knew what she wanted to begin with, I don't know. She said she was looking for some excitement, that- what was it… stagnation breeds weakness or maybe it was boredom?” Juan shrugged and took another sip of his beer. “Demons- at the very least they're dangerous, every one of them.”

“How did you protect yourself?”

“Honestly, I didn't.” He admitted. “It's not like I was looking for a demon. I didn't need to fight her or anything, she wasn't the snap your neck type.”

Sam stared at the man, who’d clearly been in a desperate situation and was somehow out of it, but Juan didn't look like a man saved from the brink. The guy had more or less lived at a bar for several days. He'd made a deal of some unsavory sort. Sam had read dozens of textbooks full of tales of poor choices, and those didn't involve the interplay of magic or potential damnation. This was the stagnation & candidness of a man defeated.

“What did you give her?”

“My secrets.”
“You won't tell me.” Sam guessed that he was being evasive.

“There are too many to tell.” Juan laughed a bit sadly. “I'm completely outed if she wants to turn me over to… take your pick, between the hunters, the cops, or the other demons. I can't do anything against her going forward either- I can't even try. She gets a copy of my memories, everything related to the flip side.”

“Gets?” Sam paused. The guy was under surveillance. No wonder he wasn't trying to find a way to sneak out of the deal or trying to convince someone to kill her. “She's going to see this?”

“Yeah.” Juan nodded, then finished his drink. “It's probably best that you leave before you get yourself into trouble.”

Sam considered the fact that he'd just been somewhat exposed. So far she didn't know much about him except that he was a friend of a witch and he had questions about demons. By itself that wasn't much for her to act on. If he left she might just mark him down as not worth investigating. But dammit, he was investigating too.

“What's her name?”

“Zoya.”

“Zoya,” Sam spoke at Juan. “I'd like to buy you a drink.”

After much debate, Sam convinced Stacy to let him go alone in order to help entice Zoya. She agreed to give him three hours in the bar, but put a locator spell on him so that she could go after him if he ended up being taken somewhere. Once his three hours were up she would bust in with four other witches and drag him out if needed. None of them had ever fought a demon before, but based on the books Bhavya had lent him magic wasn't a bad place to start.

It'd been years since he had gone to a bar by himself. Sam grabbed a seat at the counter, then ordered an old fashioned. He sipped his drink while trying not to make eye contact with anyone for too long for fear of accidentally signaling something more. His nights of casual hook up had been abandoned with his teenage years. He preferred relationships. There was something comforting about waking up to the same smiling faces. It was stability and maybe the promise of a better future- if he could survive everything else going on in his life.

“Martini, dirty.” A woman told the bartender as she sat down next to Sam. “On the big guy’s tab.”

Sam glanced over at her with sudden interest. She was on the short side with wide hips & ample breasts that hardly seemed contained in her iridescent pumpkin dress, which contrasted against her mahogany skin. Her round face held twinkling dark eyes, full lips, and was framed by perfectly sculpted frizzy black hair. The sly grin she gave him was the cherry on top of what had to be a carefully designed bit of bait for unsuspecting victims of the persuasion that enjoyed women.

“Zoya, I take it?”

“As observant as you are handsome.” She held her hand out for him to accept in a shake. He didn't want to insult her, but he also didn't want to do anything that might be mistaken for accepting a deal. His hand took her fingertip, then drew the back of her hand up to his lips for a suave little kiss of greeting. “And cautious to boot.”

Her flesh had tickled his senses in a way that reminded him of the death vision of the girl he’d saved on campus weeks ago. Zoya felt almost foreign to him- She was probably from a Hell other than the
one he was linked to. She also didn’t match the sensation from the vision of the girl. Zoya was from another Hell altogether, but at least she was a living breathing—well, he wasn't entirely clear on what constituted being living to a species that came from the afterlife—anyway, she was there and he could talk to her.

“Thank you for meeting with me.”

“My absolute pleasure.” She thanked the bartender as she took her drink, then sipped it. “Before we start, I'm obliged to tell you that I don't give up information for free.”

“What kinds of things would I be trading away?” He wasn't sure what he had to offer, but giving away all his secrets like Juan had was definitely off the table.

“Information is always welcome. I like to think of it as seed money for new opportunities.” He made a mental note not to mention anyone he knew, lest she show up on their doorstep to work some awful deal. “Magical artifacts are sometimes acceptable. I also deal for much higher stakes, but that worry in your eyes…”

She placed her hand on his wrist touching his bare skin. Her fingertips caressed him and he felt like she was looking through him.

“Don't worry, love. I'm sure I can find something you can give me.” Zoya wet her lips in a surprisingly distracting move. “It won't buy you classified information or action on my part, but for some entry level information—the stuff in your price range, for that I could just take little tastes from you.”

She gripped him gently. Her touch turned strangely cool, or rather it felt like he was losing heat to her. Maybe not heat, that didn't make sense, but something was being siphoned off from him.

“What’re you doing?” He managed while focusing on not jerking away instantly. They'd hardly been talking for 30 seconds, risking ending things now felt like such a waste.

“Nothing a good night's rest won't restore.” She smiled at him. “Now do you want to use your questions on this harmless little thing? Because it certainly seems like you invited me here for something else.”

He weighed his options. Whatever she was doing was an immediate concern, but if he could recover from it without special measures, then maybe it was secondary.

“I'm trying to find out about the demon that marked my soul, how my soul was marked, & why,” He cut to the chase. If she wasn’t going to be helpful in his objective then it was better to know right away

“That's a very broad question partially covering what I suspect is protected information, which I simply don't have.” Zoya’s voice might've been mistaken as apologetic, but he guessed that she wasn't sincerely moved. “You can try again and maybe I’ll have some answers. Maybe try either looking for details further removed or a fuzzy big picture. Astute thing like yourself might actually be able to learn something.”

The books Bhavya had lent him were a bigger picture. He needed details, many details. Working his way in through the periphery might be a reasonable approach. As Juan had said, she seemed to enjoy talking, with a little luck and the right topic she might become conversational.

“Who are you?” The corners of her lips curled up at him focusing on her. He couldn't tell if she liked being the center of attention or just the center of his attention.
“I’m Zoya of the House of the Twisted Hearts, the Hell of Frost & Whips.”

“Frost & whips.” He tested the concept aloud. Hopefully it was figurative.

“It’s a human translation.” She distanced herself from the name. “The realm names as you’ll hear them up here are always so literal, and boring. They’ve lost all their poetry & bite.”

Literal. He cringed internally. Despite trying to hide his fear at the reminder that Hells were places for torture, she stared at him knowingly. When the worry bloomed in him, he felt another tiny pulse of something being stripped from him through her touch.

“What Hell am I associated with?”

Zoya blinked and her eyes turned solid black for a few seconds before she returned them to normal. She’d been studying him, observing something that she couldn’t otherwise see. Some characteristics about him could evidently be identified through his aura.

“The Hell of Burning Light.”

“Burning.” Sam felt like he might throw up. His mind was running through a dozen unpleasant images. The reminder that he was bound for fiery damnation made his nerves worse. He tried to bury his fear, but he felt particularly raw in that moment, receiving harsh truths from an uncaring woman. She took a little more of whatever that energy was from him and he gently pulled his arm out of her grasp.

“Don’t worry. I’ll cut you off before there’s risk of permanent damage.” She assured.

“I need a second.” Sam exhaled. He didn't feel lightheaded exactly, it wasn't a physical sensation. Something about the moment reminded him of being high or switching medications and wandering blindly into a subtle change. She wasn't just taking something from him, she’d been affecting him on a more discreet level.

“If it makes you feel any better, Burning Light is supposed to be one of the most tolerable of the fire hells, as those things go.” Zoya plucked her martini’s green olive from its metal pick with her teeth, then ate it. “At least as far as I’ve heard. Fire & ice, we don’t really play nice together, you know?”

“We? Like you & them or you & me?” He wasn’t sure if the association with a fire realm was already hurting him.

“Oh, you I’d happily play with.” Her hand settled on his thigh, but didn't create that odd sensation. “You’re such a tantalizing specimen. The things I’d do to you... It’s too bad I can’t get my hooks in you. You certainly feel like a Twisted Heart.”

Her hand slid up his leg. Instead of the cool sensation of something being drained from him, her touch felt warm and seductive.

“What would you want to do with me?” He asked quietly. He'd get to why she couldn’t get what she wanted, but first he needed to know what she wanted from him in general.

She leaned in close to him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. Her breasts pressed against him. He swore he could feel her chest heavy with a calm & deliberate breath that gave him goosebumps as it tickled his neck. Everything about her felt inviting and some rational part of his brain was still holding onto that red flag.

“I would make your wildest dreams come true, and in exchange you would give me your soul
wrapped with a red satin bow.” She whispered. “I’d make you feel such pleasure & torment that you’d love me, more than anything or anyone you’ve ever loved before. You’d be just like all the others- but you aren’t like the others, are you? You’re gifted. You’re powerful. It’d be such a shame to break you like I did with them, to discard your ravaged soul to the cold. I’d keep you for myself. You’d be my lover & my student. Together we’d topple titans and take everything this world has to offer. And I promise you’d love every second of it.”

She softly nibbled his ear. He tried to focus on Brady, but the thought of him seemed to turn the warmth of Zoya’s touch into that draining cold. She gave an almost imperceptible moan at the change. He got the distinct impression that she enjoyed him thinking about Brady. She was trying to manipulate him, but he wasn’t sure what she wanted from him in an immediate sense- other than whatever she was pulling from him with her touch.

“Why can’t you do it?” He whispered through gritted teeth. It was taking a considerable amount of willpower to not reciprocate in some way. Surely she wanted him to, but he fought against the impulse.

“You don’t hold the rights to your soul. As much as you might want to give it to me- and believe me when I say that I want you to give it to me,” Her hand slid along his leg until she was caressing his crotch. “Alas, even us two consenting adults can’t deal.”

It was hard for him to think- he supposed that was half the point. He replayed her words in his head. She'd said he didn't hold the rights to his souls. His eyes widened and a bit of the fog in his mind cleared. As much as he lusted for beautiful women, he also had a passion for property rights- especially when it came to his soul. He leaned away from her, having been seduced by the puzzle, not the person.

“You said rights- How did I lose the rights to my own soul?” His voice was more lively than just seconds ago.

“If I had to guess, they were traded.” She stared at him, reevaluating her target, having apparently misjudged him.

“But I didn’t get anythi-” His stomach dropped about a foot. Bhavya had described his visions as being gifted to him by the demon that had marked his soul, but gift wasn’t the right term. He’d gotten his powers at the cost of his soul. “I didn’t agree to any trade. That wasn’t fair.”

“Sounds like someone should get a slap on the wrist.” Zoya commented with a largely indifferent shrug, then shifted so that she was leaning against the bar instead of Sam. She took another sip of her martini.

“We didn’t make a deal if I didn’t agree to it. It should be void.” He countered, suddenly feeling like he was starting to get some footing in the conversation.

“You’re so cute.” She smiled to herself more than him. It might've even been sincere. “This isn’t some human contract. If fairness was required, then we’d barely get any work done.”

His elbow nearly slipped off the bar counter when he heard that. The playing field wasn't level, so much for his footing. He'd have to roll with the punches as best he could until he learned a bit more about the Hells’ version of the Uniform Commercial Code. Without much else to go on he just went with his gut.

“I don’t even want these powers.” He argued.
“Do I look like I can do anything-” She caught herself presuming that he had some idea about what was going on, then clarified. “Personally, I can’t do anything for you about that. Anyway, I’m no expert, but extracting things like that is usually very expensive.”

“Extracting?”

“No guarantees, I think it depends on what was done, but hypothetical.” Zoya waved for the bartender to bring her another martini. “Entrepreneuring old & new minds, there are plenty of demons that augment souls, but I’m not one of them.”

He noticed that she was starting to treat him like someone new to the industry rather than a mark—though he suspected she was smart enough to still be keeping track of his tab.

“You said extracting powers is probably expensive. What does ‘expensive’ even mean?”

“Low end? Don’t quote me on this, but I’d guess probably twenty unremarkable souls.”

“Souls…” He should’ve known it would be something unattainable like that.

“What's wrong?” Zoya cooed. When she caressed his cheek he only pulled away slightly, too distracted by the magnitude of twenty souls to bother fending her off. “Such a sweet face shouldn't look so down.”

“I don't even have one to deal with. How am I supposed to be able to deal with twenty?”

It wasn't even clear to him what removing his powers would mean to him. As far as he could tell the visions frequently made his migraines & nosebleeds worse, but there was no way of knowing whether stripping out the powers would stop whatever was making him sick. Not to mention it seemed unlikely that simply taking away his powers would somehow return his ownership rights in his soul. Those were two different transactions.

“You don't have the stomach for it?” She asked, then sipped on her new martini.

“Are you suggesting…” She was proposing that he actually get souls from other people. He couldn't tell if that meant that he was supposed to kill people or just do something that would damn them to some sort of tortured afterlife. The whole thing made him uncomfortable and based on Zoya's smirk she knew.

“Sweet was right.”

“Can… Can I trade another soul for mine?” Twenty was way too many and that was just to undo his powers, it wasn't even addressing the long term problem of some demon owning his soul. He didn't like the idea of trading someone else's soul for his, but he'd be an idiot to not at least inquire.

“For an exquisite piece like you? I don't think that's likely to fly.”

“Can I bring down the value?” His first thought was to try flooding the market in order to overwhelm the demand with supply, which worked alright with coffee mugs, but they were talking about human souls. He didn't want to think what flooding the markets of multiple Hell dimensions entailed.

“If you want actually quotes & market fluctuations, you’ll need to talk to an Abyssal of the Crossroads for inter-House rates.” Zoya informed him. “I don't deal in already claimed goods.”

“Can you get me in contact with an Abyssal of the Crossroads?” Sam asked, not really sure what
one of those demons might be like.

“A Crossroads demon from my plane won’t be able to tell you about the Burning Light’s market. You're going to have to contact one of your own.”

He realized that he was facing a similar scenario to the quote that Wren was trying to get for him. Unfortunately, the different Hells seemed to keep their markets relatively separate, or at least enough that he couldn’t get everything he wanted from Zoya. It wasn’t that surprising when it came right down to it, just discouraging. Evidently he was more on the periphery than he’d expected- So why did he feel like he was smack dab in the middle of the shitstorm?

Zoya waved over the bartender, then leaned across the bar top and took the young man’s hand. Sam noticed that the bartender had glanced down at what must’ve been a staggering amount of cleavage staring back at him. She gently stroked the guy’s hand.

“We’ll be right back.” She told him. “My friend & I are just going to step out for some air, but when I get back I’d love to get to know you better.”

“You’d like to know me?” The bartender spoke in a mild daze.

“Intimately.” When she smiled, he smiled back at her and nodded. “I’ll be right back.”

Zoya tilted her head to indicate that the bartender should get back to work. He reluctantly let go of her hand, then moved down the bar to take an order.

“Come with me.” Zoya instructed. Sam glanced around the bar full of potential witnesses. “There could be a hundred people in here with weapons drawn and they couldn't stop me from killing you if I wanted. Come on.”

“Fine, one sec.” Sam pulled out his wallet, but she redirected it back to his pocket.

“I didn’t go to that effort of getting you out of the bill just to have you start waving around your money.” She commented while leading him through the bar toward the back door.

“I offered to buy you a drink.” Sam pointed out. “I get the feeling you aren’t the forbearance or forgiveness kind of person.”

“You’re right about that.” They went out the door into the dark alleyway behind the building. “My drink of choice carries a kick above gin.”

“What’re we doing out here?” Despite her earlier implication that the number of bystanders didn’t matter to her, the realization that he was alone with the demon was unnerving.

“I’m taking that drink you owe me.” Her eyes had a frighteningly ambiguous hunger to them.

Sam swallowed and took a step backwards, but he bumped into the wall. Before he knew what was happening she had her hands on him, sliding up his chest, pulling his face down to hers. His brain sputtered for a moment at the realization that their lips were only a few inches apart. He started pulling away, but her caress soothed him.

“I'm in a relationship-” He started.

“I know, it's one of the most attractive things about you. I can feel all those warm fuzzy feelings and they’re so intense with you. It’s really so tempting. You know, most people are blessed with only a
good head or a good heart and therefore they're only a threat or a victim on one front. Not so with
you.” She dragged her plush lips along his neck. He tried to convince his body to push her back,
but he barely swayed. “I can feel those emotions bubbling just below the surface. What do you
think is my favorite to eat?”

Some fearful reflex immediately thought souls, but that clearly wasn't the case. He didn't have the
ability to sell her his soul, surely he couldn't give it to her or she couldn't take it by force. She was
talking about emotions. She was attracted to his commitment to Brady, his feelings for Brady.

“Love.” He guessed.

“Sharp, like I said.” Zoya place a hand over his heart. He was almost trembling, wondering what
she was planning on doing to him.

“Please, don't take it away from me.” Sam throat felt tight. He couldn't picture what it meant to have
your love consumed. Would he notice some loss or would it feel natural? Could he survive it? With
his chronic depression, not having his love could be incredibly dangerous. He started to panic. “I
need it. I'm barely holding together. If you take it from me-

Zoya’s hand touched his cheek and he felt tingling warmth spread down through his body. His
knees buckled. She crouched down in front of him. Her dress rode up her thighs and he struggled to
not glance down to see what was visible. He could feel her drain some of his strength at his
impulsive. She baited him by spreading her legs more and he struggled to not look.

“I promise not to break such a sweet thing as you. I'm just gonna stir things up and take a little lick
off the head.” She whispered. Her lips moved to meet his own. “Don't be scared. Fear spoils the
flavor.”

Sam inhaled in alarm as she kissed him. His shock was made crippling by the way everything
changed around him. The dark alleyway was drowned out by bursts of soft golden light that
bloomed & bled across his sight. The scene was consumed by illumination. The chill night air
turned mild and he felt far away, somewhere better. His mind was fighting to keep up with the
change, or rather to hold onto the transition itself. Something very strange had just happened- he
knew that, but he couldn’t put his finger on what was strange. A significant part of him didn’t want
to dwell on whatever that odd feeling was, not when everything else felt so nice.

He was standing on a secluded patch of grass on campus showing Brady how to block a punch.
Brady took a slightly opportunistic swing at Sam's torso, but Sam easily deflected it while dodging.
He grabbed Brady's arm as he wrapped around embracing Brady. It felt so freeing to be able to
share that little piece of his identity with Brady, even if he couldn't explain exactly where that
experience fighting had come from. Instead of becoming frustrated, Brady seemed to become more
& more infatuated every time Sam bested him. They kissed below a canopy in full bloom with
purple blossoms.

“You really are the best thing in my life.” Brady said as he tucked a few stray hairs behind Sam's
ear. “I love you.”

Sam opened his mouth. He was going to say it back- he wanted to say it back. Everything flickered
with cool shadows and a static hiss overwhelmed him. He wasn't outside with Brady anymore,
instead he was seated in his room bending the end of a metal wire into a strange shape. Furcifer sat
on the table, watching him work with intense interest. When he was done he held an odd almost
wand-like object out for the tabby to see.

“Want do you think?” He asked.
Furcifer’s tail whipped excitedly. Sam nodded with an unenthusiastic sigh. He picked up a hand held kitchen torch for broiling, lit it, then started heating the end of the wire that was bent into the weird symbol- it was a brand. Before anything could be done with the brand, the room flickered with a soft warm glow and he could feel a sense of calm come over him.

Stacy. She was dancing, spinning around so that her magenta dress patterned with black skulls flared out around her. Her laugh was refreshing and carried all the lightheartedness that he’d come to appreciate in her. She beaconed him over to dance with her, she wanted him to be happy- she was one of those people who really cared. He picked her up and held her to him. Her soft hand caressed his cheek affectionately, then she kissed him more delicately than she ever had before. For a moment it was disorienting for someone other than Brady to be so tender with him, but he supposed it made sense. She was a sweet person raised in a family that cared- the thought made him strangely wistful. Her lips breathed warmth on his ear.

“Maybe someday.” She whispered, then she was gone. He looked around desperately trying to find her. It didn’t make sense for her to just disappear. Something wasn’t right.

The crackling static was back. Flashes of white light stunned him for a moment- when he recovered the scene was a dark bedroom. A man & a woman he didn't recognize were sleeping. Two large men appeared in the room beside the bed- one grabbed the woman. She screamed as she was dragged from the bed. Her fiancé reached for her but could only clutch her hand. His throat was slashed by the second intruder as the woman's engagement ring fell from her finger. In an instant the attackers & the woman were gone. Another flash of white.

Brady. It was the first time they’d met. Sam was sitting alone in the shade of a tree at Stanford. A few of the guys from the football team came over to ask Sam to tryout. That was back when he had a little more muscle on him, but he didn't want to do anything that might distract him from his studies. When Sam rejected the idea for the third time the guys made fun of him, one even called him gay. He'd been unsure what to do since he didn’t want to cause a scene or get into a fight. Brady swooped it and told off the jocks, then offered to buy him some coffee. They spent the whole day together talking about anything & everything. No one had ever talked to him for 15 minutes let alone ten hours. Brady was charming & funny and when he leaned in to kiss Sam goodnight Sam thought maybe he'd finally found that goodness that was supposed to exist in the world.

The light above them in the hallway flickered and Sam could've sworn he saw eyes- yellow eyes in the afterimage of the light fixture. The eyes seemed hauntingly familiar. He’d seen them in a vision. Sam didn’t understand how he knew about the visions, he hadn’t started having them yet. He let go of Brady and backed away. Something wasn't right. It'd been years since their first kiss. Sam started looking around for signs of what was going on, but the light above gave a static hiss and turned too bright.

There was a young Latina woman curled up in the fetal position clutching her head, crying in pain. She was in a hospital bed. Machines beeped and two nurses moved quickly administering medication, but nothing was helping her. Blood spilled from her nose & tear ducts. She opened her eyes suddenly, then the windows shattered. For a moment Sam could've sworn her eyes were solid black, but in an instant they were normal again. The nurses hadn't noticed, after shaking off the broken glass they were working frantically, their patient had flatlined.

There was another flash of light- somehow he knew there had been other flashes. He'd just been with Brady and then he was… well, he hadn’t been anywhere. He hadn't been in the hospital room with the dead woman, only watched it. It had to have been a vision. She'd probably been one of the damned people. He was trying to hold onto the thought, but another scene overtook him.
Jessica. She was so beautiful in every way there was. It'd been almost two years since he'd seen her without the blood & the flames that marred his nightmares. She was wearing one of his t-shirts, curled up on their couch, sketching out an image onto a canvas. It was the painting she'd been planning on giving him for his birthday. When she spotted him looking at her she pulled it to her chest so that he couldn't see what she was drawing. He'd never gotten to see what she was painting for him, the incomplete canvas had also been lost in the fire. It was a dream or hallucination, something he didn't understand, but part of him didn't care. He wanted to set the canvas aside and hold her again. She playfully evaded him, gesturing for him to follow her toward the bedroom.

When he passed through the doorway into the hall he found himself somewhere he’d never been before. It was a beautiful house, the sort he used to imagine them living in someday. Gentle sunshine & the songs of birds drifted through the windows giving him a sort of peace. He followed the smell of freshly baked cookies to a love note from Jessica. When he went upstairs to find her a noise caught his attention. He went to investigate and found a nursery at the end of the hall. There was a baby lying in the crib, a little girl. When he'd dared to dream of having a family he'd always wanted a daughter. He hesitantly reached out for the girl- she had wisps of blond hair like Jessica’s turned slightly brown like his own.

The scene flickered around him, crackling with that static sound. It was suddenly nighttime. The baby was a boy now for some reason. Sam's head was killing him- He could feel the vision happening this time, it packed more of a punch. Made dizzy by the vision, he gripped the crib, hunching over it to brace himself. A few drops of blood fell on the baby's face and for a moment Sam worried that he'd gotten a nosebleed, then he felt a wet drop fall onto the back of his neck. When he looked up he saw a blond woman in a white nightgown was pinned to the ceiling. At first he thought the woman might be Jessica, but it was someone else. Her stomach was cut open, blood dripped from her. Sam stumbled backwards falling to the floor just as the room burst into flames around him. She reached out for him, but before he could place the woman's face he was engulfed in fire.

Sam curled up on his side trying to protect himself from the flames, but they were gone. He was in some musty old bedroom- it was familiar, someplace from his childhood. His head was killing him and he was so very tired, laying there on the floor barely able to move. There was blood on the rough wooden floorboards below him. He could hear talking and laughing, below him- he was on the second story of a building. The group of men who were talking were joking about killing witches. He smelled the familiar stench of a burning body and started crying.

“Please don't kill me.” He begged through the blood & tears before he passed out.

Something was wrong. He was seeing things that couldn't have been happening in sequence. The whole thing felt off- certain moments in the mix had that sensation that tickled part of his brain. His visions were triggering much closer together than he was used to. It was probably related to whatever hallucination or dream state he was in. The thought only made his mind race faster, caught up in the anxiety of the moment. This was out of control. He had to try to shake himself out of it- There was that damn flickering light & static.

Two little girls of maybe five or six years old were huddled in the corner of what looked like a basement. Sam zipped up his jacket to hide the blood on his shirt, then cautiously approached them. He didn't want to scare them, but it wasn't safe to just hang around.

“Is one of you Maria?” Sam asked, offering his best effort at a reassuring smile. The taller of the two girls nodded. “I'm a friend of your mom. Come on, I'm taking you back home.”

He picked up the girls, one each arm. The cut on his chest hurt, but he didn't acknowledge it. When
he turned around to get them out of there he found himself empty handed. He barely had enough
time to realize how short the visions were becoming before he was hit with another flash of light.

He was lying on the bed of the apartment he shared with Jessica back at Stanford. Jessica’s bloody
body was beside him. He reached out to grab her, but flames surrounded them both and he couldn't
see beyond the fire. His clothes were burnt away, but he wasn't harmed. A pair of soft hands
carressed him. Arms embraced him. Lips kissed him. He was making out with a woman, he
couldn't tell if it was Jessica or Stacy. Another pair of hands, larger masculine- they traced the line of
his jaw the way Brady liked to. He was laying in a bed of gentle fire that only produced a tickling
warmth, pressed blindly between his lovers. Two mouths, four hands, & so much more played with
him. It felt incredible. He barely even noticed that it wasn't really- well, maybe he barely cared.
The realization that his guard was completely down jolted Sam out of the moment.

He was kneeling in the alleyway behind the bar. There was no bright flash of light or static hiss. No
telltale signs of visions or fantasies. This was real. Whatever Zoya had done to him was over. His
eyes stung, his cheeks were damp with tears. He tasted blood and found more than usual had poured
down from his nose to his chin. When he looked down, his shirt was stained with blood and his
pants with cum.

Zoya was awkwardly sitting on the ground in front of him. The way her arms were supporting her,
it looked as though she had fallen backwards from her crouching position. She licked a little blood
from her lips while staring him up & down in surprise. He guessed she'd been kissing him the whole
time, even throughout the nosebleed.

“I've never done that with a psychic before.” She made a grunt of approval while clenching her
thighs together. “Not exactly the ride I was going for- a bit more fear & sadness than I’m into, but
that was still a hell of a thing. If you can learn to focus your visions to specific flavors of emotions
you could make a lot of friends in the House of the Twisted Hearts.”

His head was still spinning from all the things he'd seen. There was too much information that had
come at him too fast to process- but one thing stood out to him with horrible clarity, she’d done
something and it had caused him to have visions. It was frightening to think that he’d had visions
triggered against his will- actually, they'd always been against his will, but this time it'd been
induced. He hadn't been able to narrow the subject of the visions down at all, but in theory there
existed a very real way he could be used. Zoya had indicated that she wasn't planning on hurting
him, though that was before she'd stumbled upon the potentially opportunity.

“The vision with the woman on the ceiling was something powerful.” Zoya commented as she stood
up and fixed her dress. “Though maybe it wasn’t the climax we were treated to later.”

“I didn't- We didn't have...” He was still struggling to figure out what she’d done to him as he
covered the stain on his jeans with his hands. Her lips curled into a slight grinned at his
embarrassment.

“I don't want to burn that bridge our first time, but maybe next time we'll do this without the clothes.
Wouldn't want anything else to get stained.” She pulled a metal coin from her cleavage and tossed it
to him. For a second he thought she was paying him- he certainly had the unclean feeling that he'd
earned it. But it was a talisman. “My card. Catch you on the flip side, love.”

She was gone.

Sam waved off Stacy with a promise to explain all of it after he got some rest, then returned home to
immediately take a long shower. His shirt was a light enough grey that he didn't even bother trying
to clean the blood out and just threw it away. He considered throwing away the pants, which could
easily be cleaned- though the jeans were a reminder of the encounter. They hadn't had one of the
typical sexual encounters, but Zoya had overpowered him, messed with his emotions, kissed him
without his consent, & forced him to cum for her own pleasure. He threw the pants into the trash
bin, trying to put that much more distance between himself and the assault.

Despite the temptation to take too many drugs and pretend the evening hadn't happened, there was
too much potentially valuable information interspersed in the events. The stakes were too high & his
resources were too few for him to bury the whole thing. He went to his room, slipped on his softest
pair of pajama pants, then curled up with his laptop in bed. He logged everything he'd seen in his
journal and decided to try parsing the memories, fantasies, & visions when he was feeling more
emotionally capable of churning over those images.

He turned the talisman over in his hand a few times, looking at the engraving of a woman with a
forked tongue. Some vague feeling of recognition made him google image search “female demon
coin”. Several rows down the screen he saw a talisman very much like the one he was holding. He
clicked the link to see what text was associated with the picture.

Sam tossed the coin across the room like a grenade that might go off at any moment when he saw the
article on succubi. The House of the Twisted Hearts suddenly made more sense. After taking a few
calming breaths he started reading. He hadn't been planning on having sex with Zoya, but skimming
through the article he was all the more committed to avoiding it. A lapse in judgment on that front
could cause significant harm to his sanity, health, or simply kill him. Never mind the paragraph
about how succubi & incubi often used human victims to reproduce-

Sam scrolled down to the much shorter section on incubi, the male equivalent of succubi. He read it,
then continued to stare at the screen for several seconds. Zoya’s explanation of what she'd like to do
with his soul was consistent with a method for turning a human soul into a subservient incubus. The
whole thing made him deeply uncomfortable. All the more reason for him to find a way to get
control over the contract on his soul. The last thing he needed was for Zoya to go off and make a bid
on it. Sam started playing House of the Rising Sun on his laptop, then lit a joint in a desperate
attempt to calm his nerves. He knew the deep end was supposed to be deep, but he hadn't intended
to catch the attention of a succubus.

When his joint was gone and the song was done he rolled over to turn off his laptop, but saw there
was an unread email from Wren. It seemed that there was a demand for psychics on the Quiet
Market. Sam groaned as he read through an itemized listing of how much money his various organs
could fetch with the right buyer. The last entry on the list was most alarming though. Apparently the
whole was indeed worth more than the sum of its parts. It seemed market rate for a live psychic was
7.2 million dollars. How well known was it that psychics could have their visions forced? He
closed his laptop and laid in bed wondering how solvent the Chinatown & Sunset covens were.
more and it was stylistically tempting to give less. So this is how it ended up.

I feel a bit bad for abusing Sam like this. I thought about making the last bit with Zoya less sexually abusive, but she's a succubus. In the end I'm having to just embrace the uncomfortable and try to treat it respectfully.

I highly doubt I'll be able to get the next chapter posted before gishwhes (August 5-12). I captain a team and will undoubtedly be heavily consumed with that. I've done little drabbles or one off stories during past hunts so it's possible I might write something, but the next chapter is more complicated than usual and I don't think it's likely I'll risk tinkering with it while distracted.
Conflicts of Interest

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sam woke up in the middle of the night, heart pounding. A dull stabbing pain seemed to radiate from behind his right eye, down to his neck. His body was shaking and covered with sweat. For a moment his mind protested trying to remember his dreams- or visions, or whatever he’d just seen. It was some garbled mess that had largely replayed the sights, sounds, & sensations that Zoya had produced in him. Nothing stood out as new & noteworthy, but he wasn’t really feeling strong enough to dig too deep.

“Furcifer, are you here?” Sam asked the unlit, silent room as he gingerly rolled over onto his side. He groped around for any painkiller he could find that was within arm’s reach. As much as his head hurt, the prospect of standing up felt like too much effort. He pulled a pill from the bottle on his nightstand, then tried to take it with nothing to drink. The pill stuck in his throat, partially swallowed. It wasn’t big enough to cause a serious problem, but he was forced to lay there as the pill dissolved slowly in the wrong spot, creating a gnawing ache just behind his breastbone. The feeling reminded him of heartache.

To Sam’s surprise he felt a strange disappointment when the orange tabby didn’t hop up on the bed at his call. He didn’t mind the cat as much as when it had first started showing up, but that didn’t mean that they were friends. Yet there was something about waking up in bed completely alone after the encounter he’d just had with Zoya that left him uneasy. The thought of Zoya made him shiver in his warm bed. He was scared or lonely- undoubtedly both. Maybe he should’ve just let Stacy stay the night at his place?

It was too late to invite Brady over, though maybe tomorrow he’d ask him to spend the night. He wouldn’t be able to confide about the succubus to Brady, but there was no doubt that Brady would try to make him happy. The idea that he was relying on Brady so much was a bit disconcerting, railing against all his decades of abandonment & unhealthy self-preservation impulses- Sam could feel the conflict inside himself and tried to assure himself that connections & reliance on others was a good thing. It was a good thing that he wanted to be comforted. It was a good thing that he was lonely.

Despite feeling a little silly, but he wrapped the blanket more tightly around himself. He held Brady’s pillow, breathing in the thankfully still enticing scent. After a moment, he gently dragged his fingers along his jaw, the way Brady liked to do. As soon as the painkillers were in his system he fell back asleep.

The encounter with Zoya had left Sam shaken for the entire next day. In addition to his concerns about the revelation that he didn’t own his soul, there was another unexpected issue. After that horribly long night, followed by a morning dominated by the feeling of overwhelming wrongness, Sam invited Brady over. He wanted some comfort & familiarity, which Brady was more than willing to provide.

The pair of them had had four self-defense lessons since Brady had told Sam about his dad possibly dropping in on them at some point. Ever since Sam had first offered to help him in that way, Brady had been slightly quieter- but not in a bad way.
Historically, Brady had been the slightly more dominant one in their relationship. His charm & wealth gave him the sort of entitlement that caused him to set the agenda more often than not. To be fair, Sam didn't have the money, familiarity with the area, or free time to aspire to go out & do things for fun. So Brady would often be the one dragging him to an event or restaurant- eager to show off the exciting world around them to his apparently naive boyfriend from the Midwest.

Now though Sam was dabbling in taking the lead and it seemed to be making a difference. Occasionally he noticed Brady looking at him with a subtle, almost vulnerable smile- the expression of a man content. Maybe Sam wasn't confident all the time, some suave guy with his shit together, but in those fleeting moments when Sam could teach Brady- give him support in return, the sincere affection in Brady's eyes made Sam's chest a bit tight.

But that day Sam had been too tired to suggest that they go for an afternoon jog and a fighting lesson. Instead they mostly just kept each other company while sitting at the card table, studying their respective subjects. The study session was admittedly long overdue and normally the academic domain would give him a minor boost, but Sam didn't feel confident or in control. He wanted to be held, yet he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to be touched. As he made an annotation in the margin of his textbook, the pencil lead broke, drawing Brady's attention.

“You look tense.” Brady's hand slid up Sam's arm. “Let me take care of that.”

Brady stood up, then circled around behind Sam, dragging his fingertips along Sam's exposed skin before gripping his shoulders. The otherwise seductive touch was jarringly similar to the way Zoya had touched him. Sam pushed the comparison from his mind as he let Brady gently turned him around in his chair. Still seated before Brady, Sam's face was just higher than level with Brady's crotch. For a second Sam thought about touching him, hinting at the offer of a blowjob. But before he could, Brady cupped Sam's face and softly led him to stand too.

When Brady leaned in to kiss him, Sam felt a small chill run through him. He forced himself not to cringe or pull back. It wouldn't hurt or be wrong, this was Brady. Their lips touched and it only took Sam a second or two to fully kiss him back. Brady didn't notice his hesitation.

Brady playfully pushed Sam backwards onto the bed. Sam’s stomach knotted at being forced down, but he didn't want to mess things up by saying something. His fingers gripped the bedding, it grounded him in the familiar sensation, the familiar place, with a familiar person. There weren't any flickering lights or static, this was real & safe. Brady climbed onto the bed, then started making out with him. Brady's hand slid down Sam's torso and moved to palm Sam's dick through his jeans, but stopped after a moment. Despite the flirting and making out on the bed, Sam wasn't actually that hard.

“Uh… huh.” Brady leaned back and stared at Sam. “Do you not want to-”

“I do, believe me I do.” Sam worried that he sounded desperate, but Brady didn't say anything. “Just kiss me.”

Brady gave a small shrug before kissing Sam. He gripped Sam's ass as they kissed, grinding against each other. Some tender nibbling & warm breath on Sam's ear made him moan.

“You want me to give it to you?” Brady purred.

Sam knew that Brady was just trying to help by talking dirty to him, but it somehow made things worse. Brady had to know that something was off if he was making the extra effort. Sam tried to think of all his go to fantasies for masterbating, but nothing was working. The pressure he was under to perform was making the problem that much more difficult. A little panic & shame flared in him
when he identified the positive feedback loop. His body tensed slightly in Brady's embrace, dashing any hope of having unhindered sex.

“Is something wrong?” Brady asked, dropping his flirtatious tone. “Am I doing something-”

“Shit. It’s not you.” Sam assured. The last thing he wanted was for Brady to take it personally. “I think it’s the stress or my anxiety or something.”

“Oh, okay.” Brady sat up a bit, then visibly struggled to figure out how to react. He stroked himself and raised his eyebrows at a thought before glancing at Sam, then opened his mouth debating saying something. Sam could almost see the angel & the devil on Brady’s shoulders arguing over whether to ask Sam to either blow him or let Brady fuck him. Under different circumstances Sam would’ve offered to do either of those, but not after last night. He didn’t have the emotional stability to subordinate himself in that way right then.

“I didn’t sleep well last night. Can you just be here with me for awhile?” Sam asked. “Maybe I’ll have more energy later.”

“Okay… yeah.” Brady laid back on the bed.

Sam rolled toward Brady. He couldn't quite maneuver his larger frame into a position where his head was resting in Brady's shoulder, but they shared a pillow and Sam embraced him. Brady's hand caressed Sam’s arm, the settled to hold his hand. It couldn't have been more than five minutes before Sam fell into several hours of deeply restful dreamless sleep.

The next morning Brady had to leave bright & early to return to Stanford for classes & some imminently due lab work. Sam decided to go visit Stacy and tell her about the encounter with Zoya, then hopefully brainstorm on the issue of finding the demon that owned his soul. Despite the restful night’s sleep, he was a bit too slow moving during his morning routine causing him to just miss the baby bullet train, unfortunately doubling his travel time. So he decided to make the best of it. He was only six cards into reviewing his Business Organization flashcards while taking the train up to San Francisco when his phone started ringing. It was Stacy.

“Are you still on the train?” She asked as soon as he answered.

“Yeah, I'm running late-”

“Get off at the next stop and turn around.”

“What's going on?”

“A raid.” It sounded like she ran a little ways, then caught her breath. He could hear a siren on her end of the call. “I think. I don't know what’s going on, but there was shooting.”

“Is everyone okay?” He didn't need to specify that he was talking about her coven.

“I think- one sec.” Stacy started talking to someone in Cantonese. “Shit, I gotta go. Don’t come up.”

She hung up on him. For a second he wanted to call her back- to call someone up there in order to find out what was going on, to make sure everyone was okay, but she sounded right in the thick of whatever was happening and he didn't know the phone number of anyone else in the coven. He immediately started searching for breaking news articles on his phone while waiting to get off at the next stop.
At least three deaths and eight injured had been reported in a shooting two blocks northwest of Union Square in San Francisco. Sam anxiously chewed his lip as he checked the map to find that it was located between Chinatown & the Tenderloin. A suspect had died at the scene, though the article didn't give a cause of death- with witches it could've been anything. Police were advising everyone to stay inside while they searched for two additional gunmen.

Sam got off the train at the next stop and just sat down on the concrete ground of the station platform. He wasn't sure where to go or what to do. Some impulse in him wanted to get up there and go after the attackers, but he was just some guy, he didn't even own a weapon aside from a knife. He felt helpless sitting there, refreshing the news on his phone, waiting for something. An update revised the death toll to five, then his phone started ringing. Stacy again.

“Is everyone okay?”

“Cheryl & Tammy are at the hospital- Tammy looked stable. Wren’s dead.” Sam had met the three of them, but Wren was the one he’d actually interacted with in a substantial way. They’d spoken only two days earlier. “Sunset & Tenderloin both lost people too.”

Sam buried his face in his hands for a moment. Somehow that made things worse- of course it did. Before the violence had just been a tragedy, with the two other covens involved it was suddenly political.

“Are you having a full on gang war now?” He guessed.

“They didn't do it. It looks like it was a hunter raid.” Stacy corrected.

“What?”

“Andy saw the security footage. The shooters’ car was out of state and full of weapons.”

Andy was one of the more memorable coven members because he was their person inside the local police department. As far as Sam could tell from the maybe dozen exchanged sentences, Andy seemed like a reasonable guy, though a bit unamused by everything around him. Sam supposed a certain amount of cynicism was due for either cops or witches, doubly so for the man stuck in the middle. It wasn't entirely clear to Sam if Andy considered himself a cop who happened to be a witch or if he embraced the reality that he was a mole in the police department. Either way he was certainly an invaluable source of information.

“Did he see the shooters? Does anyone know what they look like?”

“We got a few people working on it.” Stacy assured, though he wasn't sure what having the hunters eventually IDed meant to the witches themselves. “The covens are all scrambling. It's probably safest for you to stay near campus. Closest coven to you is either Little Saigon or Little Portugal, but that's still a bit of a drive to your east.”

“You think they're gonna get attacked or do the attacking?” Sam asked before stepping aboard a southbound train back home.

“No idea, but everyone's on high alert. Those two hunters are still out there- fucking animals.” Stacy muttered.

He took a seat, then his eyes scanned the other passengers. There were about twenty people in his train car, mostly single riders- too many with bags or clothes that could easily conceal weapons. If the police had found the attackers’ car with a bunch of weapons in it, that meant the attackers hadn't sped off in it. The odds were slim that out of state hunters would be familiar enough with the mass
transit system to know how to make it down the peninsula so quickly, but Sam still eyed a few people with extra suspicion. He had terrible luck, he felt a little paranoia was justified.

“They didn't take the car?” Sam confirmed.

“No.”

“Do you know what type of car?” He said a silent prayer that it wasn't a black ‘67 impala.

“No idea about make & model- blue I think.” Sam let out a sigh of relief at the news, but the feeling was short lived. “Bhavya’s called for a meeting. I think something’s about to go down.”

“What do you mean ‘go down?’” He didn't like the way that sounded, especially if hunters were involved somehow.

“The covens haven't met up like this for as long as I can remember.” Stacy explained. “I'll let you know the fallout. For now I'm gonna go let a mā know I'm okay.”

“Be careful.”

The afternoon dragged on like an unfocused blur. He couldn’t distract himself with school work and the news reports weren’t nearly informative enough. The whole thing felt like a slow motion emotional crisis. It was disorienting to realize he might be grieving for the dead coven members. Aside from Jessica, he hadn’t experienced that sort of pain related to death in many years. He'd grown to like the coven and the thought that violence had touched people he cared about suddenly brought back old feelings & fears. When he was a kid, after particularly brutal hunts, he’d lay in bed drowning in a sea of what ifs. The helplessness, the vulnerability- he felt very small all of a sudden. Once again he was the little kid who hadn’t yet learned the painful lesson that you couldn’t be hurt by losing friends if you’d never had friends to begin with.

Part of him whispered that the coven wasn’t his family. For all intents and purposes he didn't have a family. He had blood relatives sure, but his dad & Dean had stopped being family to him years ago, despite Dean’s very minor attempt to reconcile with him. In Sam’s bleakest moods that felt like it was for the best- but in the darkness of his bedroom not 36 hours earlier he’d been crushed by loneliness. There were people in his life that he cared about, whether he'd meant to tumble into those relationships or not. As strange as it might sound, there was an entire group of people that liked him and treated him warmly- and that had to be a positive thing.

He'd never been welcomed into that kind of environment, even among the hunters. He'd always been John’s awkward runt kid, shying away from his responsibilities. On the rare occasion that his family had attended hunter gatherings -usually a pyre- the adults had entertained themselves by recounting tales of Sam's mishaps & Dean’s triumphs. At least that's what it felt like to Sam. The only hunter who'd ever even tried to be kind to him was Bobby- Sam suspected because the older hunter had never had a kid of his own. But periodically acting as an outlet for someone’s paternal instincts was far from being welcomed & accepted by a family.

Laying around his dorm room, the more he thought about the attack the worse he felt. He'd seen Wren only two days earlier, but there hadn't been any vision of his death as there had been with the girl he'd saved from overdosing. Maybe he needed to touch people for it to work? Maybe his powers didn't work two days in advance? If he'd only known more about his powers maybe he could've seen it coming and stopped so many deaths? It took all his willpower to not numb himself with a drink or drugs. He wanted to stay sober in case Stacy or the coven needed his help.
Eventually Sam convinced himself to get out of bed in search of some food & a change of scenery. He was walking along the sidewalk that skirted the campus on his way to grab a quick dinner before heading back to his dorm. With the meal & exercise hopefully giving him a second wind, he’d probably try to study, but if the evening was anything like his afternoon he’d just be sitting around refreshing the news feed related to the shooting. As of a half hour ago seven people had died including one shooter and two suspects were still at large.

He was only a block from the local poke restaurant when a black Tesla Model S pulled up next to him. The rear passenger’s side window rolled down and Bhavya looked out at him.

“Sam, get in the car.”

He hesitated for a moment before doing what she’d said. As soon as he'd closed the door they were on their way at a speed that was undoubtedly ticketable. The male driver & a woman in the front passenger seat were both armed with holstered pistols. Bhavya wore a simple white saree and wasn't carrying a weapon or even a purse.

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere private.” Bhavya answered as she looked out the car window. “What do you know about hunters?”

He felt like all the blood had just drained out of him. Only a bit more than a month after he’d met with her the covens had been hit by hunters. It'd only been a week or so since his dad & Dean were in the area, maybe Bhavya had been keeping an eye on him. If she’d found out that he was related to hunters- it looked bad. He wondered just how hopeless it'd be to bail from the car at the next traffic light and make a run for it. Somehow she’d figured out where he went to school. She’d probably be able to find him with minimal effort.

“What's going on?” He decided to play ignorant and hope that she’d at least hear him out.

“My people were attacked- some of your Chinatown friends too. Something needs to be done about this.” Her tone was contemplative concern with a sharp anger to it, but it wasn’t directed at him.

“What do you want with me?” He wasn’t sure what he wanted her to say, probably anything short of his death as some sort of revenge would do.

“People with your talents are few & far between.” She glanced over at him. “It's times like these when it's important to have powerful friends.”

“You mean my visions?” Sam wasn't sure whether she was suggesting that he was powerful or that he needed her help. Either way he didn't want her to get the wrong idea about what he had to offer. “I can't control it. I'm not gonna be much help to you.”

“We're going to a gathering of very important people, many of which exude magics you've never even heard of, and the location- well, it's peculiar. Seers have their senses open to things that the rest of us might miss.” Her eyes narrowed at him, studying him for some sort of silent insight. “I'm not asking for you to tell fortunes, only to watch & listen. If something comes to your attention, tell me about it.”

“Tell you about it in private afterwards?” He guessed. She was taking him along to potentially spy on the others.

“Yes, unless you observe something particularly urgent.”
“Urgent?” Sam's eyes flicked to the armed driver & guard. “You think there might be another attack?”

“I think there might be many dangerous elements.”

“I don't want to fight anyone.” Sam felt a bit guilty. She was mourning her dead while possibly facing another attack and he was apparently even rejecting defensive action. “I mean, I don't like violence.”

“Have you ever killed anyone?” She asked pointedly. When he didn't answer she reached out and gently pat his hand. “You don't have to tell me about it, that's fine. I've killed many people in my life and I expect that I'll kill many more. I don't much care for killing, but we all make sacrifices.”

Bhavya turned to resume staring out the window in quiet contemplation. He had found her intimidating from the moment he'd met her, but during their previous conversation she'd shown him a rare, maybe almost maternal kindness that had made him warm to her slightly. In that moment, hearing her confessing to killing people, he realized that for all the hunters & murderers he'd met, she was just as dangerous- hell, she'd amassed power for centuries. She was probably the most dangerous of them all once the issue of sanity was removed from the curve. Yet, as chilling as she was, part of him couldn’t help but like her.

The car ride took only about twenty minutes. He didn't drive and was thus unfamiliar with significant portions of the area which were less accessible by public transit. His limited knowledge placed his school just south of a tall skinny bay- The Bay. San Francisco was located at the end of a peninsula that extended up halfway along the bay’s western side. Roughly halfway between San Francisco & his school, on the peninsula, was Palo Alto, where he’d lived for four years while attending Stanford. Directly across the narrow bay from San Francisco was Oakland. Then to the south of Sam’s school, beyond a small ridge of mountain, was the beach town of Santa Cruz. Between these landmarks there were dozens of towns & cities that had bled into each other and largely lost their borders during the tech boom. The narrow boulevard of boutique shops & restaurants that they were driving down could've been any number of places thanks to the patchwork quality of the Bay Area. Though the lush tree covered hills adorned with large walled houses indicated that he was in a wealthy neighborhood to the south or west.

They pulled down an alleyway, stopping briefly at a back entrance to some two story, brick building establishment. Bhavya gestured for Sam to get out of the car before doing so herself. Once Sam was out of the sedan he stopped and waited for more direction. He was there as her guest, or debatable prisoner, and he was completely out of his element. Bhavya circled the car, then allowed her bodyguard to get the door for her. At Bhavya’s wordless instruction he followed her into the building.

The dimly lit hallway passed a commercial kitchen that was furiously producing delicate plates for tasting menus of an unattainable cost. Their party turned a corner, heading away from the laughter & clinking silverware of a busy dining hall. Instead they headed for a staircase that descended into a large concrete cellar. He expected to find some secret passage or a hidden door reminiscent of a speakeasy, but there didn’t seem to be anywhere else to go. His stomach lurches as he wondered if this was all a ruse to kill him somewhere private. Though they were witches, this sort of subtlety in a murder was just excessive.

“Has your Chinatown friend taken you through a shadow gate before?” Bhavya asked him while raising her hand toward the wall, searching for something that didn’t require physical contact.

“I don't think so.” Sam’s brow furrowed despite feeling less worried about the odds of his imminent death. He couldn’t even recall hearing the term before. “What’s a shadow gate?”
“Do you get motion sickness?”

“No.” He was getting nervous again- maybe not for his life, but her question didn’t bode well.

“Follow close behind me.” Bhavya told him, then added. “You might like to place a hand on my shoulder to help you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Mind the first step.” She warned as she took a step toward the concrete wall. Since they were talking, Sam reflexively moved to close the distance between them. As soon as he’d taken the step forward he’d felt like an idiot for not proceeding more cautiously.

The first thing he noticed was the scene around him become a dark oily smear, but that wasn’t half as unsettling as the realization that his foot hadn't landed on stable floor. The more his center of gravity moved forward, the more it felt like the ground was being dragged backwards and out from under him until he was teetering on the edge of a cliff. Before he could think of what to do he tipped forward. His sense of direction was completely thrown. Part of him expected to crash face first into the concrete floor and part of him expected to fall into some kind of pit, but the pull of gravity abruptly shifted 90°. The direction that had previously been down was now straight ahead. He was standing on what felt like solid ground, though his knees shook weakly. Soft fingers patted his hand that had somehow managed to grip Bhavya's shoulder without him noticing.

“You've got to walk it off.” Bhavya advised. “You'll be fine.”

He staggered forward a few steps, causing some of the disorientation to fade. As his head began wrapping itself around the change and his vision returned to normal, he started noticing that something was off about the environment. It looked as though they were in the same building that they had entered from the alleyway, but several details were wrong. The basement was a slightly different layout- there was a short hallway in front of them leading to a single unmarked wooden door. He couldn't hear restaurant patrons in the nearby dining hall. Beyond that everything had a strange sensation to it, everything felt off.

“What just happened?” Sam touched the side of his head, hoping that the mild ache he was feeling would simply fade away. “Where are we?”

“We entered another plane.” Bhavya answered far too coolly. “I suppose you might call it the literal flip side.”

“Another plane?” Sam froze, then looked around him, appreciating the differences in the environment anew.

“Earth, the Hells, your beloved Heaven- all the transformative planes exist on one axis.” She gestured from up to down, then side to side for contrast. “There are many collections of planes existing on different axes. We’re meeting here for security reasons. As far as I can tell the hunters aren't even aware that these planes exist.”

Sam braced himself against the wall. He felt like something was wrong- well, at least unusual. The right side of his head hurt a bit, but not as much as he was expecting for some reason- Even with the dim lighting in the basement hallway, his senses felt like they were taking in too much. It was like a migraine with an uncommonly small amount of pain. He could feel sound rattle around as vibrations in his skull. The light almost trailed across his sight as he moved his head. He could smell something that triggered a flare of nostalgia in him that he couldn’t place.
“We're very near to our home plane, so there is little innate danger here, but be sure to avoid wandering.” Bhavya told him when she checked behind herself to see that he wasn’t closely following. “This place is a poor imitation of our reality, but the further from Earth you travel the worse it will become- a copy of a copy of a copy and so on until you find yourself somewhere very far from home. Also, the further you go from Earth the harder it will be to get back, or stay alive in general. I suggest you stay close, you don't want to go slipping through a crack on accident.”

“A crack?” He swallowed dryly, earning an innocent tilt of the head. The thought of accidentally falling through some interplanar fissure was terrifying to the point where Sam had to actually convince himself to take another step. And if he did end up falling through one, what would a plane two levels removed look like? He wondered if that was an inherent danger sufficient to explain why witches didn’t just hide out on other planes to hide from hunters. “Is that why you aren’t here all the time? Since the hunters don’t know about this place.”

“The cracks aren’t a significant problem with enough experience.” She corrected. “The main reason we don’t use shadow gates more often is because it takes a considerable amount of power to conjure a shadow gate. Very few witches & supernatural creatures are capable of opening a gate and even fewer have the strength to return- but tonight is a special occasion, calling for increased protections & effort.”

“You seem pretty experienced. How deep have you traveled?” Sam asked as he carefully started following his guide, unsure of his allowed margin of error.

“When I was a much younger & foolish girl I traveled through four planes before my body gave out from the strain.”

“Gave out?” He didn’t like the sound of that. Though the strain from traveling might explain his sudden onset headache.

“It wasn't my most flattering moment.” Bhavya replied cryptically. “But from a broad enough perspective we’ll say that I survived.”

“How’d you get yourself out of there?” She’d mentioned that traveling between planes on a return trip required its own power. It was hard for him to picture someone who was near death making an equally treacherous journey back home.

“Earth is the only plane that I'm aware of that is predominantly human. If I had to guess, the vanity in me would speculate that Earth is the figurative center of the multiverse. And the planes closest to it, wrapping around it like the layers of an onion- those planes contain beings that circle us like predators or parasites. One such being took an interest in me. She saved me.”

“Your demon?”

“I believe that demons are inherently gifted in traveling between the planes. That's why we're even exposed to them at all. It very well might be their most defining characteristics- what is a demon without their ability to travel to Earth? A merchant, a witch, a slave driver?”

“They're evil.” Sam replied, then thought of Furcifer & the demon that had saved Bhavya. “Mostly.”

“Says the prey of the predator.”

Opening the door at the end of the hall, they entered a large meeting room with three people already seated at a conference table and a half dozen other observers standing closer to the walls behind their
representatives. Whatever whispering had been occurring when they entered stopped as everyone
turned to see who the newcomers were. Sam felt a flash of embarrassment & guilt, entering with
Bhavya. The implications of being brought in by her weren't clear to him, but the stunned look on
the faces of the Chinatown coven told him the move might've signified something.

Stacy had been standing with Andy, leaning against the wall behind Stacy's dad, Dennis. When
Stacy saw Sam walk in her eyes widened and she pushed herself off the wall in order to fully stand
up. It looked like she wanted to go over to him, but hesitated. She mouthed some question to him
that he couldn't discern. Until someone clued him into the proper etiquette of the situation he
couldn't do much more than shrug subtly at her.

“Be a dear and stay with me a moment before you go over to the Chinatown girl.” Bhavya told Sam
as she placed a hand on his arm. When he stopped, she stepped closer to him and lowered her voice
so that only he could hear her. “You're here to watch for oddities, which you'll report back to me
afterwards. Once this meeting begins, if you sense anything worrying- truly dangerous, speak up
immediately.”

“How do I know what's dangerous?”

“Once everyone in attendance is in this room, every other creature or force on this plane should be
considered a threat. Within this room…” She tilted her head to the side. “use your best judgment.”

“I’m not ready for this.”

“No one feels they're ready when circumstances call on them.” Bhavya offered, then patted his
cheek in a move that stirred many conflicted feelings he wasn't able to bother considering. “Now go
off to your Chinatown girl. She looks like she's about to come over here to fight me for you.”

Sam backed away from Bhavya for a couple steps before turning and walking over to stand next to
Stacy. Her hand subtly slid along the wall behind them, then grasped his fingers. He squeezed her
hand. At least she was familiar, someone he could count on in this bizarre setting.

“She picked me up at campus.” Sam whispered by way of an explanation & apology.

“Did she threaten you?” Stacy asked as she watched Bhavya take a seat at the head of the table.

“I have no idea.” His eyes scanned the room to make sure no one was looking at him too closely
before adding as quietly as possible. “She wants me to look out for stuff, since I'm a psychic- spying
on people and looking for danger.”

“Are you really gonna spy for her?”

“Can you get me out of here if I say no to her?” Sam asked, earning a disheartening frown. “I have
no fucking clue what I'm doing.”

“It's gonna be okay.” Stacy assured. “Just hang tight and we’ll be out of here in an hour or two.”

This was a setting where he'd never expected to find himself. It was true there was some borderline
morbidity fascination involved with seeing how witches really interacted- this was the kind of behind
the scenes insight most hunters would literally kill for. But that was part of the inherent problem.
There was no doubt in his mind that the points in the dangerous column were stacked precariously
high, ready to bury him at the slightest jostle. Each step he took deeper into the world of witchcraft
also brought him closer to the crosshairs of a hunter’s rifle- on top of whatever risks arose from his
demonic shadow.
Then there was the fact that the environment was foreign, potentially featuring otherworldly characteristics that he hadn’t had explained. Bhavya’s explanation of the place and what he was supposed to do was woefully lacking. There was no way for him to know what was mundane or noteworthy in a plane he’d never visited before—hell, he’d never even known existed. He wasn’t even sure how to get back to their home plane without help.

Lastly, he didn’t doubt for a second that everyone in that room was more than capable of killing him. Stacy was the only one that knew how close his ties were to the hunting community. After the run in with the hunter during the first evening Sam had dinner with the Chen family, Sam had told Dennis & a few of Stacy's other close family that he'd known a few hunters growing up, but he'd intentionally framed it as a much more tenuous relationship than the reality of the situation. If his connections to the hunting community were discovered he was pretty sure he wouldn’t get back to Earth alive.

“That's Trenton Smith, leader of the Tenderloin coven.” Stacy whispered to Sam, shaking him from his unpleasant thoughts. She nodded toward a lanky pale man in his forties sitting across the table from Dennis. He was wearing comfortable sneakers, charcoal grey straight cut jeans, and a black hoodie. His face was dim, but alert. Too many bloodshot veins marked his grey eyes, which would’ve otherwise matched his tightly cut silvery hair. He looked like a man who’d had a year’s worth of trouble crammed into a single very bad day. The two bodyguards standing behind him were also dressed in casual clothes and seemed at least as visibly stressed. Sam supposed Tenderloin had also lost people that morning. “He’s kinda a dick at times, but at least he’s reasonable.”

A few seats to Trenton’s right was a woman with lightly tanned skin & dark brown hair. She wore a black silk blouse that hinted at some kind of white collar job. A red shawl was wrapped around her upper arms & shoulders. Her fingers compulsively played with a gold crucifix necklace that she wore. Only one guard stood behind her, occasionally whispering into her ear, eliciting thoughtful nods & headshakes indicative of a woman conducting her own business.

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“The woman in the shawl is Melinde Orta from Little Portugal.” Stacy offered for Sam’s benefit. She was about to add some more commentary, but the other coven leaders started arriving.

A woman of southeast asian descent walked in, only escorted by one guard. Her long black hair reached to her midback, becoming almost camouflaged by her black leather jacket. She wore faded skinny jeans & a lavender top that contrasted nicely with her warm skin. Her eyes flicked around the room, spotted Melinde Orta, then she specifically avoided sitting near the leader of Little Portugal.

“Leather jacket is Linh Pham, Little Saigon. Don’t let that little snub fool you, she’s probably the nicest person here. Little Saigon & Little Portugal just have a contested border.”

A tall man with dark black skin wearing grey slacks & a teal dress shirt entered. He was large, but neither overweight nor muscular. His head was clean shaven, though he had a barely visible five o’clock shadow on his chin. The woman following him was typing away on her cell phone, giving her the appearance of a personal assistant more than a bodyguard. Sam wondered if the lack of a distinct armed goon was a subtle display of the man’s own skill.

“Malcolm Coles, West Oakland. A little standoffish, but a solid guy- does a lot of charity work. He’s probably the only person here you can count on to never stab you in the back.” Stacy continued running the gamut. Sam briefly wondered if she’d meant to include herself & her dad in the list of potential backstabbers. He highly doubted it.

A few seconds later, another man trickled in followed by two guards. He couldn’t have been older than thirty with pale brown almost ashen looking skin. The young man’s frizzy light brown hair hung around his face, somewhat obscuring his bright hazel eyes & countless freckles. He wore olive
green skinny corduroy pants, a black t-shirt, & a purple plaid overshirt that was left unbuttoned. Sam noticed his dress shoes that screamed hand-cobbled italian leather.

“Jordan Henrick, Uptown Oakland- total hipster, but he knows his way around a corpse like no one’s business.”

“Corpse?” Sam broke his gaze away from Jordan for a moment to look down at Stacy in confusion.

“Necromancy.” She clarified. “Necrophilia jokes aside, he’s one of those hipster snaps you’d fuck in a heartbeat but regret it before he even got done pulling out-”

“Shut up.” Sam hissed under his breath. He could feel his ears turn pink, but sighed with relief when he confirmed that nobody was staring at them. In the quietest whisper possible he reminded Stacy. “I want to know who might kill us, not who you want to hate fuck.”

Sam took another quick indulgent glance at the cute Uptown leader before turning his attention to a middle aged hispanic woman, who was entering, accompanied by a guard. The woman wore a loose airy dress in an almost watercolor spattering of blues & greens. Her greying black hair was loose & stringy and she clearly wasn’t wearing any makeup- not that he cared. She had an apparent gentleness that made her naturally pretty in an almost motherly way. Anyway, when it came right down to it, it wasn’t any of his business how she chose to present herself.

“Lorna Castillo, Santa Cruz. Santa Cruz is…” Stacy chose her words carefully. “well, Santa Cruz kinda fun, super weird. They’re good for a party, but thank god there’s a mountain between us & them.”

Last was a Middle Eastern looking man with thick framed glasses, a broad jaw, & silver peppering his curly black hair. He was wearing a t-shirt that had a cartoon mash up between Star Wars & Dr. Who. It seemed a little tasteless considering the nature of the meeting, though Sam noticed a RFID badge still tethered to the man’s belt, indicating that he might’ve come directly from work. He took off his brown leather laptop bag and rested it against his chair.

“Casey Ahmed, Palo Alto coven.” Stacy subtly nodded to him. “One of those big numbers, game theory, techie programmer types. His coven mostly uses their magic to help their day jobs, but they’re fast learners in the craft so we can’t just blow them off as dabblers.”

“How does magic even help with software?”

“That’s the trick, the PA preps found a weird niche-”

“Thank you all for coming on such short notice.” Bhavya said loudly, quieting a dozen whispered conversations and drawing everyone’s attention. “I know this meeting was an unusual request, but these are unusual times.”

“Is it true- some of the people killed this morning were yours?” Melinde asked what most the people in the room had to have been thinking.

“Sunset, Tenderloin, & Chinatown all lost people in the attack.” Bhavya confirmed. “This morning is a reminder that despite our differences, we bear common enemies. We need to discuss how to deal with the hunters.”

“How did they even find you?” Linh asked, presumably interested in increasing her own defenses.

“Our infighting is killing us.” Dennis speculated. “We let our presence on the street get too
noticeable while Tenderloin & we were on guard after border tensions.”

“*You had a few extra people out and they risked shooting up a city street in the middle of the day?*”

“It could've been bad luck.” Stacy interjected. “The attack came during the set up to a Quiet Market auction- some last minute unloading of goods at crazy low rates. It sounds like it was the kind of thing that could've gotten gossiped about- found its way too far out from the right circles.”

“You think the hunters were planning on hitting the Market?” Malcolm mused, causing several of the witches to look mortified by the idea.

“It sounds more likely than they just happening upon our witches, then following them until they decided to attack two blocks from a major muggle hangout-”

“In middle of a weekend morning.” Melinde agreed. “They let our world & our violence spill out right next to civili- worse, right next to tourists.”

“You're missing part about them going after our Market-” Jordan started.

“Intentionally or not.” Dennis reminded everyone. “We don’t have any reason to believe that the hunters knew about the Market.”

“Do you think some hunters’ intentions are going to matter when the nonhumans find out?” Trenton groaned.

“People, territory, supplies- it doesn't matter how they're targeting us. The hunters are becoming too large a problem for us to keep ignoring.” Jordan tried to edge his way back into the conversation.

“Speak for yourself, I'd rather lose supplies than people.” Linh countered Jordan’s false equivalence between types of attacks.

“The deaths are tragic, yes- but we can’t overlook the impact this might have on the Quiet Market.” Casey pointed out. “It is the lifeline of our entire community- I'm not just talking about our people, even the nonhumans depend on it.”

“There's no even about it.” Malcolm corrected. “If the Market shuts down we’ll have the nonhumans out in force, looking for their food some other way. Who knows what that'll do to our neighborhoods?”

“It's not our responsibility to spoon feed the beasts around here.” Jordan replied.

“You'd rather they start prowling the streets?” Lorna scoffed.

“Seven million people live in our region.” Malcolm reminded everyone. “It's been twenty years since we’ve had a werewolf related death. We have systems in place and they work because we all pitch in even if we don't particularly like each other.”

“We need to fix this.” Dennis agreed.

“We didn't break it.” Jordan commented.

“Like that matters now?” Casey huffed at the Uptown leader distancing his coven from the situation. “The building is on fire. I don't give a damn who started it. Everyone grabs a bucket of water.”
surfaces were faintly illuminated in different hues from an unidentifiable source. At first he thought they were reflections or some other trick of the light, but the gentle pink glow that surrounded Melinde’s eyes followed her when she moved— the colors were auras. He was seeing magic or other supernatural forces, somehow illuminated in this strange environment.

Linh didn’t glow with colors, but when she held still for longer than a minute the space around changed. It was as if he was looking through the edge of a glass lens. Light was bending around her warping the room beyond her. The illusion was almost mesmerizing, an optical illusion he wanted to figure out, but he refocused on the discussion.

“If you just increase your security you won't have so much of a hunter problem.” Casey suggested.

“That's easy for you to say. Just practice our conjuration inside the basement wine cellar at our fucking estate.” Trenton muttered sarcastically. Tenderloin & Palo Alto had to be opposite ends of the economic spectrum in attendance.

Sam sympathized with Trenton. After he'd left hunting and started interacting with some of the wealthy kids from Palo Alto he’d realized that there was an unrecognized socioeconomic aspect to hunting. In general hunters weren't very well off, but neither were the overwhelming majority of the things they hunted. Wealthy witches or non-humans could fairly easily insulate themselves from hunters by placing a third party or nice security system between their activities & prying eyes. The result was that the hunter-prey dynamic often played out between members of the working poor or lower middle class. Sam suspected it was one of the reasons no government had ever taken notice enough to do anything. A few deaths in a shooting in Tenderloin would hardly captivate the public sympathy & interest that deaths in the wealthy area of Palo Alto would. So the suggestion was particularly tone deaf.

“Go fuck yourself.” The Tenderloin leader added for good measure.

“Living up to your livelihood, Trenton.” Malcolm muttered.

“He teaches rhetoric at a community college.” Stacy whispered to Sam. The idea that one of these witches was a professor surprised him. It made sense that they’d have day jobs, but it made him briefly wonder about his own professors’ extracurricular activities.

“Dude, I'm just saying there are ways to reduce modes of failure.” Casey argued. “You don't have to take everything personally.”

Sam heard something that sounded like soft whispering. He looked around for a moment, but didn't notice anyone looking at him with the intent to communicate. While he was distracted some heated words had evidently been exchanged. Casey & Linh were both eyeing Jordan warily. Malcolm had shifted in his chair, leaning away from the other representatives from Oakland.

“Maybe if Uptown didn't spend so much time playing with their bones-” Casey started.

“Grow up, children.” Lorna commented, causing Casey & Linh to glare at her.

“Palo Alto & Little Saigon are both young covens.” Stacy whispered to Sam.

“What's young?” Sam asked.

“Sub 50 years.” Stacy replied quietly. “Young covens make the established ones twitchy. Palo Alto startup type, you know?”

Sam nodded with a slightly better understanding at the new dynamic. He'd lived in Palo Alto, the
arguable nerve center of the Silicon Valley, for four years. The city was small, wealthy, powerful, & demographically younger than average. The tech boom decades earlier had spawned hundreds of software companies with little in the way to initially offer employees short of stock- if the company failed that was one thing, but if the gamble paid off, well there were plenty of millionaires Sam's age in the Bay Area, many of them caught in the orbit of Palo Alto. The culture fostered many interesting characteristics, but most poignant now was the risk taking mentality. He could see that helping in aspects of business if you had a complimentary skill set to back it, but at the same time there was definitely good reason for the older covens to worry about their wild youthful counterparts.

Sam heard that almost imperceptible whispering around him again. When he glanced back there was only wall. He shook it off as his imagination or maybe an early migraine symptom creeping up on him. It might've been a trick of the acoustics, though a quick check showed that no one in the room was murmuring a discreet conversation with their colleagues. He tried to keep his guard up, in case it turned out to be… something.

He noticed that his attention kept being drawn to Casey's laptop bag. He couldn't put his finger on its draw until he realized that the colorful auras of the other witches seemed to taper ever so slightly in the direction of the laptop bag. It wasn’t just Sam’s attention that was being drawn to it, the bag was literally gently pulling in supernatural… things. The pull was so subtle that it didn’t seem to be doing any harm and Bhavya had suggested that threats wouldn’t come from within, so Sam decided to simply keep an eye on the bag until there was a noticeable change.

While scanning the room, Sam noticed that all of the leaders expect for Dennis & Bhavya periodically glanced at him. He supposed he was the new guy, maybe the only person there that wasn't a known quantity. Not to mention the fact that he'd arrived with one coven and was standing with another.

Melinde & Jordan watched him with slightly more interest than the others- actually, they were looking at the space immediately around him. Sam got the impression he wasn’t the only one in the room who could see supernatural things. Stacy had been able to spot his demonic aura back on Earth, here who knew how much people could tell about him. It was a little disheartening, but at least he hadn’t been thrown out in the first few minutes- anyway the covens had bigger concerns.

“Stop your bickering. Matters of personal defense can be settled on your own time, in your own ways.” Bhavya interrupted the half dozen covens arguing about proper warding practices.

“If we aren’t here to talk about how to defend ourselves, then why’d you make us come all the way down here?” Trenton asked.

“I’ve lived a very long time on this world and I’ve seen the way forces rise & fall. I’m tired of our people bickering. I’m tired of us being walked over.” Bhavya stood up as she spoke. “We’re ending this tonight. Tomorrow is a new day and if you have a problem with it get ready to see your last sunrise.”

“What are you suggesting?” Dennis broke the silence after the potential threat.

“An alliance-” Bhavya started.

“Palo Alto won't let you older covens take us over.” Casey rejected the suggestion. “We know how these deals go.”

“This isn't about business.” Bhavya countered.
“Everything is about busine-”

Bhavya leaned forward and deliberately placed her palms on the table before looking the table up & down. Sam could almost see power radiate from her.

“To me this isn't about business. This is about violence.” Bhavya’s voice was venomous. The way she commanded the room- Sam wouldn’t have been surprised if everyone else was also holding their breath. “This morning those animals murdered our people in broad daylight. I want the hunters gone. I want them to know that if they step foot into our territory they better come bearing their own pyre bundles.”

Sam's heart hammered as he tried to hide his trembling. They were going to start looking for & killing hunters. He'd heard of the occasional instance of a monster pursuing a hunter, usually seeking vengeance for the death of a pack member or the equivalent. But he'd never heard of something on this magnitude. Between all the Bay Area covens, there had to be something in the order of a hundred witches, and their leadership was talking about making the vendetta a matter of policy.

“Killing people brings us unwanted attention.” Melinde pointed out. “It’s bad enough when they kill us.”

“Most of the hunters are already off the grid. It wouldn’t be hard to make them disappear if we had time to prepare.” Jordan mused.

“I want to make a warning to their people. I want them to fear us.” Trenton suggested, earning a nod from Bhavya- an unsettlingly malicious common ground for the feuding covens to begin rebuilding their relationship.

“You’re just going to get more of them that way.” Sam interjected, desperate to stop their momentum. The room full of witches turned to give him their attention for the first time. His mouth was suddenly dry and he struggled to continue. “Hunters are stubborn and hold onto vendettas. If you make examples of them you’ll just get twice as many coming in to get revenge. If you make them disappear without a trace you’ll get more investigating the disappearances.”

“And how do you suggest we stop them?” Malcolm asked.

“I… uh…” He didn't want anyone to die, but that was clearly where everyone else's mind was at. He wasn’t sure what else to suggest that might remotely satisfy their desire for violence. “I don't know.”

“Who's the kid?” Lorna asked, eyes shifting between Bhavya & Dennis.

“He has a point-” Linh started.

“I didn't ask if he had a point, I asked who is he.”

“What is he?” Jordan asked as his twinkling hazel eyes narrowed curiously.

“He's an Anathema.” Melinde replied while absentmindedly playing with her gold crucifix necklace.

The statement completely blindsided Sam. She'd called him a demon. He had no idea how to process the accusation. He was human. His family were humans. He’d always been- His mind sputtered on the recollection that Anathema were a subset of demons that didn’t start out as demons. When he glanced at Stacy, she mouthed “What the fuck?” But before he could respond to Melinde, Bhavya spoke.
“He’s a consultant of mine.”

“He looks like a kid.” Malcolm agreed with Lorna’s assessment.

“Most importantly, he’s under the protection of Chinatown.” Dennis stated firmly, though Sam couldn’t tell if the old witch was as surprised as his daughter. “If anyone would like to touch him, you’re going to have to come through us.”

Sam felt a strange mixture of relief & concern at the idea of being so definitively associated with the Chinatown coven. All things being equal he was involved with them significantly more than Sunset, but now he was affiliated in a way that might carry all the political blessings & curses- potentially literal curses with this crowd. For the moment it seemed to be a form of protection, at least against the two or three coven leaders who were watching him with a newfound interest that seemed less than hospitable.

“No one is going to hurt him.” Bhavya assured as she looked around the room threateningly. “He’s an asset and you would all do well to remember that.”

Sam’s stomach lurched. He didn’t want to be an asset to half a dozen or more covens. He didn’t want to be anything to all those covens. Luckily, none of the other coven leaders beyond Dennis & Bhavya seemed remotely impressed by him. Hopefully, they would just disregard him with what he expected was an accurate appraisal of his worth.

“No asset?” Linh asked, raising an eyebrow and dashing Sam’s hopes to fall back off their radar.

“Yes, in my opinion he’s an up & coming.” Bhavya answered, causing Sam’s jaw to clench discreetly. “Young blood I’m investing in.”

“You would.” Melinde scoffed. “Young blood- the community doesn't need anymore demon blood. The stuff’s poison.”

“I suggest you grow a less delicate stomach.”

“Listen, I don't give a fuck about some SF pet project. Are we seriously talking about killing some hunters?” Malcolm interrupted. Sam couldn’t tell if he was insulted by being referred to as a pet project or if he was grateful for the redirect- granted he would’ve preferred a different distraction.

“It's about time we went on the offensive with the hunters.” Trenton muttered.

“The pet project was right about drawing unwanted attention.” Linh interjected. “We need to be careful how we do this.”

“I’m a patient woman.” Bhavya suggested to the group. “If the sudden deaths of multiple hunters would draw even more unwanted attention, then we’ll make it slow. We’ll curse them and let it hit when they’ve left the area. Let them die on someone else’s door.”

The various coven leaders nodded in approval of the suggestion and a few murmurs broke out as a few ideas for hexes were bounced around. Sam didn’t even listen to the jargon being thrown around. His brain tried to devise some last stitch reasoning to talk them out of the attack, but he couldn’t think of a strategic argument that might appeal to their sensibilities. Furthermore, he didn’t even had any credibility with most of the coven leaders. When Stacy softly squeezed his hand he wondered if he’d turned a bit green or if she just knew him well enough to understand he might be conflicted.

“We still need to locate the hunters.” Trenton pointed out.
“There’s a bar in the East Bay that they frequent.” Malcolm presented an easy target to the group.

“And another on the edge of our territory.” Lorna added.

“Melinde,” Bhavya smiled diplomatically. “It’s without dispute that Little Portugal has the best diviners on the west coast. Would you be so kind as to locate the dregs for us?”

“You want us to sort through millions of people?” Melinde looked taken aback by the task.

“Palo Alto would be willing to offer help with parsing your results, if we can avoid putting boots on the ground.” Casey proposed, earning a nod of approval from Bhavya. The proposition made Sam wonder where exactly Casey worked. There were a few software companies in Palo Alto that handled big data & analytics. The thought that the algorithms used to predict things like ambushes in war zones might be combined with literal divination and applied to locating hunters was terrifying.

“You’re still asking for too much, Bhavya.” Melinde rejected the suggestion.

“It’s in your interest to find them too.” Bhavya countered. “Does anyone here really think this’ll just blow over? Seven witches dead, civilians in the hospital, who knows what this’ll do to the Market.”

Sam noticed that she hadn’t mentioned the dead hunter. He didn’t particularly have sympathy for any of the people that had committed the attack, but the witches were completely ignoring the hunter perspective- a move that could easily prove dangerous.

To the hunting community, this had probably been a routine hunt gone wrong. Any hunter worth a damn knew not to start shooting in a city center during the day. If Sam had to guess he’d bet that the hunters had gotten word about some “monster” gathering -the auction- and went to at least scope the event out. Being in a city could’ve easily thrown off the hunters’ sense of discretion if they didn’t normally work urban settings. It wasn’t hard to mistake a few dozen flip siders milling about for civilian loiterers, or vice versa. So a few hunters ended up in over their heads, realized it too late and the impulsive coin flip landed on fight instead of flight.

That would normally be little more than bad luck, but they made the news and two of them had gotten away. He didn’t like the idea of anyone dying, but Sam had to admit that the long term body count would’ve almost certainly been lower if all three hunters had died at the scene. There would’ve been less chance of the hunting community turning their attention to the otherwise apparently mundane shooting. As it was, the two hunters were probably scrambling to get out of the area, pulling favors with other hunters and spreading whatever fantastic tale their paranoia & adrenaline fueled brains had misperceived. Between that and whatever manifestation of the turmoil in the Quiet Market resulted, the red carpet would shortly be rolled out for the hunting community- meanwhile the covens were already organizing a silent massacre.

“I agree that we need to do something about the hunters, but Tenderloin won’t work with Sunset.” Trenton stated firmly. For a moment Sam wasn’t sure why cooperation between those covens should be such a sticking point, until he remembered Stacy’s explanation of the tension when the two of them had visited Sunset about a month earlier. A few years earlier, one of the Sunset witches have turned one of Tenderloin’s most promising witches over to the police. The move had probably been more than a setback to Tenderloin- the idea of tossing a witch to the police, even under the human crime of trafficking endangered animal parts, had to have been deeply offensive to such a secluded community.

“In exchange for an armistice if not an alliance, we’re prepared to offer a gesture of good faith.” Bhavya snapped her fingers. The door opened and two men brought in a third one that was gagged
and in handcuffs. “You can have the one who wronged your coven. We’ve extracted his soul for safe keeping, but the rest of him is yours.”

Sam stared at the prisoner. He was one of Bhavya’s own witches and she was handing him over to suffer who knew what at the hands of a wronged coven. Sam wasn’t sure what the implications of the man’s soul having been removed. Which half was really the man? Did a soulless body even feel pain or deserve punishment? How the hell did that even work? The questions were added to Sam’s mile long list that he’d begun collecting just an hour or two earlier.

“We appreciate your gift, but Connor -our up & coming- is still in prison. As long as he’s in prison, we can’t work with Sunset.” Trenton replied. “And friendly cooperation is so fucking far beyond that.”

“Chinatown might be able to help.” Dennis commented, then gestured to Andy the cop, who stepped forward to talk.

“I found out where in the prison Connor is being housed. We would be willing to assist in a rescue attempt, in exchange for having our borders completely uncontested and 36 hours notice on all of Tenderloin’s major ritual evocations.”

“We're under enough pressure from hunters & malicious spirits.” Dennis elaborated, softening the tone of the condition. “If we can help get rid of some of that pressure & stabilize our borders, then we’ll do what we can to make it work.”

“We’re interested.” Trenton acknowledged.

“Once he’s out, the cops are going to look for him in your territory.” Andy pointed out to Trenton. “Do you have a safe place to hide him if we can get him out?”

“That's our problem-” Trenton started, but Dennis interrupted him.

“If Connor gets picked up, what's to stop him from turning on us? We’re gonna be putting our people on the line. His capture is our problem too.”

“He’s hard as iron. He hasn't said a word about the flip side.”

“Just tell me he's going out of the city-” Andy offered. “Out of state would be better. Out of the country is best.”

“We have a place out of state.” Trenton assured.

“Keeping him away for a few months would probably be enough to cut most of the risk, but the longer the better.” Andy sighed unenthusiastically. “I’ll try to keep track of any manhunts and give you updates.”

Sam watched Andy return to his position along the wall. Evidentially Andy’s loyalty fell wholly with the coven instead of with the criminal justice system.

The meeting wrapped up with numerous agreements between various covens to communicate & organize for the search & attack on the hunters, but Sam couldn’t catch any definitive plans through his eavesdropping. Everyone was dying to get out of the foreign plane, back to Earth & the relative safety of their own territories. The groups began trailing out of the room, many of them taking last glances at Sam as they left. Linh gave him a polite smile, which he registered, but he didn’t have the emotional or mental energy to return it before she was already gone.
“Kid, two quick pieces of advice.” Malcolm said as he approached Sam. “Don't come into my territory without my permission first. And don't let anybody call you kid in front of people you're trying to impress.”

“I... wasn't trying to-” Sam stammered, thrown by the apparent threat & help.

“Well, that was your first mistake, kid.” Malcolm commented as he walked passed Sam and out the door.

“Don’t take it personally.” Dennis suggested to Sam. “He’s responsible for his coven’s safety- his neighborhood’s safety. You’re just a bit… unexpected.”

The comment hurt a bit even though he knew Dennis didn’t mean it to be offensive. It was the damn demonic aura- well, it was the accusation that he was an Anathema. He’d been called a demon in front of powerful people, who were knowledgeable enough to know that that might be sufficient reason to distrust him. Even Dennis was tiptoeing around the issue. He needed to find out what the hell the rumor was about. Sam nodded to Dennis, acknowledging the assurance, then made his way across the room to speak with Bhavya, who had just finished overseeing the handoff of the prisoner to Tenderloin.

“What was that about being an Anathema?” Sam asked Bhavya before she could shake him down for intel.

“Your soul has been marked by a demon.” She replied casually. “It's just a matter of semantics.”

“It's not just- words matter. If they think I'm a- an Anathema, then…” He didn't know what unpleasant implications that might carry.

“The term is so poorly defined that trying to do anything about it might well be lost effort.”

“It's not lost to me. This is my life, it affects me. Just because you don't care about demons doesn't mean that there aren't people out there…” Sam thought about Gordon Walker or the other hunters. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Do you consider me a demon?”

“I consider you a very interesting young man full of potential.” Bhavya responded ambiguously. “Why would I confine you with such simple terms?”

Sam felt faint. She wasn't correcting the misperception- well, perception, whether it was a mistake was uncomfortably debatable. His brain could barely sort through everything that'd just happened in the last hour or two. He was probably in shock still.

“Did you see anything?” Bhavya asked him and in his dazed state he didn't even humor holding out on her.

“I think I heard something like a whispering noise, but I'm not sure and if it was there it didn’t do anything.” His observation made Bhavya nod a little.

“There might’ve been a spirit drifting about.” Sam was debating asking about the prevalence of spirits and what it meant that no one else appeared to notice it, but she continued and he was barely keeping himself together. He’d have to pick her brain later, once his own brain had recovered. “Anything else catch your attention?”

“Casey had something under the table, in his bag- it felt like it was drawing magic or power into it. I don’t know what it was.” Sam spoke softly. He would give all the same information the Chinatown coven, but he didn’t want to be obviously giving intel to her.
“I suspect he was collecting information of his own, probably trying to study all the charms that were brought into the room. Sizing up the competitors, so to speak.” Bhavya said more to herself than him. “Anything else?”

“I also saw… I don't know how to describe it. The space around Linh was bending or something.”

“She's learning some new talents.” She offered as an inadequate explanation, then smiled and lightly patted his cheek before stepping to join her bodyguards. “That’s a good boy.”

“Bhavya,” Sam called out to her, stopping her before she was out the door. “When you go after the hunters, no innocent bystanders are gonna get hurt, right?”

He wasn't sure how to stop the violence when much more powerful forces were already aligning the dominoes, but the least he could do was try to limit the damage. The minimalist effort on his part was cold comfort compared to the fear & helplessness growing in him.

“This is our home. Unlike them, we’ll be precise.” She assured.

“If something goes wrong…”

“I accept the responsibility for this course of action, there is no if about that at least.”

He watched in a daze as the remaining witches exited the room. There was going to be violence and he wasn’t sure there was anything he could do to stop it.

Stacy took his hand and guided him through the shadow gate, to the two cars that the Chinatown coven had driven to the meeting. His brain was too busy trying to process what had just happened for him to pay any attention to the discussion in the car on the drive back to campus. All the while Stacy held his hand in reassurance.

When they got to campus, Dennis asked Stacy to stay in the car for a moment so that they could finish their conversation. She suggested that Sam go up to his place and that she’d meet him shortly. For a moment he thought about staying with her, but honestly he just wasn't sure how much more he could take. He softly gripped her knee before climbing out of the car and walking toward his building.

Sam didn't quite make it all the way there before the shock started wearing off and the gravity of the situation hit him. He stumbled over to the bushes next to his dorm, threw up, then pushed his hair back out of his face. The whole thing was dizzying. Some oddly rational manifestation of his fear wondered if he'd just committed a crime. He wasn't exactly an accomplice or an active member in a conspiracy- he didn't agree to help the covens or committed an overt act to locate and kill the hunters. In fact, he was pretty sure that as long as he wasn't explicitly asked about the crimes as part of a criminal investigation, he wasn't legally required to report it- not that he was really considering narc-ing on the witches. Any investigation would either be thrown out as absurd or would completely destroy Stacy's family- it'd almost certainly ruin him too. Years had passed since he'd killed anyone, but being dragged into a murder or a conspiracy to murder investigation opened up too many unpleasant opportunities.

He hated that that was what he was using his education for, covering his own ass- dodging the fallout from his violent history or some supernatural turf war. He didn't want to be thinking those things, but the fears crept in against his will. Going to college, getting his JD, settling down- he was trying to get away from these complicated messes. Now there were dangerous people on all sides of him- and he had his own problems.
For a fleeting moment he wondered if leaving was best. He could just disappear before everything caught up with him, try to start his simple existence somewhere new- But he wasn't a simple person, no matter how much he wanted it to be so. This demonic… thing would follow him. His illness would continue to get worse. He wouldn't have anyone. He wouldn't have Brady. And if he was honest with himself, if he lost Brady, he wasn't sure he'd be willing to risk the double edged sword of loving someone again.

Running away wouldn't save any lives. Leaving would cut off nearly all of his meager resources. That would make it harder for him to learn enough about his situation to save the people from his visions or maybe his own life. If he could keep himself out of harm's way for a little while longer, then maybe he could at least save the people from his visions, if not the hunters.

When Sam got back to his room he splashed some water on his face and rinsed out his mouth. A few too many pills were hastily consumed, but not so many as to even register on his list of concerns. He sat down on the edge of his bed, lit a joint, then smoked it in mind numbing silence for a minute or two. He wasn't even sure what to do in the next few minutes, let alone the next few days. It was a bad sign that he was mentally freezing up, at least he recognized the telltale symptom. He glanced at the bottle of anxiety medication that he'd taken moments ago and waited for some of the gridlock in his head to clear up. When his nerves were chemically soothed a bit, he settled on his first move, then grabbed his phone.

“It's Sam.” He probably should've started out the phone call with a slightly warmer greeting, but it was late and he was desperately trying to keep calm. Attempting to further mend things with Dean could wait for another day.

“Wow, I didn't expect to hear from you.” Dean didn't sound overly critical, just legitimately surprised. “Are you okay?”

“I'm okay.” Sam tapped his fingertips anxiously on the bed. “Where are you & dad?”

“A few miles east of St. Louis, why?”

“Where's Bobby?”

“Do you need help?”

“No.” Sam answered hastily. The last thing he needed was for his family to come to his aid and end up in the crossfire. “Don’t come out this way-”

“What's going on?”

“Just do me a favor and stay out of California until I tell you it's okay.” Sam pinched the bridge of his nose. He hadn’t really thought through making the phone call and had no idea how much to tell Dean. Of course Dean would want to know the reason dad & he were prohibited from entering the entire state. Now that communication between them was open, Dean had reverted to his default protective big brother nature. And Dean would be stubborn- they were all stubborn.

“That’s not good enough. What's happening?” Dean demanded.

“You can’t tell anyone about this.” Sam started, grimaced to himself, then cursed before continuing. “Some people got killed and it looks like there's gonna be some fallout.”

“What the fuck? And you're telling us not to come?” Evidently he’d been too vague, to the point of being enticing.
“I'm not in danger.”

“Tell me what's going on.”

“Some hunters shot up a group of witches-” Sam began giving a little context, hopefully enough to assure Dean that he wasn’t in danger.

“Wait, that shooting on the news this morning?” Dean lowered his voice. “Those were witches?

“Yeah, seven of the dead, at least three of the injured.” Sam confirmed, then quickly continued. “They were members of feuding covens. Now that the hunters killed them it's united the covens. They just sealed an alliance- they're gonna retaliate across the Bay Area, maybe even more of the state.”

“How do you know that?” He could hear the wariness in Dean’s voice- it wasn’t doubt about what Sam was saying, it was discomfort with the possible ways he’d found out.

“I know some people.” Sam offered after a half second pause that Dean certainly recognized.

“People.” Dean exhaled the word. Sam could hear him shout to someone that he'd be back in a few minutes, then walk outside. “You’re hanging out with… Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?”

“I'm not in danger.” Sam chewed his lips at the inaccuracy of that statement before amending it. “They don't want to hurt me.”

“Do they know you're- you used to be a hunter?”

“A couple of them.”

“And they're just cool with you killing-”

“I'm not killing- I'm done with that.” Sam blurted out in his exasperation. Why the hell was everyone talking about him killing people? It made him feel marred. “I haven't hurt anyone-”

“Whatever.” Dean blew off the hypothetical moral turpitude with an ease that made Sam feel even worse. “It's not just them you have to be worried about. Innocent people in their orbit get hit-”

“Yeah, I kinda noticed that watching the news this morning.” Sam acknowledged the point. “I'll be careful, I can do that. But I need you to try to keep hunters from coming this way. The witches are gonna be subtle. The hunters won’t see it coming. You’ve gotta-”

“How am I supposed to stop anyone without telling them I was tipped off? Anyone with half a brain would trace it back to you.”

“Lie, figure something out, just stop them from coming out here.” Sam threw his free hand up in exasperation at having to feed an answer to his brother.

“How well known are the… covens?” Dean lowered his voice when saying covens. It seemed he was somewhere near their dad or another hunter.

“It seems like some of the civilians in their neighborhoods know about them, but other than that I can't really tell.”

Sam opted to not mention the existence of an entire flip side commerce network that also catered to the creatures hunters sought most. The coven leaders had made a compelling point, if that back
channel collapsed, possibly under an attack by well intentioned hunters, then a whole lot of predators might be forced to get their goods the old fashioned way. There was some sort of self-policing nature to the flip side that existed beyond the force hunters could apply. The need for anonymity in human society and the pressures of living in densely pack metropolitan areas had rendered an equilibrium, which only faltered when the occasional renegade decided they needed more- more victims, more prey, more monsters. Sam pursed his lips wondering which group fucked things up more often the nonhumans or the hunters.

“No.” Dean said after a thoughtful pause. “I'm not gonna risk exposing you. This chain of intel isn't happening.”

“What?” Sam thought he might throw up again.

“If word about the witches’ plans get to other hunters or vice versa, then it's gonna be pretty fucking obvious who the linchpin is. You're our only real contact in California.” Dean added. “I'll redirect dad east, and keep Bobby around his normal stomping grounds, but I'm not going out of my way to feed intel I wouldn't normally give.”

“People are gonna die.” Sam tried to reason with him.

“But not you.” Dean said firmly. “Hunters, monsters, witches- it's how the world works. We protect family & civilians. Everyone else plays at their own risk.”

“We're… we’re supposed to help people.” Sam's voice broke and a few tears rolled down his cheeks.

“We can't help everyone.” Dean replied colder than normal. “Anyway, you're out. Go to school. Go be a lawyer. Help people that way. Leave the fighting to the grunts.”

“You aren't a grunt.” Sam whispered.

“Keep your head down.” Dean offered as a goodbye. “It's where you keep your best weapon.”

The line clicked. Sam stared at the phone for a few seconds, then dropped it on the floor and laid down. When Stacy entered his room a couple minutes later, he pulled her into the bed with him. He held her close, neither of them having the emotional energy for anything more.

“I'm sorry your family is going through...” Sam tried to find the right words, but there weren't any. He wiped a tear from her cheek. “I'm sorry.”

“We’ll get through this.” She offered halfheartedly as she buried her face in his chest, searching for safety & comfort in his embrace. “It’ll be okay.”

Chapter End Notes

This is one of those chapters that covers a lot of ground and it's hard for me to get a sense of the resulting tone/take away (as compared to my vision for it). Yet at the same time I feel like it all kinda needed to be together to convey just how long a day Sam had.

It should be clear by now that this is an AU with different mechanics and Sam has slightly different/additional powers.
Also, I was a little uncomfortable introducing so many diverse characters so quickly since I feel like the best way of avoiding thin/stereotypical characters is to flesh them out. Unfortunately, dividing the scenes between 9-12 parties means less time for each person. I based each coven leader on a person I actually know, which hopefully came through as them being at least slightly rounded in the flash of a scene.

I could preen this chapter so much, but honestly I think I really just need to call it good enough for now and keep moving with the story.
The Importance of Intangible Things

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Stacy spent the night, but they didn't have sex. Sam hadn't expected things between them to take that sort of turn, venturing into something akin to a real relationship. Of course he'd spent sexless nights with Brady & Jessica before, but they'd lived together. Despite the fact that Sam occasionally called Stacy his girlfriend, the word had always been more for the benefit of others who might not understand or approve of their actual relationship… well, what he'd thought was their actual relationship. The sexless night of companionship suddenly threw their friends with benefits status into question.

Laying there in bed, watching her sleep soundly after such an emotionally exhausting day as yesterday, he had to admit that he was glad she was with him. He wanted to comfort & protect her—but that didn't necessarily mean anything. One of his main personality traits was wanting to care for & help others. It didn't have to mean that their relationship was becoming more serious.

One perfectly reasonable explanation was that he was just grateful to have someone to wake up beside. If Brady had been there Sam would've already been completely intertwined with him, trying to bury his stress & confusion in Brady’s comforting embrace & familiar scent. Sam's hand drifted down his torso and he started playing with himself at the thought of Brady. He started getting a little hard- a welcome discovery after having trouble on that front just a day earlier. But Stacy was still sleeping and he wasn't really interested in trying to masterbate quietly beside her. He stopped playing with himself before he got too far along.

Rather than getting up, Sam pulled the iPad from where it had been tucked between his mattress & the box springs, then started searching for more information on Anathema. As far as he was concerned the question of whether he was an Anathema was still unsettled. Normally he might not care about appearances, the truth of the matter was the truth regardless of perceptions… but in this case perceptions might actually affect him. Having some unfounded reputation could affect him in ways he hadn’t fully considered… and on the other hand, a justified reputation was an even larger problem.

While rereading the sections on Anathema, he second guessed his initial take away from the text- or at least his certainty on the subject. On his less critical first read through, he'd dismissed the entire species as some sort of smattering of chaotic abominations- some incidental aftermath left in the wake of demonic activity. It was probably the fact that the Abyssal & Infernal sounded organized, with their Houses and orders. He’d unintentionally imagined by contrast that Anathema must not adhere to structure. That seemed to be a pretty common assumption by the authors, but when he looked at the actual accounts of Anathema it didn’t really hold up to scrutiny. In order to be misidentified as tricksters, fey, & evidently psychics- the Anathema in the case studies he was reading had interacted with humans, often having lived in human society.

Sam reread the account of an Anathema that had been killed in 1864 in Georgia. The man had actually been a member of the Union army during the American Civil War, which meant that he'd probably had a home & job- he’d been a member of the community. Rumors spread that there was magical trickery in his unit- objects appearing & disappearing, nearby enemy camps vanishing in the night, uncommonly good luck. When a few officers were tasked with getting to the bottom of what might've been help from outside sources, the man deserted. He was captured a few days later by Confederate troops, but as soon as he instructed his captors to release him they did. A nearby
Confederate soldier saw the mind control and shot the man. A trickster wouldn't have been killed by the minie ball, but the iron bullet left a smoking fatal wound. Historians of demonology picked up on the smoking iron wound as an injury to a demon, but only an Anathema would’ve died from an injury to their body.

Unsurprisingly, most documented instances of Anathema were written by people who had killed them or historian academics, who didn’t seem particularly sympathetic to the dead Anathema. Sam had read countless journal entries & essays describing the habits, deaths, & methods of killing different species, but never of a species he was accused of being. He’d had an inkling of this stomach twisting fear when he’d realized he should be careful not to advertise himself as a psychic. This was just the next level- Maybe being a psychic was just a symptom of the real condition and he’d been thinking too narrowly?

Bhavya had indicated that she thought his demonic aura was sufficient to categorize him as an Anathema. Some demon had manipulated his soul, giving him powers & possibly making him an Anathema, in exchange for the ownership right to his soul. As a result, he was currently destined to go to a particular Hell when he died, the Hell of Burning Light. In the meantime, he was getting visions- mostly related to people who were bound to the same Hell as him, usually their deaths or maybe in a broader sense just stuff having to do with his Hell- but he could also see some things unrelated to his Hell. There was the girl he’d saved. He’d probably been able to see her death because it was so imminent. Then there was the auras & other strange qualities with the other plane. Bhavya had mentioned that she believed demons were naturally talented at traveling between the planes. Maybe it was more than just an affinity for the crossing of planes? Maybe there was something innately powerful about other planes?

But hypothetically if he was an Anathema, the thought of trying to develop his powers was a bit intimidating. He couldn't tell if his powers were the thing killing him. When he had visions they were often accompanied by a headache or worse, but it was premature to say that they'd caused the problem. How could he even practice with them aside from focusing intensely- and almost certainly giving himself a migraine. He supposed he could try to locate people on their deathbeds in order to test whether he could see their deaths. The thought of lurking around a hospital to touch terminally ill patients was unappealing in so many ways.

Beyond all the wondering over his visions & the Anathema question, what did those answers actually get him? He needed to get more information on the demon who had stolen his soul. In addition to that he needed to find a demon of the Crossroads from the Hell of Burning Light. Zoya had suggested that one of those demons might be able to tell him how much it'd cost for him to buy back his soul. Though it seemed unlikely that a demon of the Crossroads would be willing to provide him any information for free. After the run in with Zoya, he wasn't prepared to walk into any sort of negotiation with only himself as a bargaining chip. Unfortunately, he was still more or less a poor student with a troubled mind & an ever increasing number of potential enemies.

Stacy stirred next to him. He thought about turning off the iPad, hiding what he’d been looking at from her, but that sort of hiding was only to cover his own shame. She’d been at the meeting and heard the accusation. He wasn't trying to protect her from the flip side like Brady- she was in it just as deep or worse than him. She rolled onto her side, snuggling into him. After a few seconds her sleepy eyes opened, glanced at the iPad screen, then up at Sam.

“So...” Her forehead crinkled a little uncertainly. “You're like, kinda a demon?”

“You're asking me like I know.” Sam sighed.

“If you are one of them…” Stacy thought for a moment. He hated the way she'd phrased the start of
the sentence, regardless of what came next. “I mean, it's not like that makes you a different person than you were two days ago. Anyway, compared to the fact that you used to be a hunter, being a little demony isn't so bad.”

He appreciated that she was trying to comfort him considering the potentially devastating rumor. In a way it made things better. She had a point that a name didn't change the substance of who he was—yet… his doubt whispered that she wouldn't have felt the need to reassure him if she didn't feel the stigma. The afterthought turned a bit sour for him, but he tried to push the Anathema mess aside. He didn't want to think about it. He wanted to outrun this ominous unknown & its affect on his relationships even just for another moment longer. Trying to find something else to talk about, he replayed her comment in his head and something struck him.

“I'm never gonna live down the ex-hunter thing am I?”

“I never thought I'd talk to a hunter, let alone fuck one—”

“Ex-hunter.” He repeated, a little offended.

“Ex.” She acknowledged.

“Are you in favor of the covens hitting the hunters in the area?”

Stacy pushed herself up on her elbows, literally getting out of her comfortable position, jostled by the suddenly serious conversation.

“I don't want people getting killed, but if it's us or them…” She shifted away from him, or maybe just to get a better look at his face. “Are you…”

“I'm not pro-hunter.” He assured her. “They're misguided & closed minded, but some of them are good people- they're trying to help.”

“They murder people.”

“I'm not saying what they do is right.” Sam sighed, trying to parse his own conflicted feelings on his old profession. “I don't agree with it, but I know why they do what they do.”

“They're your family.” Stacy offered sympathetically.

“They're my something.”

“You're allowed to not like your family and still want them to live.” She chewed her lip, then added in another attempt at diplomacy. “Your brother didn’t seem murder-worthy. And he was kinda cu—”

“Don’t say cute.” Sam cringed at that thought of Dean getting anywhere near one of his partners—though he was a bit relieved that the conversation had turned away from him.

“Can’t stop a girl from having eyes.”

“You aren’t his type. One look at your magic tattoos and it’d be all bad.” Sam commented, then realized how lucky they’d been that Stacy’s quick reflexes and Dean & John’s chivalry had left the tattoos unexamined when the two men had barged into Sam’s room while she was naked.

“Anyway, you're too upbeat for him.”

“Too upbeat?” Stacy repeated in confusion. “Since when is it a bad thing to be happy? You'd think sex would be a time when having a good attitude is a plus.”
“Some hunters get cynical, they think cheerfulness is a con or something. Getting burned is super common for hunters. They learn to only expect tragedy as sincere.” Sam frowned a bit. Hunters were always waiting for the other shoe to drop, meanwhile the covens were getting ready to accommodate them. “How quickly do you think the covens will move on the hunters?”

“Are you gonna try tipping them off?” She asked, unaware of his failed attempt to do just that the night before.

“No.” He assured. “I'm just wondering how much time before the shit really hits the fan.”

“I'll talk to my dad- see what his sense is. I wouldn't expect anything right away. Locating who knows how many hunters over a few hundred square miles, that'll take at least a week or two, maybe longer.”

“Weeks?” Sam pursed his lips. That was considerably longer than he'd been picturing. A week or two window left plenty of time for curious hunters to come into the area to investigate. “The coven needs to get its defenses up as soon as possible- don't wait until you're about to strike.”

“What?”

“The two hunters that got away yesterday, I'd bet my life that they're at some hunter bar telling stories about some monster nest or party or whatever they thought was happening- they must’ve thought they found something big & scary if they were willing to start shooting in broad daylight like that.” Sam explained. “Hunters talk, all the time. That's one of the ways they find jobs. The whole place is gonna be swarming with hunters before you all can hit them.”

“How long do we have?”

“Maybe three days tops until the bulk of them start showing up.” He guessed. “It depends on who the attackers were friends with, which part of the country they primarily hunted in.”

“I need to call my dad.” Stacy said as she climbed out of bed in search of her phone. He watched her pace around his room naked as she waited for the call to get picked up. Sam sighed a breath of relief when Dennis answered. Her speech kept slipping back & forth between Cantonese & English, but her body language let him know nothing had gotten worse in the last twelve hours.

“One sec.” She told her dad, then turned to look at Sam. “How are you with finances?”

“I know my way around a balance sheet.” One summer during undergrad he'd taken a job at a local used bookstore, helping them recreate 8 years of profit & loss statements and assorted other documentation necessary to contest a federal tax audit. He'd always enjoyed numbers, their simplicity & independence from all things moral- or immoral as the case might be. They were a refugee from the chaos. “What's up?”

“Wren didn't have an assistant or leave a lot of notes, so our inventory is a big confusing mess. Calvin is trying to figure out our books.” Sam had met Stacy's brother Calvin once before. He was a forensic accountant, which made him one of the best people to reconstruct what was undoubtedly a very complex web of assets. “He found some contracts that he isn't super comfortable reviewing.”

“I'm not sure I'm qualified.”

“Are you gonna bat an eye at a contract for vampire fangs?”

“Do you have vampire fangs?” Sam asked in surprise. “They're so brittle.”
“You're our guy.”

The journey back up to the Chinatown coven’s territory was different than before. There was more tension. The two hunters from the attack were still at large and who knew how long it would take for other hunters to start trickling into the city in search of anything out of the ordinary. Previously, Stacy would chat fairly candidly about magic & the flip side in public, but Sam noticed that she’d wisely opted to be more discreet this time. The tight lipped nature of the whole thing made it seem less savory- before it was a bizarre quirk of the neighborhood, now it was something reserved for behind closed doors.

They made their way to the same second floor jewelry shop with the back room where Sam had met Wren. Instead of one saleswoman lingering in the showroom, there were three people that Sam recognized as guards attempting to blend in as employees or customers. With a little nod to Stacy & him, the door to the back was opened and they went off to see how bad the situation really was.

They made their way through the intermediate storage room, then through another door to the office. The whole place was roughly sorted chaos, mostly in the form of folders & packets of papers, though a reasonable number of boxes hinted at objects of value. A second desk was set up for use across from Wren’s old desk. Sam wasn’t sure if it’d been there the whole time covered in boxes or if it’d been brought in for him. Calvin was already there, sleeves of his dark green sweater literally rolled up as he dug through a file folder.

Sam watched Stacy hug her older brother. The display of familial affection stirred up some uncomfortable feelings in him, but he pushed his own baggage aside- he had a tangible thing he could work on that might be productive.

“Dad’s trying to meet one-on-one with all the local business owners, but I convinced him to let you & Keung help him- otherwise he’s never going to cover the whole neighborhood today.” Calvin told Stacy.

“Jesus.” Stacy rubbed her face in anticipation of a very long day. “Am I just telling them about the shooting or the alliance?”

“The fewer the people who know about the alliance the better.” Sam interjected. The whole thing was technically a conspiracy to commit multiple premeditated murders- that was about as bad as it could get. He chewed his lip wondering if he’d just given aid to the conspiracy by suggesting that they avoid a potential mode of failure. His possibly growing legal exposure made his stomach ache a bit.

“Once you get home they’re going to decide on a party line.” Calvin assured her that she’d get some guidance for her diplomatic mission.

“Sam, you gonna be okay here for awhile?”

“A mountain of paperwork, this is my comfort zone.” Sam replied with a meek smile.

“I've got my cell if you need me.” Stacy told Sam before standing up on her toes to give him a parting kiss on the cheek. He could feel himself blush a bit. She'd never kissed him in front of her brother- he'd never experienced any wholesome displays of affection in front of a family member. Before slipping away through the door, she pointed at Calvin and warned. “Best behavior.”

Calvin raised his hands in forfeit as she left, then turned to Sam. For a fleeting moment Sam wondered if Calvin was going to say anything about the kiss or Stacy, but instead he just went back
to a pile of paper ledgers.

“Thanks for coming up on such short notice.” Calvin offered.

“Sorry that you're all going through this.” Sam replied as he strolled around the room trying to get a sense of whether an organizational system had already been established. “How can I help?”

“Anything would be great, but I put a few rat nests over on the other desk for you.” Calvin said pointing Sam toward a desk covered in folders. “I'm only maybe 5% through this place- and that's just figuring out what's in this office.”

“Is there another cache?”

“We have a few storage units that I hope are just inventory instead of contracts & legal title.” Calvin moved an aging folder from one pile to another. “I like paperwork as much as the next nerd, but there's something more exciting about counting gold doubloons.”

“You guys have gold coins?” Sam glanced up from his first assignment.

“I don't know, but that treasure hunter feeling you just got is what I'm talking about.” Calvin clarified. “Coven’s collect all sorts of odd things given a few centuries. I'm dying to go pick through the attic, so to speak.”

They worked in relative silence for almost two hours. Occasionally, one of them would find some sort of oddity that was either worth sharing for its absurdity or because there was the need for a second opinion. Sam had to admit, the massive project was a welcome distraction from both the looming conflict on the streets and the looming existential crisis in himself. It was puzzle after puzzle, and generally they had answers. After a while Sam noticed Calvin hunched slightly against the far wall massaging his lower back.

“You okay?” Sam asked, suddenly worried about magical boobytraps protecting trade secrets.

“I'm fine, just sore. Maddy is figuring out how to walk.” Calvin referred to his infant son Maddox, who’d been briefly handed off Sam at their first meeting. “I strained my back trying to stop him from falling onto some concrete at the playground yesterday. Everybody says babies are made to bounce, but as a parent you're pretty sure they're made of glass.”

“Is he your first?”

“Yeah.” Calvin smiled to himself. “Took four years of trying, but we finally got one. Now we just have to not mess him up.”

“You'll do fine.” Sam offered the completely baseless assurance.

“You have much experience with little kids?”

“Well, one time you handed me your son for five seconds.”

“Noted. You're not on the potential babysitter list.” Calvin joked, but the statement came as a relief.

“You don't happen to know how many days are in November by any chance?” Sam asked after a few minutes.

“30.” Calvin answered, then guessed. “Calculating interest accrued?”

“Prorating an equipment lease payment.” Sam replied causing Calvin to smile in approval.
“So…” Calvin hesitated slightly. There were only so many things that might trigger that reluctant lead in. Sam could guess what was coming. “You & Stacy seem to be getting along.”

“We are.” Sam confirmed, but didn't initially invite additional comments or speculation. When he glanced up, he saw Calvin staring at him, debating whether to say anything. “Is this about to turn into one of those ‘What are your intentions?’ talks?”

“You know everyone in the family can literally make every muscle in your body melt?” Calvin observed, making Sam let out a halfhearted chuckle.

“I had a general, less graphically violent idea, yeah.”

Part of Sam felt guilty about precluding Brady from the entire knowledge of the coven, but he wasn't sure how Stacy's family would react to the idea that she was essentially in a relationship with two men. That sort of thing was a problem for a lot of people in a general sense- it was a whole other thing to more or less tell someone that his younger sister was routinely double teamed.

“You seem like a good guy.” Calvin complimented. “She's usually into wilder guys- the bad boy type. It's nice to see her with someone that's a little more down to Earth- well, I mean- you know what I mean.”

Calvin gave a jerky half shrug at the mention of Earth & the verbal stumble, almost like a cringe at having caught himself in a faux pas. Sam wasn't sure what Calvin had thought he'd done that was offensive. Maybe he'd called Sam boring, but coming from the self proclaimed nerd that seemed unlikely. It wasn't the concept of being down to Earth, it was the mention of Earth at all... and in relation to him.

“You know about the demonic aura-thing?” Sam guessed.

“Yeah, some.” Calvin's voice turned a bit uneasy, but not hostile or even rude. “I'm not gonna lie, it's a little weird- I mean I know a lot of people with their own things… I just, the demon aspect…”

“Creeps you out?” Sam suggested, earning a mild tilt of the head.

“It's on my radar at least.” Calvin acknowledged.

“Trust me, I don't like it anymore than you do.” Sam commented. “I only just found out about all of this too.”

“It's not… well, contagious or anything, right?” Calvin's voice was very nearly as uncomfortable as Sam felt. He was asking if Sam could potentially give Stacy something like a demonic sexually transmitted disease.

“It doesn't work like that.” Sam hastily answered, though he wasn't entirely sure what the reality was. He wasn't sure if it would be reassuring or just make things more awkward for him to explain that they always used condoms. It was probably best just to leave that bit unsaid.

“Okay, good.” Calvin said almost to himself.

They went back to silently tackling their respective piles, but Sam kept finding his mind wandering away from his work. If he was an Anathema, and if Anathema were made from some sort of corrupting effect, could he infect someone else? If it was possible, surely Brady would've been affected- He'd had sex on & off with Brady for five years, and back when they'd lived together they had unprotected sex a dozen or so times. Stacy hadn't seen any demonic aura on Brady, if he'd caught something shouldn't it have been noticeable by now?
Sam tried to ignore the purely speculative fear. There were plenty of other more urgent & probable reasons to worry. Despite the lure of his numerous personal triggers, a sudden realization brought his attention crashing back into the stack of papers in front of him. His brain didn’t some idle math and he realized the magnitude of what he’d been working on over the last few hours. There were over 22 million dollars in assets changing hands in the contracts in front of him, not to mention a few contracts that had described “intangibles”. He’d never worked on stuff like that before. The implications of those hundred or so papers that had been entrusted to him was staggering. What had started as a small favor had suddenly become quite more.

“Do you know what ‘intangible #372’ is?” Sam asked as he started rereading an ominously thick packet of papers.

“One sec.” Calvin opened a filing cabinet next to his desk, then skimmed through the hanging folders. “It's a 10% interest in any growth in ‘the emotional yield of craven manipulators’ within San Francisco’s Business District since 2001.”

“What's a craven manipulator?”

“I'm guessing something to do with being cowardly- one sec.” Calvin kept reading for a moment, then synthesized. “It's an entire subclass of hex, basically anything designed to induce cowardice.”

“Wait,” Sam’s eyes widened. “does that mean just hexes designed with the specific intent to cause a cowardly state or any spells that happened to dissuade some action or cause duress?”

Little definitional oversights like that made a huge difference. As convoluted an asset as whatever an “emotional yield” was, there was a major difference in the two scopes Sam had pointed out. One interpretation only covered a narrow specifically intent set of hexes, while the other could be a much bigger pot of hexes that unintentionally qualified.

“I'm not seeing the answer clearly defined in here.” Calvin scowled at the lack of precision.

“Any idea who else might own the other 90% interest or other intangible emotional assets?” Sam asked. “If your coven ever wants to redeem this, then you're gonna need to know who might argue with you about what it means. Who knows how much this stuff is worth, but if it's worth anything, then there's gonna be a big fight over a few little vague words.”

“The other covens probably hold major interests in intangibles like emotions, magical phenomena, things like that. There are some private collectors in the area that are probably into that stuff. I'm not really sure who else, maybe some non-humans, can't count them out.” Calvin guessed.

“God this file sounds like a black hole of trouble.” Sam sighed as he scowled at it. “Does that file description even have a map or something defining the geographical boundaries of the Business District in 2001?”

“There's a list of APNs- Assessor Parcel.”

“Yeah, I've taken Real Estate Conveyancing.” Sam assured. Just because he didn't own any real property didn't mean he was unfamiliar with the coding system for identifying lots of land. “We’re gonna have to check if any of the lots got divided since then because that would screw up the numbering system, but otherwise it should be pretty close to the same.”

“I can try to find out tomorrow.”

“Even if we figure out what this contract covers- both definitionally & geographically, how do we try to value something like this?” Sam groaned, then rubbed the back of his neck with his offhand.
“Market rate?” Calvin gave the completely useless and typical economist’s answer.

“Do you know any appraisers who can value emotions?” Sam’s question was met with a brief disappointing silence.

“Do you see any upcoming dates on that?” Calvin nodded at the stack of papers in Sam’s hand.

“No.”

“Then we aren’t under any pressure to figure it out right now. Put it at the bottom of the pile.” Calvin suggested.

“I’m making a note here that you instructed me to ignore this one.”

“Fucking lawyers and your C.Y.A.s.” Calvin muttered.

Sam was sitting in his Business Organizations class trying to focus on the lesson, but his mind kept drifting off to the flip side. There were so many questions & loose ends. The conflict between the witches & the hunters had thrown a major obstacle into his search for answers- not to mention his personal life & education. Everything felt like it was getting out of control, like he was jumping from one sinking ship to another. He was scrambling, reacting- trying to keep his head above water. The whole thing was exhausting and left him slouched in his desk chair from discouragement.

“How many of you have seen things like this?” The professor asked as he clicked through his powerpoint presentation. A seemingly endless series of slides flicked by depicting cartoonishly sinister looking lawyers. Nearly half of them portrayed the lawyer as a devil figure or in Hell. Previously the cliche wouldn't have drawn a second thought from Sam, but with everything that was happening lately it hit a bit too close to home. “Our profession is overwhelmingly disliked. What are some of the perceptions that you’ve heard about lawyers?”

“They're liars.” One student called out, breaking the floodgate of class participation.

“Sneaky.”

“Selfish.”

Sam hated these lectures. He’d heard this sort of thing in two other classes as part of discussing professional ethics or improving the image of the profession in general. It was normally annoying, but each of those suggestions made his guilt flare over his continued lying to Brady and sneaking around with the coven.

“There's one that you all missed.” The professor replied. “Lawyers are naysayers.”

The word “naysayers” was written out on the board in a drab act of melodrama. Despite the fact that the university was a costly private school, two dry erase markers ran out while trying to write the word before the professor found adequate supplies to finish the job. The dead markers were unconsciously abandoned on the ledge below the whiteboard, somewhat undercutting the professor’s credibility.

“It's your job to look for things that might go wrong. Our profession is disproportionately afflicted with stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse- and it's no surprise why that is.” Sam shifted, interest subtly piqued by the unexpected turn in the lecture. “Part of the reason is because you're being trained to walk into a boardroom, listen to a dozen brilliant people talking about a revolutionary piece of technology that will save the world, and all you’ll hear is everything that could
possibly go wrong. Lawyers look for threats & risks, and million dollar start ups don't like to be told why they can't do something- why they can't save the world.”

It hadn't really occurred to Sam that his childhood of constantly watching for danger may have instilled in him a vigilance that fit so well with being a lawyer. It was hard to imagine his fear as an asset- maybe his caution? But all those negatives: stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse- all of those were manifestations of unhealthy fear & worry. The lecture was venturing strangely close to his discussions with his therapist, Dr. Neves. The professor was almost diagnosing a taught affliction- what was studying & testing if not some rudimentary form of cognitive behavioral therapy without the self-awareness?

These unhealthy mindsets were things he'd mused on in the middle of many insomnia filled nights. He knew that he'd never lose his anxiety or depression, that was becoming clear from his therapy sessions. He might become subclinical for a time, but that wasn't the same as having no fear. But what did the recognition of it manifesting in his professional life actually get him?

Sam started jotting down some disjointed thoughts on the subject, trying to get them out of his head and into a workable space. With them written out he might be able to find a way of translating what he'd learned in therapy to another forum. But as he worked, the lecture & his own thoughts collided. His cluttered & overstressed mind began pulsing with a fast onset migraine.

He reluctantly slipped out the classroom door, then found the closest bathroom where he wasn't likely to get interlopers. After checking that no one else was in the stalls, he grabbed a few paper towels, wetted them, then patted his face & neck. He pulled one of his migraine pills from his emergency stash in his wallet, popping it in his mouth. A wave of nausea hit him, so he went into the handicap stall in case he needed to throw up. He'd barely closed the stall door when the vision kicked in.

There was a young woman having a picnic in a field with a boy of about the same age. She looked familiar, dark hair & gentle eyes- Sam recognized her from one of the visions Zoya had induced. In the previous vision she'd been in a hospital bed, screaming in pain until she'd died. Clearly this vision took place at some time earlier. The pair were eating snacks and chatting in Spanish- making plans for some future road trip. Sam wasn't entirely fluent, but he followed the mundane conversation, waiting for something to happen- something bad was bound to happen.

He'd hardly had time to think such a pessimistic thought when the woman clutched her head. She swayed a bit, knocking over a glass bottle of soda as she collapsed. The boy caught her, then lowered her to the ground. When he asked her what was wrong, she parroted his words back to him in perfect sync. He kept trying to speak to her, but all she could do was echo his words.

She began speaking very quickly, so quickly that Sam couldn't catch most of what was being said. It was almost a stream of consciousness, but it didn't sound like hers. The flood of words were observing her- they were the boy's thoughts being voiced aloud by her. She was reading his mind. Unedited, unsynthesized, unprocessed regurgitated data. Nothing was being gained from it. It had to have been involuntary.

Her body started convulsing. The boy cleared away the sharp & breakable objects around her. As she jerked the grass for several yards around them seemed to whip in random directions. When she stopped convulsing, the boy held her limp body and pulled up one of her eyelids. Her eye was solid black, but it slowly faded to normal after a second or two. The boy didn't seem alarmed by the discovery, instead he just held her and wiped up the blood that had started trickling from her nose.

“Don't worry, Arcelia.” The boy whispered to the nearly unconscious girl. “You’ll get better with your powers. We still have time to get you ready.”
Sam was crouched, leaning against the wall of the handicapped bathroom stall. His fingers gingerly reached up to touch his nostrils. He was having a nosebleed, like the girl. After stuffing a few squares of toilet paper up his nose, he rushed—well, staggered out of the stall to check the mirror. His eyes were normal. The realization that that surprised him was profoundly disheartening.

By the time he got himself cleaned up and went back to the classroom, the lecture was over. Everyone was gone. The lecture had cautioned him about perils, but he'd missed any advice on mitigating them because he was too busy with his flip side life. That felt apt. He grabbed the two spent markers and tossed them into the recycling bin before leaving.

The university that Sam attended was built around a Spanish mission constructed in the 1700’s. Surrounding the old church were various quaint auxiliary buildings and gardens. In an attempt to get his mind somewhere far away from demons & witches, he walked over to a stretch of grass that was bordered by roses, which had just started to bloom, then laid down. The wind blew through the nearby palm trees creating a rustling sound that reminded him of waves breaking on a beach. He could smell star jasmine & roses. When he closed his eyes he half expected the peaceful moment to be stolen from him by another horrific vision, but it didn't come. This was what he wanted in life, the quiet.

He wanted a stable job, a home, a spouse, maybe even a kid. Everything far from danger, high stakes, & drama. On the weekends -yes, he'd have weekends- he would lay in a hammock and read. His personal library would contain poetry & classic literature, not spell books or accounts of Anathema. With a little luck he'd die of old age, something unheard of for someone who'd been a hunter... But the daydream was shattered when perfumed pollen tickled his sinuses and the resulting sneeze sent a painful jolt through his brain.

The frustrating reminder of his imperfect reality forced him to get up. He wasn't about to risk further ailment from something as common as allergies. Even something as simple as laying about in peace for a few minutes had become too much to ask for. He got up, brushed a few stray grass clippings from his clothes, then decided to wander farther from the rose garden. When he passed the heavy wooden double doors of the church he paused.

In all the time he'd attended the school he'd never entered the church- hell, he hadn't entered any church since quitting hunting and back then every visit had been a job. When he was younger he'd pray most nights- hoping his family would stay safe or better yet stop hunting. Recently, he’d only really prayed on the anniversary of his mother & Jessica’s deaths. He doubted anyone was listening, now more than ever, but he still went inside, took a seat in the back row, and began praying.

He asked that his life become simpler, both in its ongoing activities & in moral conflicts. He asked that his health improve, or at least that he stop getting worse. He asked that the people he cared about stay safe during the difficult time ahead. He asked that he not be an Anathema— even if Stacy was right, that he was still the same person he'd been the day before. Even if it was just a word, he didn't want it to be true because if there was only one thing he'd learned in law school, it was that words were powerful.

When he was done, he was just about to walk out of the church when he noticed the holy water font at the front of the church. The account of Anathema he'd read earlier mentioned the species being slightly reactive to iron— it made sense that they might also react to the rumored weapon against demons, holy water. He slowly approached the font, reached out to touch the surface of the water, but hesitated just above it. It had to have been years since he'd touched holy water, sometime when he was still hunting. Looking back he couldn't really recall using it— his dad had used it, occasionally Dean too, but not him- the kid in the family had never been entrusted to use it.
He cautiously dipped his hand into the basin of holy water. It didn't burn or steam, but it felt warm. His other hand touched the outside of the stone font, hoping that the sensation was the result of some ambient heat in the building. The stone fixture was cool to his fingers. He leaned his forehead against the wall and few tears fell into the holy water. After a minute or two the water began irritating his skin, so he removed his hand, then dried it off with his hoodie.

The itching didn't immediately go away, so he hurried back to his dorm to take a shower. It took an almost violent amount of scrubbing to stop the effect of the holy water. He didn't have the energy to do anything about his hair or the rest of him, opting to just let the hot water pour over him for an indefinite time. He wasn't looking forward to returning to his room and inevitably rereading the books on Anathema for the third time, but he finally convinced himself to end the shower when he noticed that his fingertips had turned wrinkly from prolonged exposure to the water.

Sam wrapped himself in a towel, then stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. The bruise from where his dad had hit him was mostly faded, only memorialized with a vaguely yellow splotch around his cheekbone. He reflexively thought that if his dad had known about the Anathema thing it would've been a lot more than a punch. He checked his nose for blood, though he found it unlikely since he hadn't had a vision for an hour or two. Checking his eyes made even less sense than checking his nose, but he still did it. His eyes had never turned black, but the girl- Arcelia’s had in two different visions.

She had to be one of the other people with powers, given to her by the same demon that had given him his visions. He supposed she was a psychic too. She could read minds after all. Her friend didn't seemed frightened, so she'd probably told him about her condition. The boy had tried to assure her that she had time for something, but in the other vision she'd died like the others. She had someone who cared about her and unless Sam could find a way to help her that couple would lose each other, just like Brady might lose him.

He wanted to save the people from his vision, to understand what was happening, to protect the people around him from the fallout. But he didn't have any power to do anything. The thing that set him apart, his visions, were unpredictable and could endanger him if word got out about it. The other Anathema could read minds or manipulate others’ will. He caught glimpses, flashes of a world map through a pinhole-

Sam furrowed his brow. He was being a naysayer, looking to the risks & his weaknesses. He needed to pay more attention to his strengths, whatever they might be, no matter how small they felt compared to everything ahead of him. Maybe he had a passive power as opposed to some of the more forceful powers, but he had something the others didn't have. He had the opportunity to see the world map, he could piece the damn thing together even if it was a mile at a time. More than that, he could build the big picture with more than just his visions.

He was more than his powers. He was a critical thinker, more importantly he was a creative thinker. If he needed chips to play in the game, he'd go collect some. There were nine covens, who held significant influence over the territory containing a major trading hub in an international market. Being introduced to the coven leaders had seemed like a bad thing at the time, but really it was an opportunity. He had an in with the regional power players. Malcolm, head of Oakland West’s coven, was right, not trying to impress the coven leaders had been a mistake.

In his defense, the Anathema bombshell had given him a significant disadvantage on what ideally would've been a very bizarre networking event. The stigma was real- Calvin had been wary of him and Sam was on friendly terms with the Chinatown coven. That didn't bode well for what the other covens’ leaders might think of him, but that didn’t mean things were hopeless. The proposal to essentially go to war with the hunters had thrown him beyond immediate recovery from the
Anathema reveal. If he couldn't yet do damage control on the witch-hunter conflict, maybe he could at least do something about the Anathema thing— or at least do something on a more basic level. But before dealing with the covens, he needed to take precautions to ensure that whatever demonic nature he had wouldn't start him off on the wrong foot with any new people. He needed to figure out how to work deals while suffering that particular handicap— Sam cursed.

Sam glanced around the empty parking lot of the vacant commercial office park. It was shortly after eight on a weeknight, but the multistory office buildings surrounding him had been vacant for several years. The entire neighborhood was the Silicon Valley’s equivalent of a ghost town. Once it had been a thriving collection of software companies no one had ever heard of and telecommunication companies that had eventually been consumed by a big name company higher up the food chain. Now the place was only good for teens skateboarding after school or more serious elements securing a private & neutral meeting ground.

With only partial hesitation, he pulled Zoya’s talisman from his pocket and said her name. She was standing about ten feet in front of him. The phrase “dressed to kill” came to mind. She wore the same curvy body, this time squeezed into a dark red dress that hugged her with a stunning degree of flattering craftsmanship. The plunging neckline was devastating in the amount of cleavage it produced. An amused, enticing smile spread across her face at the sight of him.

“It's good to see you again, Sam.”

“Stay back.” He warned, holding up a flask of holy water that he’d carefully collected for the occasion.

“You're the one who summoned me.” Zoya touched her chest in a gesture of faux offense, but her fingertips dragged along her skin in a caress designed to bring attention to her breasts. “That's not very polite.”

“I just want to talk.”

“And if I want to do more than talk?” She batted her eyelashes at him and slid her hand down her body toward her inner thigh. He forced his eyes back up to her face, almost missing that she used the distraction to take a step toward him. “Are you gonna hold me down?”

“You're a succubus?” Sam took a step backward as she shrugged in acknowledgement of the accurate guess.

“We have a lot of names.” She moved forward again, having given up the subtlety of her pursuit. “Names are less important than what I can do for you.”

“Or what you can do to me.” Sam continued his retreat, unwilling to use the holy water while they were still cordial.

“Please tell me what I can do to you.” She let out a tiny moan at a thought. “What you want me to do to you.”

“I want you to give me answers.”

“And what are you going to give me?”

“Just a kiss. Nothing more.” Sam stopped retreating. It was time for him to stand his ground.

“What do you want to know?” Zoya’s brow furrowed in the first unflattering gesture he’d ever seen
from the succubus. His firm & meager offering caught her curiosity enough that he wasn’t prey anymore—well, not exclusively prey.

“Am I an Anathema?” If anyone could confirm or deny his status as an Anathema, it would be another demon.

“The sweetest one I’ve ever seen.” She moved closer to him, but he barely cared. In order to hold up his end of the bargain, he’d have to let her touch him.

“How do I hide?” He asked, unsure of the proper nomenclature. “Demons have to have some way of avoiding being found, otherwise they wouldn’t be such an urban legend to hunters.”

“That’s a big request.” She moved close enough to play with one of the buttons on his shirt.

“I need to know how to keep myself safe.” Sam closed the distance, thought about Brady, and kissed her. He could feel her draining some of his happiness & excitement from him. This time around, he was on his guard for the faint intoxication she gave him in return. Before she could get her hooks into him, he pulled back, breaking the kiss. “If you ever want to take a taste again, you need me to stay alive. So tell me how to hide myself from hunters & things that can spot auras.”

“We use a ward in the form of a brand.” Zoya explained after a thoughtful pause. She pulled a pen & scrap of paper either from the ether or parts unknown, then drew a sigil and handed it to him. “Any demon who isn’t a complete moron places it somewhere that can’t be seen.”

“Where’s yours?” As soon as the question escaped him, he expected her to invite him to search for it, but instead she actually looked offended.

“That information is definitely not for sale.” She stated firmly, before returning to her normal self. Her arms wrapped around the back on his neck in an embrace that pressed her breasts against him. “I think I’ve earned another nibble.”

“Just a kiss, a few seconds.” Sam agreed that giving him the sigil had been a showing of good faith, above & beyond what the earlier fleeting kiss had paid for. She leaned in to kiss him, but he pulled his head back an inch to add. “I felt you trying to drug me. Or whatever that was. I’m serious, don’t try anything.”

“Reflex.” Zoya's excuse or apology was undercut by the little smirk that formed on her face. “You felt that? You really are gifted.”

She reached up and pulled him into a kiss. Sam thought about Brady. He was the calm & safety in all the chaos that had become his life, but he was also his truest & oldest source of joy. Even in just a simple moment curled up in bed together, that was the simple peace Sam longed for—The way Brady smiled at him in the morning, before nuzzling into Sam's neck. Soft lips & morning scruff tickling his tender flesh. Whispered compliments delicately couched in jokes so that Sam wouldn't get embarrassed. Their bodies slip closer to each other, embracing, searching for that completeness—being deeply known & loved.

Sam could feel himself drifting into a cherished lustful memory, but at the same time a lesser part of his brain worked to keep track of Zoya. Her tongue had parted his lips assertively. She cupped the side of his face and he could feel that warm tingling of pleasure start to form at her touch. He fought against the temptation to fade back into the memory of making out with Brady—that's all it was, a memory. Something very important was going on in the present, something he had to try focusing on.
She was rubbing against him. One of her hands slid down his front and started to palm his dick through his jeans. He tried to back away, but his limbs were a bit too clumsy. When he almost tripped backwards, her hand moved around to support him, incidentally pressing his crotch against her. She moaned through the kiss, unprepared to break it.

The kiss was escalating, either from her betrayal or maybe her own single minded enthusiasm. To her credit, she wasn't flooding him with enticing fantasies or memories the way she had in the alley. There was more restraint on her part, and he'd initially started the trip down memory lane with Brady as a source of inspiration for the bartered emotions. It was possible she was just getting greedy out of habit rather than trying to actively screw him over so to speak- she had mentioned succumbing to reflexes moments ago. Regardless, he wasn't going to just let her take whatever she wanted from him. For too much of his life he'd let people use him. He was accommodating, but when it came down to it people were depending on him. He wasn't prepared to keep being a victim.

He wasn't sure what he was doing, but nearly anything seemed like a good starting point- anyway all things being equal his intuition had to be better than nothing. With some difficulty he lifted his heavy arms. He gripped the sides of Zoya's face and tried to push her off of him, but she didn't let go.

He didn't want to hurt her, though he suspected there wasn't much chance of him doing any real damage. She was taking pleasure from him, he needed to offer a sufficient deterrent. Sam pushed the sweet memory of Brady's kiss from his thought and instead focused on all the pain & sadness he could. Visions of death & suffering flickered in his mind and he tried with all his will to force it on her.

Her tongue froze in surprise, then withdrew from his mouth. She shifted, releasing her grip on his ass as her body pulled away from him. He could feel her trying to disengage with him, but he wasn't ready to let her go. He wanted to let her know he intended on defending himself. His fingers gripped the back of her head & lower back so tightly that his knuckles threatened to crack. When he finally let go of her, she fell backwards onto the ground trembling & panting.

“You aren’t gonna touch me without my consent- my uncompromised, continual, informed consent. No tricks. No extra taste on a whim. No ‘just a bit more.’ Never again.” Sam told her in a deathly serious tone. She blinked up at him in stunned silence, waiting to see what he would do next. Possibly against his better judgment, he held out his hand to her, offering her help up. “I'm not your victim.”

“Then what are we?” She asked warily.

“Hopefully legitimate business partners.”

Zoya eyed his hand for a moment, then accepted it.

Sam wasn't used to actually drafting contracts, but he'd studied enough bad ones that he was only moderately worried. He didn't bother trying to hide his concern, the person he was dealing with could sense his emotions. Instead he banked heavily on his determination in the situation- not desperation though, he made that clear.

Most people might've been inclined to assume Zoya wasn't an adapt businesswoman because she dealt in matters of the heart. Having previously been one upped by her, fairly or not as the case might be, Sam gave her all the credit & caution she deserved. It might've been his imagination, but he could've sworn she sincerely warmed to him each time he figuratively or literally pushed her back to arms length.
After extended negotiations they'd settled on a basic deal that Sam could take back to Chinatown and potentially the other covens. If a coven opted into the deal, Zoya would assess and generate an item by item appraisal for all of the relevant emotional intangibles that that coven owned in the Bay Area. In return for her work she'd receive a .25% interest in any appraised goods owned by the participating coven.

To sweeten the deal for Zoya, Sam suggested giving her the right of first refusal on a percentage of any assets the covens wanted to sell- put simply, the covens wouldn't be able to shop around for a buyer until after she was first offered the goods in exchange for her paying whatever the market rate was. The covens wouldn't lose anything on that provision and she had a leg up on her competition. More than that, giving Zoya incentives as a potential buyer helped counteract any motivation she might have to falsify the values as a shareholder herself.

A confidential aspect of the deal was that Sam would be secretly given 20% of Zoya’s commission on the initial appraisal services and a record of all assets that Zoya uncovered, including any non-coven private holdings discovered within the next two years. If he lived long enough and if those intangible assets ended up being worth anything, his .05% interest in the larger pot might someday be helpful for covering his medical bills once his school health insurance ended- or hopefully more pleasant living expenses.

But honestly his secret commission wasn’t even the part he was most enthusiastic about. Now he had a legitimate reason to set up meetings with the covens- more than that, he had something to offer them. This was his opportunity to restart the dialogues that had been tarnished by the Anathema issue. Once he was at the table he'd be able to better assess each coven’s temperament, priorities, & resources. It might take some work, but now he had seven new opportunities for leads to run down.

More than just gaining more potential sources of information, he was also setting himself up to start accruing resources that could be bartered with. A demon of the Crossroads might be able to give him more information on the demon who stole his soul and the cost of getting it back, but he wasn’t about to walk into another meeting without something other than himself to trade. If he could broker a deal with a few covens, he'd soon start accumulating his bargaining chips.

On the way back to his dorm room Sam stopped by the store to pick up a few supplies. He knew exactly what he needed: two needle nose pliers, a small spool of sturdy flexible metal wire, & a miniature kitchen torch.

As expected, Furcifer was patiently waiting for him when he got home. The cat rubbed against his leg in a strangely comforting show of affection, then hopped up on Sam’s lap when he sat down. Rather than curling up like a normal lap cat, Furcifer peeked its head over the edge of the table in order to watch what Sam was working on.

“I’m keeping your secret. I really hope you're returning the favor.” Sam told the tabby, while giving it a little scratch on the chin. He examined the drawing of the ward that Zoya had prepared, then began meticulously shaping the wire with the pliers. “Because if not, I’m about to do something really stupid for nothing.”

Furcifer jumped up onto the table to get a better look at the drawing of the sigil. The loud purring that followed gave Sam a little more confidence in the authenticity of the sigil. They might both be demons, but as far as Sam could tell Furcifer had no reason to be enthusiastic about some hypothetical trap Zoya may have laid for him. He finished the last few bends of the wire, then held it out for the cat to see.

“Does that look right?” Sam asked the tabby. “Of course it does.”
He got up from the table and poured himself a tall glass of whiskey, then drank about half to help relax. With an upbringing like his, he’d suffered all sort of injuries, but self-inflicted ones had been few & far between. He pounded the remainder of the glass, then heated up the brand in the fire of the torch. He opened his mouth and pushed on the side of his face, exposing the inside of his cheek. After a few seconds hesitation, he pressed the brand to his flesh.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter had more legal/financial jargon in it than normal. Hopefully it's not so much that it made the story hard to follow.
When Brady entered Sam's room he paused for a beat and stared at Sam. His expression was mild surprise. For a moment Sam worried that maybe the brand on the inside of his cheek had caused a little bruising that Brady might investigate- there hadn't been any there that morning, but he was still worried that something might develop. Then he'd have to try explaining why he had a symbol burned into the side of his face. Luckily, Brady quickly recovered and explained.

“You look good. There's something about you.” Brady offered as he took off his backpack and tossed it onto the table. “Did you do something?”

“Uh…” Sam struggled to think if there was anything that had changed physically about him. Neither encounter with Zoya had left a mark. He grinned at the thought that maybe he was feeling better- not healthy, but at least he felt better emotionally. “I've been stressing over stuff for the last few weeks and I just came up with my plan of attack for the next while. Hopefully I'll start seeing some real progress. It's a relief.”

“See, you can handle more than you think.” Brady smiled, then nodded toward the door. “Speaking of progress, I've been hitting the gym while you've been hitting the books. Pretty soon I'm gonna get one up on you.”

“What've you been working on? Strength? Cardio?” Sam moved closer to Brady and looked him over for clues.

“Strength.” Brady even flexed, but Sam hardly noticed a difference- not that he was complaining. He preferred lean musculature on men.

“You'd probably get more out of stretching and working on reflex training.” Sam offered apologetically. “All that strength's no good if you can't hit anyone.”

“My reflexes are good.” Brady said in his defense, but Sam politely refrained from comment. “You up for a little practice?”

“Sure.” Sam grabbed his phone, then followed Brady outside. They walked around campus in search of a stretch of grass large enough for them to spar on, yet secluded enough to not draw onlookers. “Any word about your dad?”

“Not really.” Some of Brady's good mood visibly melted away. “I keep hoping if I don't check in with him, he'll forget about me.”

“Neglect is one thing, forgetting you exist…”

“He's got this big project he's working on. It's been all he's cared about forever. If you can't help him get out of his way,” Brady complained.

“And in the middle of that he's still coming to check on you?”

“Check on his investment.” Brady snarled at what Sam suspected was a quote. He knew Brady's family was wealthy- they'd probably sunk a small fortune into Brady's education & housing expenses.
“Hey,” Sam touched Brady's arm, stopping him, then embraced him. “You're doing great. You don't have to worry about impressing him.”

“Impressing him isn't what I'm worried about. I'm done trying to make him happy.” Brady sighed as he rested his forehead on Sam's shoulder. “But deflecting and redirecting him away from us, yeah, I'll be working the hard sell. And if that fails, well, at least you're a good teacher- hopefully I'm an okay student.”

“Show me.” Sam kissed Brady's cheek before letting him go so they could start their lesson.

Brady was definitely improving, though Sam got the impression that he was holding back. He didn't blame Brady for being reluctant while sparring. It was normal for hunters to beat the shit out of each other without any animosity, but most civilians didn't care for violence or the risk of injury- Hell, Sam was holding back too. Practicing with Dean or his dad might've ended up with a few bruises or a split lip. He definitely didn't want that for Brady… But that didn't mean he'd let Brady get cocky. Sam hooked Brady's leg with one of his, tripping him, then pinned him to the ground.

“You're getting better.” Sam offered from his position on top of Brady.

“Not quite good enough.”

“You were starting from a weak position. You need to find some way of getting more leverage before you make your move.”

Brady wrapped his legs around Sam's, then rolled them. He grabbed Sam's wrists and held them to the ground. Sam let Brady pin him- laying in the soft grass, limbs tangled, bodies pressed together, hearts pounding. Suddenly fight training was far from his mind.

“I'm ready to make my move.” Brady whispered, then kissed Sam's neck. His lips lingering on Sam's flesh, sucking and nibbling tantalizingly.

“Jesus Christ.” Sam quietly groaned as he reflexively pulled Brady's body closer to him. He might've been self-conscious, but it was early enough that there wasn’t anyone around and they were hidden away in the gardens behind the campus’s church. They laid there in the warm spring sunlight, holding & kissing each other- enjoying long overdue simple indulgences.

“When all the drama -and school- is done…” Sam whispered, but hesitated. He wanted to have that peace, some happy life with Brady, but it was hard to imagine what his life might look like after the dust from the flip side had settled. Whatever it ended up being, at least there was one thing he knew. “I want more moments like this- peace.”

“You & me, just being ourselves.” Brady spoke fleetingly when his lips weren't on Sam's exposed flesh. “Someday we won't have to worry about people like our families. We won't have to hide who we are.”

Sam let out a small moan of pleasure at the thought. Brady had managed to find the thing Sam wanted most for their relationship. He didn't want to hide himself from Brady. The thought of maybe someday Brady truly knowing him and still loving him... Maybe someday they really could have a future?

“We need to go back to my room.” Sam groaned in Brady's ear.

“Do you want me?” Brady baited, knowing damn well the answer was yes.

“More than anything.” Sam offered, hitting Brady's weakness.
They collided with the dorm’s hallway while they clumsily kissed on their way back to Sam's room. Sam fumbled the keys as Brady bit his ear and palmed his dick through his pants. They nearly forgot to close the door, but Brady hastily kicked in shut before tackling Sam backwards onto the bed. It was frantic & desperate and Sam couldn’t remember the last time he'd had such incredible sex.

“Can I get your help with something?” Sam asked once his heart had stopped pounding and he’d caught his breath- evidently he needed to exercise more too.

“For you, always.” Brady playfully rolled toward him, intertwining their legs, then ran his fingers through Sam’s hair.

“I have a negotiation project coming up and I need some advice on how to be smooth.” Sam couched the upcoming contract pitches to the covens as a class assignment.

“You're smooth.” Brady caressed Sam’s chest & abs.

“You know what I mean.” Sam rolled his eyes. “You're the charmer. I'm the level headed sidekick.”

“You're sidekick to no one.” Brady stared at Sam. “You don’t need to be out in front all the time to lead. It’s fine to pull the strings from behind, but don’t think for a second that that means you aren’t powerful.”

Sam decided not to make a joke about Brady being manipulative. They both knew he was, sometimes to the point of being underhanded- but he was effective at getting what he wanted much more often than not. Sam didn’t want to coerce anyone, but there was something to be said for understanding how to apply pressure when needed.

“You’ve always said I’m a leader, but I’ve never led anything since you’ve known me.” Sam observed, questioning Brady’s presumption. “How do you know?”

“People like you, you’re smart, and you’ve got this sincerity to you. That’s going to be your biggest asset in getting what you want- you're likeable and you’re a good person.” Brady looked away from Sam’s eyes, suddenly preoccupied with the bedding. “You make me want to be a good person, a better person than I am.”

“You’re a good person.” Sam countered while taking Brady’s hand.

“Only since I met you- even then, let’s be honest, I’m kinda a dick.” Brady muttered. “But I’m trying, and it’s because of you.”

“I think you’re doing a great job.”

“I’ve had a great motivator.” Brady kissed Sam deeply. After a few seconds, he started grinding against Sam. Brady had just started stroking Sam hard when there was a gentle knock at the door.

“Sam, you home? You didn't answer my text.” Stacy called through the door.

“One sec.” Sam shouted to her, as Brady hopped out of the bed.

Brady grabbed a textbook off the table and used it to cover his dick before opening the door. Stacy’s eyes widened at the sight of him. Sam could hear a few giggles in the hallway.
“Ladies.” Brady acknowledged the innocent bystanders with a flirtatious grin & wink. He sidestepped so that his crotch was hidden by Stacy. He tossed the textbook aside, scooped Stacy up in his arms, then turned around, kicking the door closed behind him. The giggles turned into raucous laughter & talking as soon as the door was shut.

“Please don’t flash my neighbors.” Sam told Brady as he tossed Stacy onto the bed.

“I only flashed them after they started gawking.” Brady offered in his defense. “I'm wanton, I'm not a complete asshole.”

“Public nudity is still frowned upon in the state of California.” Sam warned.

“I was technically still inside your room.”

“Indecent exposure doesn't take leaving the room.”

“So you're saying I should conceal my dick as a precaution?” Brady looked between Sam & Stacy. “If only I had somewhere to put it.”

“I hope you never really need a lawyer.” Stacy commented while reclining on the bed beside Sam.

“Once Sammy gets admitted to the bar, I'm gonna need a lawyer at least once a day.”

“Stacy, we can put our clothes on if you didn't come over here for sex.” Sam offered.

“I hadn't really been planning on it, but don't let me interrupt you two.” Stacy assured. Brady started stroking Sam’s dick. “Maybe the mood will strike me.”

Sam leaned his head back as Brady started blowing him. His eyes rolled over to see Stacy watching them. She licked her lips, then slipped off her dress & panties. Her fingers moved down her front and she started playing with herself while watching them. When she was good & ready, she leaned over and whispered in Brady’s ear.

“May I cut in?”

“I'm gonna grab a shower.” Brady said as he got up and wrapped a towel around his waist. He opened the door, stepped out into the hall, then turned back to instruct. “Sam, if she even looks like she's capable of walking, fuck her again.”

Sam offered a vague salute to Brady as he cupped Stacy's ass and pulled her naked body to him. She giggled a bit while stroking his subtle abs. Thoroughly satisfied, Brady closed the door.

“Are you dangerously close to being able to walk?” Sam asked. “Because if so I need another few minutes or pharmacological intervention.”

“Your mouth seems to be working just fine.” Stacy smirked, then added. “But I'm good for now. Your tag team technique is wonderfully devastating. Anyway, I actually came here to talk shop.”

“What's going on?”

“Calvin wanted me to tell you that the coven is giving you the go ahead on some sort of contract.”

“The emotional intangibles deal?” Sam propped himself up on his elbows.

“Yeah, I think that's what he mentioned.” Stacy had hardly confirmed before Sam was out of bed
and on his laptop. He opened up his password protected account, then checked his email—there was an email from Calvin detailing all of the emotional intangible assets that had been discovered in Chinatown’s inventory as of that morning. There was even more than he’d been expecting.

With Chinatown as a backer, he was ready to take his offer to another coven. He could go talk to Sunset—Bhavya liked him, or at least found him interesting enough that she’d probably humor him to some extent. But at the meeting of the coven leaders, Sunset had only earned reluctant cooperation from several of the other covens. He was already associated with Chinatown & Sunset, getting both of them as early backers would only underscore that dependence. If he was going to have any sort of individual identity in the flip side, he needed to establish himself apart from Chinatown & Sunset. That meant stepping out a bit and he had an idea of where to start.

“Can you contact the Oakland West coven and set up a meeting for me with their leader, Malcolm Coles?”

Malcolm had been described as standoffish, but a good man who engaged in charity work. He’d seemed concerned about the safety of the civilians in the area. With a little luck and reason, he might be a good place to start.

“You want to meet with Malcolm?” Stacy asked, a bit surprised by the choice. “Didn't he tell you to stay out of his territory?”

“He told me that I needed his permission first.” Sam corrected, but didn’t frame that as an implied acknowledgment that Sam might visit his territory. “Can you get me permission to propose a business opportunity to him? I want to make a second first impression.”

The next evening, Sam & Stacy took the train up to Oakland for the meeting with Malcolm. After what Stacy had described as a bit of sweet talking, Sam had been slotted into a twenty minute opening in Malcolm’s schedule. Stacy had managed to coax a little additional information out of Malcolm’s assistant, which indicated that Oakland had started seeing an increase in sightings of both hunters & nonhumans. Rather than postponing indefinitely until things had quieted down, Sam took the meeting—though he wasn’t sure how he was supposed to restore his image and make a potentially multimillion dollar deal in only twenty minutes.

Sam had to consciously stop himself from thumbing the file folder in his hands. It was a little old fashioned to have a hard copy version of a contract, but he didn’t have the relationship with the West coven to send them confidential documents. He wanted something he could keep in front of him until the time was right.

He was nervous to the point that he was habitually checking himself for sweat stains on the train ride. Slightly more than the standard dosage of anti-anxiety meds had been taken, but despite the chemical block, his rational brain knew perfectly well what the stakes were. At best, he could get a strong unbiased backer in the flip side and a deal that would help him gain the leverage needed to pursue the demon holding contract to his soul. At worst… well, he supposed it was unlikely that he would be killed, but there were plenty of unsavory possibilities when witches were involved.

Stacy shifted in the seat next to him, adjusting her fuschia dress. She glanced around to make sure none of the dozen other passengers in their train car were looking, then readjusted her panties. He raised an eyebrow at her.

“Sometimes you guys leave things tender.” She explained, then added. “Not a complaint.”

“Ah, let us know if it's ever too much.” Sam reminded her, though he usually wasn’t the one
initiating. “Sorry about Brady.”

“Sorry for what?”

“He pretty much treats you like an extra place to put his dick.”

“Well, I treat him like an extra dick- and tongue- and fingers.” Stacy smiled at fond memories. “Anyway, maybe things aren't like between us, but it's not like Brady & I only fuck.”

“Do you two hang out?”

“We've gone to a few movies & hockey games while you were busy with school stuff-” Stacy’s face scrunched up at a new thought. “Or I guess maybe while you were sick or doing other studying.”

Sam had only been half paying attention while running through his pitch in his head, then he replayed her words and looked over at her in surprise.

“You two really do like date stuff?”

“Yeah.” Stacy seemed to have thought that was obvious. One of her eyebrows raised. “When was the last time you went on a date with him?”

“Too long ago.” Sam admitted when he couldn’t recall whether he’d gone out with Brady since the concert where they’d met her.

“The three of us should go on a date. It'll be fun.”

“I- uh-” Sam closed the file folder and shifted- partially to give her his full attention and partially from discomfort. “Brady & I used to be with another woman- the one who died. Things became tense when Brady wanted all of us to be out together, like out, together.”

“What's wrong with that?”

“People would stare.” He offered halfheartedly. Maybe he had some lingering anxiety related to homophobia- He probably should’ve tried harder to analyze the discomfort back when Jessica had suggested breaking up with Brady. It was a confusing time- Sam’s stomach knotted at that feeble excuse. “Jess & I didn't want things to get… We wanted to fit in. Brady didn't care- he doesn’t care about that kinda stuff.”

“Does fitting in really mean so much to you?”

“Not as much as it used to.”

“Good.” Stacy kicked up her feet in a showing of confidence. “Cause I want to walk down the street with a tall ridiculously hot guy on each arm.”

He let out a little huff of amusement that she had such a simple goal. Though, thinking about it gave him pause. It would be nice to be able to just not worry about perceptions, really nice. He wasn’t sure to what extent that ever bothered Stacy, but Brady’s earlier mention of not having to hide who they are hinted at the issue. Brady may have been talking about hiding from their families or at least from his family & John- Dean seemed to be begrudgingly accepting of Brady’s existence… though, that wasn’t all of the families.

“Are you gonna tell your family about Brady?”

“Yeah, they won't really like that he's a muggle- not sure how they'll react to the whole two guys
thing, but they like you.” Stacy grinned. “They'll probably like that he's loaded.”

“Am I not reputable enough for Mama Chen?” Sam joked.

“Oh she thinks you're great, but she's always on me about planning for the future.” Stacy started doing an impression of her mom in Cantonese, then switched over to English for Sam's benefit. “You need a career. You're almost thirty. Your brother pays $2,500 per month for childcare. How do you expect to live?”

“Have you told her…?” Sam hesitated. “I mean, I like you and all, but that's a whole lot of stuff I'm not ready to even think about.”

“I told her to back off. I think she's willing to skip hassling you on account of you being slammed with school & the whole psychic thing.” Stacy assured. Sam appreciated the fact that she lowered her voice to a whisper when mentioning that he was a psychic. “Brady, I expect her to hone in on. She'll be on my ass and his- actually, maybe that'll help her get over the whole threesome awkwardness.”

“I don't think Brady's gonna be okay with your mom bringing up kids.”

“Hey, we've only been dating a few months. I'm not seriously talking about it.” She clarified, then slightly undercut herself by asking. “Does he not want any?”

“I… I don't know.” Sam admitted. Brady & he had never discussed that aspect of a hypothetical future. His first reaction was that Brady was too self-centered to want a kid- but Brady had actually been very nurturing towards him. “The two of us haven't talked about it.”

“Haven't you two been together for like five years?”

“On & off.” Sam corrected. “With the two of us being guys- I think maybe the logistics have made it… not moot exactly… just complicated.”

He felt a little embarrassed. For months he'd been trying to avoid accepting that Brady was his boyfriend again and now Stacy was asking if the two of them had ever talked about having a family. The more he thought about it, the more he could see Brady liking the idea. Brady wanted to shower Sam with affection and share whatever sources of happiness they could. Sam’s stomach knotted a bit. He was tempted to go back to dwelling on the West coven deal, but Stacy continued.

“Well, before Brady meets my family, you two should probably come up with a party line that's better than that- cause I guarantee you my mom will be the first one to point out where you two can find a vagina.” Stacy gestured at her crotch. “And she'll be asking Brady if he can afford daycare- hell, I think she'd be happy with just child support.”

“As someone who timeshares your vagina,” Sam stated. “I'd like to remind you that you have a 50% chance of bagging a guy that can't afford child support payments.”

“Don't worry. I'm on the pill and on magical lockdown every possible way imaginable.”

“There's magical birth control?” He didn’t know why he was asking, of course there was magical birth control.

“My dad's head of a coven.” She grinned at memories of Dennis undoubtedly having panic attacks over his rebellious teenage daughter. “You better believe he researched literal tomes on it before I turned sixteen.”
They took a cab from the bus station to some sort of small scale music venue. The metal sign was abstract letters that Sam couldn't parse before he was being patted down by security. Stacy took his hand and guided him through a dimly lit bar that bordered one side of the main hall. A dozen standing tables lined the walls around a packed dance floor. A DJ was mixing on a stage across the room and the audience pulsed to hip-pop that occasionally ventured into glitch hop & house music. Sam noticed two innocuous doors along the far wall that were guarded.

“Someone is gonna come out to greet us.” Stacy shouted over the music to him. “Definitely don’t want to sneak up on anyone. Security increased since last time I was here. They're probably watching for hunters.”

“Are you worried?”

“Coven HQs are probably the safest place in the flip side right now.” Stacy speculated, then gestured at the audience. “Especially when they have a hundred muggle human shields.”

“Touché.” Sam acknowledged, then hesitantly broached an unpleasant topic. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but can you stay out here while I talk to him? I’m trying to make a deal directly with West and I don’t want them thinking I’m representing Chinatown.”

“I’m putting several drinks on your tab while I wait for you.” Stacy warned with a little shrug. “And I’m gonna dance with whoever.”

“Do you want me to be the kind of guy that gets jealous about that?” Sam asked, legitimately confused about whether she wanted him to be offended. Personally, he didn’t care what she did as long as it didn't drag drama into their existing relationship.

“No.” Stacy replied while flagging down a bartender. “I won’t fuck anybody else, just to let you know.”

“Thanks.” He kissed her, but his lips twitched nervously.

“Sam,” She held his hand and looked into his eyes with a sincerity that drowned out the music. “you’re gonna do great.”

“Thank you, really.” He smiled warmly, actually a bit comforted by the reassurance, as Malcolm’s assistant arrived at Sam's elbow to collect him. “Have fun. I’ll be back when I can.”

Sam followed the woman through the crowded dance floor. She moved through the mob with confidence and surprising grace in a pencil skirt & narrow heels. The crowd was only lit in fading bursts of white & blue light that pulsed to the beat of the music. A few hands caressed him as he squeezed between people.

His guide stopped at a door manned by two guards and they were let through with a nod of respect. Beyond the doorway was a hall that seemed unnaturally insulated from the sounds of the club. After passing half a dozen doors they entered a large office. Malcolm wore a textured black suit with almost imperceptible teal accents. He sat at a massive cherry wood desk on the far side of the room. In order to get to him, Sam passed a sitting area where three women in elegant dresses lounged speaking among themselves- until Sam walked in. They turned silent, watching him with interest. At Malcolm’s gestured invitation, Sam sat down on a leather armchair across from the coven leader.

“I’m not going to lie. I didn’t expect to see you again.” Malcolm offered in lieu of a greeting.

“After the first impression I made, that's an understandable reaction.” Sam conceded.
“I hear you have a business offer.” Malcolm sipped amber liquid from a tumbler. “With war against the hunters potentially on the horizon, making a few extra dollars isn't exactly what I'd call a priority.”

“My proposal doesn’t require you to commit any manpower and the proceeds can be used to fund your defenses.”

“Tell me what you're suggesting.” Malcolm instructed while trying to assess Sam.

“I was reviewing Chinatown’s assets and realized that most of their intangible were languishing, unappraised-“

“Languishing?”

“No one is going to sell or buy an investment that doesn't have a value on it. Until those holdings are accurately valued it acts as a Schroeder’s cat.” Sam explained. “We’ve located an appraiser of emotional assets. She’ll appraise the goods for a percent interest as a commission and right of first refusal. In exchange your coven will know the worth of what you have.”

“And you're playing broker.” It wasn’t a question.

“I have a business relationship with the appraiser. That's how I know what she's capable of and willing to do.” Sam acknowledged, but he didn't want to get into the details of his association with Zoya. “I want to be an asset to the alliance, this is how I think I can help. I'm not a witch. I don't know what else to do.”

Malcolm nodded in appreciation of the intent. For a moment Sam thought the coven leader might make a decision right there & then- it was only a twenty minute appointment after all.

“What else do you have to offer?”

The question made Sam’s mind sputter a bit, but he tried to not let it show. He hadn’t come with anything else to offer. Meanwhile, Malcolm hadn’t provided Sam with a counteroffer for him to argue against.

“I'm not sure what you're getting at.” Sam replied cautiously. “I mostly know about transactional law & finances.”

“I can't see any demonic aura on you.” Malcolm noted.

The Anathema issue was the elephant in the room and Malcolm clearly wanted to address it. Sam wasn’t surprised that it had come up, but he wasn’t thrilled to be discussing it. Malcolm wasn’t going in for the kill right off the bat, which hopefully meant that he was trying to be more open minded.

“It's hidden. I found some warding.” Sam admitted. “If there are gonna be hunters around, I want to look as normal as possible.”

He didn't want Malcolm or any of the other witches to think he was hiding things from them. Let the hunters act as the common threat for the moment.

“I've heard that demons have powers- supernatural feats without the craft of spellwork.” Malcolm paused a moment to see if Sam volunteered any information before pointedly asking. “Do you have powers?”

Sam didn't say anything. He didn't move or react with shame. To his credit, Malcolm didn't smile
knowingly at the lack of denial. The two guards in the room shifted their weight. The three women, who'd been watching him exchanged a few whispers.

“Yes.” Sam spoke in a quiet voice, but kept a look of determination on his face.

“What can you do?”

“With respect, telling the wrong people could get me killed. I don't know if you're one of those wrong people.”

“If I swear I won't hurt you- that my people won't hurt you over this?” Malcolm pushed, then added. “You're under the protection of Chinatown & Sunset. I don't want a war with two other covens while we're drowning in hunters.”

“I need absolute secrecy on this.” Sam demanded.

“Done.” Malcolm agreed after glancing around the room to assess its occupants.

“I'm a psychic.” Sam stated coolly. “I can't control what I'm looking at, but I get visions.”

“A real live psychic.” Malcolm nodded. “No wonder Bhavya wants to hold you close to the chest.”

“My visions mostly happen at random, so I can't give her useful intel.” Sam wanted to lower Malcolm’s expectations.

“They're mostly at random. What happens when they aren't?”

“It was only one time.”

“Indulge me.”

Sam paused again. He didn’t like the idea of talking in any detail about his powers. It was bad enough that they knew he wasn’t quite human, but that was old news relatively speaking. His visions were more personal, potentially more dangerous. But Malcolm had agreed to confidentiality and leaving Sam unharmed, meanwhile Sam was trying to build the foundation of a working relationship.

“I found a woman, who was hurt.” Sam altered the story slightly to make the storytelling process easier. “When I touched her I saw her death that would've happened a few minutes later.”

“Would've happened?” Malcolm raised an eyebrow. “Was the vision wrong?”

“I called 911. The medics saved her.” Sam explained. “She didn't end up dying the way I saw.”

“You can see people’s death by touching them?” Malcolm asked slowly, still processing the information.

“It doesn't work all the time. I think it has to be within a short time of the death.”

“There are hunters on the streets and you can see imminent death?”

Sam stood there, silently considering the situation. He was putting his neck out there and it was another opportunity for someone to take a slice at it. But he was building his credibility. The more he interacted with the different covens, the more he’d get a reputation of one sort or another. As an Anathema he’d been initially considered with wariness. Now he was a potential resource - the only question was whether he was likable enough for the covens to play nice with or whether they’d take
him for all he was worth.

“I want to save people, I really do. But if I go around telling people what I can do, someone is gonna decide to keep me chained up in their basement.” Sam explained. “There's a demand for psychics—”

“You're selling the wrong service.” Malcolm suggested.

“I'm not selling that.” Sam stated firmly. “I'm willing to help your people, but the second I start trading that part of me away I'm gonna be opening myself up to too much.”

“Some people don't take no for an answer.” Malcolm observed.

“Then I hope for their sake that they don't cross me.” Sam warned, earning a look of intrigued interest from Malcolm and a few more whispers from the table of women. “Chinatown knows I'm here. If anything happens to me—”

“You've got some balls, kid.”

“Once again, with respect,” Sam’s heart was hammering and it was taking all his willpower not to let his fear show. “don't call me kid.”

“Quick learner.” Malcolm noted, then visibly relaxed. “I might ask you to survey my people before you leave- see if we can avoid any untimely deaths, but I'm not going to take you prisoner.”

“Thank you.” Nearly every muscle in Sam’s body relaxed slightly. “I know this puts you in an uncomfortable position.”

“Dahl.” Malcolm called to the table of women. A woman stood up and stepped forward. She had skin so dark & enticing that it drew Sam's attention like a black hole pulls in light. Her hair was short coils that only just framed her face. She wore a green full length dress that felt out of place in the club- clearly she wasn't there to dance. “This is Dahlia. She’s in charge of the coven’s assets & accounts.”

“I'm Sam, it's nice to meet you.”

“Charmed.” She held out her hand to him. He accepted the handshake, which was watched by everyone.

“Dahl, I'm sure you and Sam have a lot to talk about.” Malcolm offered as an invitation for them to leave. “Do your magic.”

Dahlia guided Sam through an unmarked door in the back of the office. They ascended a staircase to the third floor, then crossed a walkway over the dance floor. On the opposite side of the venue was a balcony style lounge that overlooked the club. There were three empty tables for two and a private bar with an attendant. Some sort of acoustically phenomenon or magic made the balcony particularly quiet- perfect for a conversation. Dahlia sat down at the far table, then gestured for Sam to sit. He was hardly settled before the bartender was at his side, ready to take their orders.

“Gin & tonic.” Dahlia ordered.

“Same.”

“Malcolm is head of the coven, but I have final approval on all contracts.” She informed Sam.
“He’s a powerful man in his own right, but I’m the one you really need to impress.”

“How am I doing so far?”

“My curiosity is piqued.” The bartender dropped off their drinks. She raised her glass in a toast, so he did the same. “To a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

“Cheers.” Sam agreed and took a sip. He noted that the cocktail was clearly top shelf.

“I want to get one thing stated upfront.” Dahlia prefaced as she sipped her drink. “Regardless of the offer you bring to the table or your goodwill gestures with your powers- you aren't the white knight coming in to save us from ourselves. Our coven is old and powerful and more sophisticated than most of the little gangs popping up around the Bay. Don't ever forget that.”

He considered her use of the words “white knight”. From what he’d seen of their members, the West coven appeared to be predominantly African-American. He could see the extra level of wariness Dahlia or Malcolm might have, trying to strike the necessary balance of pragmatism and possibility of a less qualified white man presuming he was entitled to influence them.

“I appreciate that I’m the outsider here and I don’t think that I know better than you.” Sam replied. “I’m here because I want to offer this deal to all the covens and Malcolm struck me as the person to go to first. He seemed like a good man, who would at least hear me out- and if I was lucky, he might help me.”

“Maybe you're a good judge of character?” She mused, cutting the tension a bit, then took another sip.

“Can I ask you something? Before we get into the numbers and posturing.”

“Shoot.”

“Will you give me feedback?” Sam asked. “I'm not gonna cave during negotiations because you tell me to, but you know the terrain and I want to learn.”

He gave her the compliment, his concession, & his candor all-in-one. Brady had insisted that his likeability was an asset in the negotiations. Well, part of his likeability was his honesty about his flaws. Knowing when to give glimpses of his vulnerabilities could be a powerful tool, especially when trying to convince people he wasn’t a threat. He wanted the dynamic to be collaborative, not adversarial.

“Have you ever made a deal on the flip side before?” She asked.

“I've worked a few small things and this offer with Chinatown-”

“But Chinatown likes you.”

“Yeah, they're inclined to give me good terms.” Sam confirmed. “And I made two deals with a nonhuman.”

“Really?” Dahlia smiled. “I'm sure that's a story.”

“For another time, after my duty of confidentiality is lifted.” He evaded discussing Zoya once again.

“Fair enough.” She nodded approvingly. “I'll let you know when you shoot too high with me.”

“Thank you.”
“Let me see your proposal.”

Sam handed her the folder. Dahlia began flipping through it, diligently reading provisions. She waved over the bartender and requested another round & a pen. Sam sipped his second gin & tonic as she marked up the paperwork. After a long stretch of silence, she pulled a cell phone from the cleavage of her dress, then texted someone.

“I'm having an assistant pull a few files for me. This might take awhile.” She explained. “Overall I'm interested, but I need to review our holdings to see how much we're prepared to disclose if I choose to proceed.”

“I completely understand.”

“I made a few changes to your verbiage, mostly to reduce my potential liabilities. Here,” Dahlia turned the folder around to face Sam, then started pointing to her alterations. “This way you're going to assume the risks associated with any information ‘known after reasonable and good faith due diligence to the best of your ability’, but I'm firm on that point.”

He considered her demand. She was trying to put as much responsibility on him as possible- that was her job. If she really was sticking on the point he'd have to accept it or try again from scratch with another coven and lose the diplomatic benefit of West’s backing. At least he could potentially squeeze some more intel from her in exchange for the concession.

“If you're going to be holding me responsible for maintaining a certain level of knowledge, can I get quarterly reports from you regarding all of your assets under this contract?”

“All right.” She handed the pen to him and he added a handwritten subsection. When he was finished she flipped a few pages in and pointed to a requirement that $3 million be placed into escrow as collateral until Zoya's commission was transferred. “The Santa Cruz coven won't agree to this. They're always strapped for cash. You'll either need to barter in kind or get another coven to front them the money- West won't do it.”

“Understood.” Sam made the mental note that he needed to figure that hiccup out. “Thanks for the advice.”

Dahlia leaned back in her chair and enjoyed her cocktail while watching Sam review the modified contract. When he was done reading, he closed the folder. He sipped his drink, unsure what else to do while waiting for Dahlia’s assistant to fetch the data on West’s holdings. She twirled the pen in her fingers for a few seconds before it disappeared.

“You're a witch.” Sam observed.

“You're visiting a coven.” She raised an eyebrow at either his lack of presumption or deductive reasoning. “I understand that you aren't a witch.”

“I've done a spell once or twice, but that's it.”

“So how did you end up dragged into all this?” Dahlia asked, then guessed. “Did Bhavya or Chinatown have the luck to pull you on a summons?”

“I'm- I'm not that kind of demon... or at least I don't think I can be summoned.” Sam admittedly wasn't sure how that worked. His voice had faltered, betraying his nerves, causing Dahlia’s expression to soften a bit. “I'm pretty new to the whole demon issue. I'm part of a subset that used to be entirely human. Now... I don't know. I guess I'm something in between.”
“In between?”

“It’s not really defined.”

“A piece of free advice.” She waited for him to nod interest in her suggestion. “You might want to consider defining it. Spin it to your advantage as long as the rest of us don’t have a clue anyway.”

“Whatever an Anathema is is an objective fact. I can’t change that.”

“Objectively, you’re right. But as a practical matter, let someone else have the burden of correcting you. Too many people overlook the power of shifting the burden to someone else.” Dahlia sipped her gin & tonic. “So you didn't pop out of thin air and you aren't a witch. How’d you get involved with the covens?”

“One of the Chinatown witches saw my aura at a concert. We… hooked up, but then she showed up at my place a few weeks later needing some legal help. After that we started kinda dating.”

“Kinda dating?” Dahlia smirked a bit at the vagueness of the relationship. “You two have sex?”

“Among other things.” Sam acknowledged. “It's complicated.”

“Dare I ask?” She chewed her lip before musing. “A half-demon & a witch are sleeping together. Actually, that sounds like it's a fairly conventional arrangement- it might be from the 13th century, but witches are traditionalists in many respects.”

“There's another guy.” Sam volunteered. He would have to get more comfortable with talking about their unconventional relationship if Stacy & Brady both wanted the three of them to be out.

“She has a boyfriend?” Dahlia stifle a smile, clearly amused by the drama, but polite enough to not prod if it turned out to be a sore point.

“We both do, same guy.” Sam blushed a little, then took a sip of his drink. She started laughing.

“You're poly?”

“I don’t cheat. I’m loyal to both of them- It’s just that I like being with multiple people.” He said, then thought better of the phrasing. It could’ve possibly sounded like he was open to relationships or encounters with people other without Brady or Stacy, which wasn't the case as far as he was concerned. He didn’t want to betray either of them. “I don’t see myself doing anything without them.”

“Woefully noted.” Dahlia commented, making his stomach knot slightly and his ears feel warm. She let the tiny flirtation go unaddressed, then turned the conversation away from the deeply personal. “Why did you want to get our emotional intangibles valued? I get that it’s good for the covens themselves, but what’s your angle.”

“The other night Malcolm pointed out that the Bay Area covens are more or less in control of territory containing 7 million people. Intangibles are frequently such an underutilized asset pool because it's harder for everyone to wrap their heads around, but the idea of intangibles based on the emotions of millions of people- that has to be a huge unknown resource. I think we can pull some of the value out of it, which we could all definitely use right now.” Sam pitched. “The covens need everything they can get going into a fight, especially if the Quiet Market suffers from the hunter attack. And to be perfectly honest, I want to start making connections and earning allies. I figure this offer is a start.”
“You want us to cash out.” She speculated.

“Only if you want to. I don’t really care what you do with the appraisal. Another option is using it as collateral of a loan.” Sam offered a less sinister alternative. “Depending on your coven’s holdings and a dozen or so other factors, I think it could go a long way to increasing West’s defenses for quite awhile.”

“Has Chinatown already run their numbers?” She leaned in, inviting him to confide in her. “Do you know how much they’ll get?”

“Their appraisal is still being done, but they've started shopping around for loan terms on the Quiet Market. The projections are promising.”

After being run through all the conversions necessary to turn something as ethereal as emotions into U.S. dollars- less all the transfer fees and normal costs of doing business, Calvin was estimating that Chinatown could pull $25-65 million out of the deal. Zoya was hard at work valuing the last few items on her list. Though Calvin hadn’t finished inventorying Chinatown’s storage unit, so there was a chance Zoya might have even more work ahead of her.

“I don't even get a hint?” Dahlia tried to coax him into giving up information on Chinatown's deal.

“I have to keep their confidences.”

“Are you really part of Chinatown?” Dahlia sat back in her chair to study him some more. She waved to the bartender to bring them another round.

“I'm not officially part of any coven.”

“But you're playing counsel to them.” Dahlia pointed out. “Do you owe them a duty of loyalty?”

“I'm loyal to them, but that doesn't place us in conflict- Chinatown & West are allied.”

“You know, having sex with a client could get you disbarred.” She warned, as her assistant dropped off a laptop & thumb drive at their table. Dahlia plugged in the drive, then began using the laptop while listening.

“I haven't taken the bar exam yet.”

“Oh my, counseling others without license.” Dahlia commented. He wasn't actually worried about her turning him into the state Bar. What could she tell them that wouldn't expose her coven? “Sam, you are a dangerous one.”

“Are you a lawyer?” He asked her, earned a nod.

“You're looking at the in house counsel for the coven and a handful of nonprofits in the area.”

“What kind of nonprofits?”

“College scholarships for at risk kids, a sexual assault & domestic abuse shelter, and an LGBT+ community center.” She peeked over her laptop to see his reaction.

“You're doing noble work.” Sam raised his glass to her.

“I'm doing work that needs as much help as it can get.”

“It seems like good causes always need as much help as they can get.” He commented, earning a
“If you don't mind me asking, how long have you been out?” Dahlia said between sips of her cocktail. “As bisexual.”

“About six years, when I started college. My family didn't find out until a month ago.”

“There's a semi-monthly teen support group at the LGBT+ center. They'd love to have someone like you come talk to the kids.”

“Someone like me?” Sam thumbed the edge of his glass.

“Young, but not too young. Making his way through law school. You're working a deal that's, what 7 or 8 figures?” Dahlia guessed at the value of Chinatown’s intangibles, but Sam didn't take the bait. “Maybe don't talk about the nature of the deal, but these stories are good for them to hear.”

“It's not all wins.”

“It never is.” Dahlia opened her phone to the contact list, created a new entry, then held the phone out to Sam. “If you'd be open to me calling on you.”

“If I can help, I will.” He accepted the phone and gave her his information including the email address he was using for flip side matters.

“You seem like a good man. But joking aside, the part demon- whole demon- whatever you are… it's not just about whether you can make me laugh and put me at ease. I'm sure you know half of making this deal is about appearances and there are a lot of people that get twitchy about demons.” Dahlia observed. “What am I supposed to think about this?”

“I know there's a stigma. Hell- I don't even like demons.” Sam admitted. “I'm human, too. I didn't know about being an Anathema until last week, but I'm trying to continue, learning, helping people, getting better... Maybe it won't be possible- if everyone I try to deal with can't see beyond the label. But I've got to try and hope that some coven other than Chinatown will take a chance on me.”

Dahlia sighed, then stared at Sam, sizing him up.

“At the end of the day, I'm the one who has to decide whether I trust you enough to go along with this- not Malcolm or the coven.” She pulled the thumb drive from the laptop, then handed it to him. “You've got a deal.”

When the paperwork was all signed and done, Sam did a quick check to see if any of the West witches triggered a vision, then he went to find Stacy on the dance floor. She was more or less grinding between two women. Stacy started drawing him into the group and the other women began surrounding him. With a twinkle in her eye, Stacy stood up on her toes to shout a message into his ear over the music.

“You ever had more than one woman? I could probably make that happen if you want.” She offered as a feminine hand belonging to someone other than her suggestively slid down his torso.

“I'd need Brady around to tag in for me.” Sam joked as a way of declining the offer. He didn't want to do anything new behind Brady's back- in front of Brady, on his hands & knees, pressed between a few bodies hypothetically might be a different matter.

“The two of you really do work well together.” Stacy conceded.
“You want to stay for awhile?” He offered. “We didn't get a chance to have fun together.”

“Yeah.” She nodded, a little touched by the thought that he wanted to salvage a date from the business trip. “I'd like that.”

“If we warn West that we're bringing a muggle beforehand, I bet Brady would like this place.” Sam told her as they danced. “Maybe the three of us can come here for a date sometime.”

“A night out with my guys sounds great.” Stacy smiled. “You think you have the time?”

“I need to learn to make some time for fun.” He wrapped his arms around her and lifted her up into a kiss. “And tonight I want to celebrate.”

The rest of the night was something of a blur. They drank & danced. Some time after leaving the club they ended up smoking in the middle of a park well after midnight. Sam vaguely remembered trying to join Stacy on a children’s swing set, but he was too large. Then they went back to his place and fucked until they both passed out. It was a lovely date- some well earned catharsis.

The next morning Sam woke up to a hangover or pain from his neurological condition. His run of good luck with his symptoms had run out, possibly contributed to by a night of stress & excess. Beyond shoveling some pills in his mouth, he didn’t move for about an hour. When Furcifer hopped up on the bed looking for attention, he redirected the cat to Stacy for cuddling. He covered his head with his pillow and waited for any sense of stability & relief to kick in.

Once the room was a bit less hostile he staggered over to the table and opened his laptop. Zoya had emailed him an updated valuation & itemization of Chinatown’s assets. Sam did some quick math. His interest was currently valued at $120,000. He plugged the thumb drive containing a list he’d gotten of West’s assets that were covered by the contract the night before- it was easily twice the size of Chinatown’s. He clicked reply to Zoya’s email, then started typing.

“I've got some more work for you, both under the contract and a thing on the side. I need to know every currency that demons of the Crossroads trade in and what the conversion rates are to U.S. dollars.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm in the middle of my last semester of law school, so I've been super busy the last few weeks. I managed to get through a rough patch, so I've recently been able to write some more. I expect another lull in a few weeks when I have 3 papers I have to write. So sorry about the uneven posting schedule.
Finding & Avoiding Family

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sam took the train up to Palo Alto to meet Brady for dinner & a movie. It'd been too long since they'd gone on a date and one of Brady's favorite classic films was playing at the quaint little Stanford Theatre down the street. They met outside Brady's apartment building, then started making their way to a trendy modern Vietnamese restaurant. Brady had been raving about Tamarine’s small plate menu for a few weeks, but part way through his puffing he stopped in his tracks.

“Shit.” Brady sighed as he patted his pockets. “I forgot my wallet in my other pants.”

Sam noticed that Brady didn't ask him whether he had any ability to pay. Instead he just turned around and they started heading the three blocks back to Brady's apartment. It was an unspoken thing between them, the fact that Sam never had disposable income whereas Brady was well off. Brady never complained about paying for Sam, in fact occasionally Sam had to fend off pampering. He might not be able to treat Brady to dinner, but Sam had his own ways of showing his appreciation. Sam took Brady's hand in his- one of those proud displays of affection that Brady craved.

“Do you want to come on up?” Brady asked when they reached the entryway to the apartment building. Sam hadn't been in Brady's apartment since their breakup years earlier. The thought of what going might signify made his stomach knot slightly, but he didn't let go of Brady's hand. Their relationship was easily the strongest it had ever been, despite Sam's secrets. He wanted to give Brady a bit more, to show that he was reciprocating. They stepped into the elevator still hand in hand. “I promise we'll actually go get dinner.”

“I'm waiting for the caveat- ‘after a little appetizer’ maybe?” Sam smirked as he wrapped his arms around Brady's waist and leaned in, lips dangerously close to a kiss. He offered another guess at Brady’s potential flirtations. “We’ll actually go get dinner, but…”

“There wasn't going to be a but.” Brady gripped Sam's ass. “Though now I'm reconsidering.”

The elevator door dinged and Brady started leading Sam down the hallway by the hand. As soon as they turned the corner toward Brady's front door, Brady froze. There was a woman standing in front of Brady's apartment door, checking her phone. She had blonde hair in a pixie cut wearing skinny jeans & a leather jacket. When Brady saw her, he immediately sidestepped to stand further away from Sam and let go of his hand. Sam was thrown by the split second twist, but took the hint. Brady didn't want her to know that they were in a relationship. She looked up, spotted them, and smiled.

“Ty, there you are! It's been too long.” The woman's voice somehow stretched beyond sweetness into something more off putting. She hugged Brady, who didn't return the gesture of familiarity & warmth right away. He pulled away from her as quickly as reasonably possible, then turned to Sam.

“This is Meg.” Brady looked almost pained as he introduced the woman. “My sister.”

“I'm Sam.” Sam offered her a handshake. “Your brother & I went to undergrad together.”

“It's so nice to meet one of Ty’s friends.” Her eyes swept up & down Sam a few times, making him a bit self conscious.

“You didn't call to let me know you were coming.” Brady said. “I could've made arrangements-”
“Don't worry about it, you'll hardly know I'm here.” Meg grinned at her brother. “I'm starving. Let me buy you both dinner.”

“I don't want to intrude-” Sam started trying to extract himself from the awkward family moment, but Meg took his arm and started guiding him back to the elevator.

“Nonsense, I insist you join us.” She told him. “I want to hear all about you & my brother.”

Brady didn't take them to Tamarine. The sanctity of their postponed date was left somewhat intact, but banished to some future time. Instead they went to the closest restaurant possible that wasn't likely to result in a long drawn out leisurely meal. Clearly Brady wanted the whole interaction over with as quickly as possible- and Sam could see why.

If Sam was pressed to decide, he wasn't sure whether he'd rather spend a meal with Meg or Dean. She was as aggressive & competitive as Brady, but she had an almost false cloying quality- actually she was very similar to her brother, except for the fact that Brady actually cared about him. Meg did the song & dance of socializing, but all the while in felt like she was sizing up her surroundings & everyone around her for the looming pillage. He'd been hoping to get a few stories about their family or Brady’s childhood from her, but instead for over a half hour Meg managed to redirect every topic to be about him or his friendship with Brady.

“So Sam, you must be loaded- going to Stanford & Santa Clara.” Meg commented, violating the traditional silence regarding Sam's finances.

“So Sam’s on an academic scholarship.” Brady clarify, framing the answer of no in the best light possible.

“That's so impressive.” Meg offered. Sam could feel her bare foot move below the table cloth, locating his ankle. She stroked up his leg and along the inside of his thigh. “I'll bet you're a man of many talents.”

“I mostly just keep my head down and study.” Sam replied as he struggled to not visibly react to the advance in the restaurant full of people.

“Sam's something of a live in the library kind of guy.” Brady agreed.

“Really? A big guy like you?” She started rubbing Sam’s dick through his pants. “I bet you like to get physical every once in awhile.”

“I guess I just have weird tastes.” Sam said as he gently grabbed her leg, then removed it from him.

She hardly took the hint. Despite stopping playing with him under the table, Meg continued to throw him predatory smiles throughout dinner. She was relentless in her assault. Occasionally, she'd lean forward, intentionally emphasizing her breasts. It felt like every other sentence was an innuendo. Even casually stating that he had a girlfriend didn’t stop her. Granted the way her eyes mischievously flicked between him & Brady made him regret not having photographic evidence that Stacy existed.

All the while Brady was stuck watching everything, too frightened of being caught to intervene. Sam didn't blame him for not doing anything. For all they knew, if Meg found out about their relationship, she'd tell Brady's dad. Sam had been hit on in front of Brady before- normally it wasn't anywhere near as awkward as what Meg was putting him through, but he could sit through an hour of mild torture if it meant protecting Brady. Well... when Meg’s foot found its way back to his ankle, he decided to skip dessert.
“I’m sorry. I’m not feeling well.” Sam explained as he abruptly got up from the table.

“Oh, no.” Meg’s voice subtly lacked sincerity. If Brady was a master at manipulation, surely his sister was a mistress of ambiguity. “Let me give you a hand.”

She threw more than enough cash on the table before the bill had even arrived, then moved up to be right next to Sam and took his arm. He tried to sidestep her, but the other dining tables provided too much of an obstacle for him to discreetly flee. Sam noticed Brady’s lips thin at Meg getting her hands on him.

“I’m fine.” Sam assured.

“I insist.” Meg replied. When they got outside the restaurant, her hand slid up his arm and covertly squeezed his bicep. “We wouldn't want you falling down.”

“I won't fall down.” Sam pulled away from her as politely as possible. “It's not that kind of thing.”

“Oh, do you get sick often?” Meg asked Sam, but she shot Brady a sidelong glance for whatever reason. It looked like it was taking all of Brady’s willpower to not punch Meg square in the face.

“I just feel a migraine coming on.” Sam replied.

“You get migraines? I hear that's common for people like you-” Meg smiled at Brady, who lost a little color.

“Excuse me? People like me?” Sam asked, thoroughly confused and a bit taken aback by being categorized somehow.

“Grad students.” Meg hastily explained, then pressed on. “I hear migraines are awful. What symptoms do you get?”

“Sorry, I don't want to talk. It's making it worse.” He lied, trying to kill the conversation as best he could.

When they got to the train station, Sam waved a silent goodbye, then took a seat on the platform. For some reason it was particularly painful that Brady wasn’t capable of checking to see if he actually needed help or give him a kiss goodnight. Sam sighed as he watched Brady & Meg walk down the underground tunnel in order to cross the street... but he didn't see them come out on the other side. For a moment he imagined Brady actually starting a fistfight with her in the tunnel- Sam wasn't sure which one he'd expect to win in that hypothetical matchup.

He got up and cautiously walked down the tunnel looking for them. The concrete underground tunnel was empty except for a man sitting on a stool playing a ukulele for tips.

“Excuse me, did you see a blonde man & woman walk through here just a minute ago?” Sam asked, only earning a shake of the head.

He texted Brady, but in a distinctly un-Brady-like move there wasn't even a read receipt within a minute or so. Sam decided to go to Brady's apartment building. He could check from the street to see if the light was on. At that point he'd at least know that he'd made it home okay rather than getting into some confrontation on the way home. He wasn’t sure what he could do if he did stumble upon them fighting, but if he was feeling so desperate for Brady’s comfort, surly Brady was in a fragile state.
As he approached the apartment building he heard Brady's voice and slowed down. Brady & Meg were standing in an alleyway next to Brady's building. Sam didn’t want to risk being spotted by Meg, so he quickly hid behind a van that was parked on the street. The shade of a tree helped obscure his reflection in the shop across the street’s large glass window. He hadn’t intended on eavesdropping, but Brady’s word caught his attention.

“I'm not saying this again, stay away from him.” Brady warned Meg as Sam watched their reflections in the window.

“You seem awfully possessive.” Her voice was candidly acquisitive and she swayed her hips, clearly having far too much fun with the entire situation.

“You can't just roll into town whenever you want and mess around with my stuff. I've busted my ass for years.”

“I'm sure you have.” Meg conceded, raising her hands in a showing of non hostility. “I'm not here to skin you alive. I was just having some fun.”

“Then why are you here?”

“The family’s been having a lot of problems with burnouts. I just thought I'd pop in and see how you're doing.” Meg explained, then added in an apparent non sequitur. “Does Sam get migraines often?”

“I've got things under control.” Brady crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“If not, maybe I could take some things off your hands.”

“I'm fine. Don't you have your own stuff keeping you busy?”

“My boy Jake is doing great.” Meg bragged, then hummed at a thought. “Sam does look like a prime hunk of man meat. I could really sink my teeth into him-”

“Shut up.” Brady snapped, but she hardly seemed to hear him.

“Maybe he needs to be dragged out of the books a bit?” She leaned in close to speak into Brady’s ear, baiting him. “I could take him for a spin. Ride him hard to give him a little exercise.”

“If you touch him…” Brady stopped himself from finishing the threat. Sam could hear the anger & fear in Brady’s voice.

“Oh, baby brother.” Meg tussled Brady's hair. “You better shape up before dad visits. He would be awfully angry if he knew what you were up to.”

Sam felt a small chill run through him at the sight of Brady being so thoroughly overpowered. The visible anger & fight in Brady wilted, suppressed by self-preservation. When Brady did speak his voice was so quiet that Sam could barely hear him.

“Meg, I'm begging you. Please don't tell anyone.”

“Of course, I won't tell anyone.” Meg replied with false indignation. “I want to see how this plays out.”

Sam was almost back to the train station when Brady finally texted him back.
“Sorry I didn’t get back to you sooner. She was on my case for a while.” Brady texted. “Are you feeling okay? I couldn’t tell if you were just trying to get out of there.”

“It was just an excuse.” Sam assured. “Your sister doesn’t really get personal space, does she?”

“I’m sorry about Meg. She’s used to torturing people for kicks.” Brady replied. “She’s a such fucking monster.”

Sam groaned at the thought that Meg’s advances towards him might’ve actually been more to cause discomfort than a sincere proposition. He had to admit that she was physically attractive, though in hindsight he realized there wasn’t a strong family resemblance between her & Brady, other than the hair color. But regardless of any objective beauty she had, he was completely disinterested, bordering on loathing her. If she really was just trying to do no more than torment those around her it was both a small relief and a major worry.

“Do you think she knows about us?” Sam texted, not really prepared to tell Brady that he’d witnessed the earlier threats made by Meg.

“Yeah, she saw right through us. She’s known me forever- she could probably tell in the first five minutes. I'm sure half of why she was hitting on you all night was just to mess with me.”

“Half?”

“Have you seen yourself?” Brady replied with a smiley face emoji that made Sam smirk and roll his eyes a bit.

“Is there anyone in your family that isn't horrible?” Sam asked as he hopped on the train.

“Not yet.”

Sam chewed his lip while trying to decide how to react to Brady’s text. The flirtation was nearly an invitation to contemplate a long term committed relationship. He decided to not directly respond to the comment. It seemed that Brady was just as capable as his sister when it came to making ambiguous statements.

“Can you come over tonight?” Sam asked, hopeful of a chance to help comfort Brady.

“She’s still around and wants me to help her with some random things.” Brady replied, then added. “I wish I could be with you right now.”

“Let me know when your sister leaves town. Then we can go on that date and I promise a happy ending.”

“That’s easy, I just have to end the night with you.”

“Charmer.” Sam teased Brady.

“Happy ending.”

Despite the temptation to jump into another deal while Brady was distracted by his sister, Sam decided to spent the next day focusing on school and self-care. He knew he was pushing himself harder than was probably wise, even without his illness being factored in. That morning he’d been figuratively & literally rudely awoken by a vision that had left him feeling uneasy.

The vision was of another one of the Anathema dying, but this was the second vision to have the
death occur in a hospital. There was a young man, about his age, barely conscious in a hospital bed. A middle aged woman with the same dark complexion as the patient was talking with a doctor while a nurse checked various monitors.

“I’m sorry, but he’s getting worse.” The doctor told the middle aged woman. “The damage is starting to affect him cognitively. He’s started hallucinating.”

“What treatment options do we have?” The woman asked, without taking her eyes off the young man.

“Antipsychotics to manage the symptoms, but we don’t know what’s causing the degradation.”

“How long do we have to fix this before it’s too late?”

“I…” The doctor struggled to respond to such an impossible question. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know-“

The young man stirred, interrupting the conversation. His eyes darted around the room, taking in his surroundings and occasionally stopping on empty space. He pushed himself up, trying to get out of his hospital bed, but the nurse beside the bed tried to get him to calm down.

“Omar, you need to relax.” The nurse offered in a soothing voice. “You had another seizure-“

“I’m not sick! I’m trying-” He was visibly weak, but emphatic. “There’s just too much and no one understands.”

“Do you want us to turn off the lights?” The nurse offered.

“No, it’s the things crawling on the ceiling.” Omar tried to explain.

“Sweetheart, there’s nothing on the ceiling-“ The middle aged woman started.

“Don’t say that! I know you can see them!” He gestured at the ceiling, nearly ripping out his IV. The nurse took his hand and held the bandage in place under the guise of comforting him. “Why can’t anyone else see them?”

“It’s okay.” The doctor assured while subtly drawing a syringe. “We’re going to figure out why you’re seeing things-“

“I’m not crazy.” Omar tried to push himself out of the bed away from the doctor, but the nurse began wrestling with him trying to confine him.

“Don’t worry, you won’t see anything on the ceiling in a few seconds.” A nurse reassured as the doctor injected the drugs into his IV.

He went almost limp. His mouth hung up as he tried to form words. He tilted his head as his eyes widened in shock at something no one else could see. The nurses all glanced across the room in the direction he’d been looking. There was nothing there.

“Do you think he’s still hallucinating?” The nurse asked the doctor.

“He should be unconscious.” The doctor commented while double checking the dosage. “I don’t understand. For him to still be looking around-“

Omar suddenly pushed himself over the edge of the bed in an attempt to flee from something. The fall yanked the IV & monitor wires from him causing alarms to sound. The nurse & doctor yelled for
help and he was immediately swarmed by hospital staff.

“Don’t let my mom near me! She’s one of them. I know her secret. She wants me to kill the others- says I have to do it to survive, but I won’t kill anyone.” Omar started crying as he was held down. “Please, I’m begging you to listen to me. They’re real. It’s all real. I just need someone to believe me.”

One of the nurses gave him another injection. His body went completely slack. The group of nurses & doctors cleared a bit until one nurse clipped a device onto his fingertip, but it only produced a constant tone.

“Flatline!” The nurse yelled as one of the doctors started performing CPR. “Get a crash cart!”

Omar’s mom stood across the room watching the scene. She didn’t cry, instead she sighed and walked out of the room, dropping her visitor badge in the wastebasket on the way out.

Sam wasn’t sure which scenario he disliked more: that Omar really had suffered enough mental degradation to be hallucinating or that he was completely lucid. If he was hallucinating, then the unpleasant question of what caused the damage was on the table. Just thinking about the potential implications of that was beginning to give Sam a migraine. But if the things crawling on the ceiling were real- if seeing things others couldn’t was Omar’s power, then the whole thing felt more tragic. Though Sam couldn’t quite understand what Omar’s accusations about his mom encouraging him to kill were about, so maybe there really was something wrong with Omar’s mental health. Regardless, for Sam it served as a reminder of the risks of telling the wrong people about his visions. But he also felt a profound gratitude for having so many people in his life who would believe him, no matter how objectively insane his circumstance might become.

After documenting the vision in his journal, Sam began trying to figure out which hospital it might’ve occurred at. There had been a toy bear wearing a Chicago Bulls jersey. Out the window he’d managed to see a bit of the city skyline. It took some doing, but he found a possible hospital in Chicago. Unfortunately, he didn’t know Omar’s last name or whether the vision had already occurred. He tried to focus on the mom’s visitor badge to see if he could get a last name, but the move was too fast for him to read the handwritten text. Making the whole thing worse was the fact that hospital staff were notoriously tight lipped except if you could impersonate next of kin, which was nearly impossible without knowing the guy’s last name. Sam saved all the information he had and decided to let that puzzle stew in the back of his mind with everything else for a bit.

Class was a welcome reprieve from the chaos that had become his personal life. The quiet predictability of sitting through a lecture, hidden among a hundred other students was a treasured sort of peace. Back in his first year he’d struggled with an ever present low level of anxiety at being called on to answer a question, but that concern was long gone. It was true that now in his second year he had a bit of confidence in his ability as a student- though more than that, he was making deals with demons & witches, he was worrying about hunters trying to kill him, and figuring out how to amass power in flip side before some unknown amount of time ran out. If a professor called on him and he didn’t know the answer, saying “pass” wasn’t the end of the world- despite what all the stunned expressions from those around him might indicate.

He’d always enjoyed his classes that dealt or touched upon business law, but now he listened with almost predatory intent. He made an entire separate set of notes consisting of musing for futures deals and reminders of issues to investigate. Next time he saw Calvin he’d have a dozen questions about the Quiet Market, or maybe he could trade Dahlia some advice over dinner for him agreeing to speak at her LGBTQA+ support group... or he could do both for twice the insight. Even without those answers, he felt like having a real world application for the rules he was studying made him more
confident with the material. He was getting work experience—maybe it wasn’t a traditional manifestation of his chosen occupation, but it was admittedly very educational.

Sam was walking back to his dorm room after his last class of the day when it felt like he had stepped on something sharp. After getting back to his room he took off his shoe and began searching it for a pointy rock or the like. He didn’t find anything, so he checked his sock, then took it off. There wasn’t anything visible embedded in his foot, but he decided to run his fingers over the area just to be sure. Part of the skin on the bottom of his foot was numb. He tried pressing on that area and felt that minor stabbing pain again.

If he had to guess, it was some sort of problem with his nerves. His eyes flicked to the collection of pill bottles on his nightstand. Almost an hour of looking up the side effects of every medication he was on didn’t turn up any easy scapegoats. He emailed his neurologist to let her know he had a new symptom, then stripped down to his boxers and crawled into bed. Furcifer hopped onto the bed and licked his cheek. Sam hugged the cat for even that small level of comfort.

“I know it... like rationally I get it, but sometimes I forget or think I’ve got more time...” He whispered to the tabby. After a long pause he decided to voice his concerns aloud, hoping to take away a bit of the sting. “I think I might be dying.”

Furcifer rubbed its head against Sam’s chest, then licked him a few more times. He appreciated the gesture that he assumed was meant to be supportive. It was kind of cathartic talking to what might’ve been an Infernal, the species of demon that had experienced human death. Despite Furcifer’s inability or choice to not communicate with words, Sam suspected it was sympathetic.

“Have you died?” Sam asked the cat, knowing perfectly well that he wasn’t likely to get an answer. “Is it as bad as everyone thinks?”

He was making some ground. The contracts with the covens would give him some connections and hopefully enough leverage to start trading in the Quiet Market. Once he figured out what demons of the Crossroads dealt in, he could locate one from the Hell of Burning Light. From there he could start getting intel on the demon who’d stolen his soul and find out how to save himself and maybe even the people from his visions—But he was running against the clock. The others were dying, either being murdered by people like his dad & Dean or Gordon Walker—or, with increasing frequency, they seemed to be dying in hospital beds. They weren’t just being murdered, some of them were sick... like him.

After a few minutes of self-pity fueled inner turmoil, Sam’s phone started ringing. It took a significant amount of self-encouragement to stop hugging Furcifer, but he eventually grabbed the phone from his nightstand. He glanced at the caller ID, wondering just who he’d allow himself to be distracted by. It was Stacy. There were five missed texts from her that he didn’t bother to read, instead opting to just answer the call.

“Are you around?” She asked as soon he picked up.

“I’m at my place, what’s up?”

“Melinde, head of the Little Portugal coven, she called my dad trying to find you. There’s some kind of emergency in Little Portugal. She asked if you could go help.”

“She wants my help?” He found that hard to believe. Melinde had been the one who called him out as an Anathema at the meeting of the coven leaders. She had seemed candidly off put by him throughout the meeting, going so far as to clutch her crucifix while watching him. He hadn’t thought much of it at the time, but in hindsight it was an ominous gesture when combined with her
observation that he was somewhat demonic.

“Yeah.” Stacy confirmed.

“She was spooked by the whole Anathema thing. What’s to say this isn’t some sort of trap?” He speculated. “I don’t know about walking into territory of people who think I’m some kind of abomination.”

“I’m not sure what to think of it.” She acknowledged his concern. “She sounded desperate though- she said her daughter & niece are missing.”

If two girls were missing that changed things- Sam felt a bit faint. He looked down at the pile of clothes he’d been wearing throughout the day. It was the same outfit he’d been wearing in one of the visions Zoya had induced- except in the vision his shirt had been cut open. In the vision he’d been bleeding from a slice across his chest. The injury hadn’t been too severe, but the prospect of walking into a scenario where he was supposed to get hurt gave him some pause. But in the vision he’d been alone when he found two young girls that had appeared lost and scared. He’d zipped up his jacket to hide the gash from the girls and asked if one of them was named Maria, then reassured her that he was a friend of her mom. He’d picking them up to carry them to safety- they’d been in danger.

“Is the daughter named Maria?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, how’d you know-”

“How do I contact Melinde?”

When Sam arrived on the scene he could tell that something had gone very wrong in a short period of time. Almost a dozen police cars blocked the streets around the massive white church surrounded by palm trees. An ambulance was parked across from the church at one of the many mom & pop shops that marked the neighborhood and an EMT was stitching up injuries on a few people. As Sam approached the police barricade he noticed that the front door of the church had a bloody smear across it. It took hardly anytime to find Melinde, who was with a group of a handful of witches standing to the side of the crowd surrounding the police tape. Melinde had several blood stained bandages on her. When she spotted Sam, she urgently gestured for him to come over to her.

“What’s going on?” Sam asked. He’d only been told that there was some kind of flip side attack and several people were in danger, including the two girls.

“We have six people in there unaccounted for, including two children.” She started recapping like a woman who’d explaining the evolving circumstances so many times that she couldn’t remember who had already heard what. “The police arrived a few minutes after we spoke. They’re treating this as a hostage situation.”

“Who’s in there?” Sam’s eyes briefly returned to the bloody door. “What’s in there?”

“We don’t know.” Melinde confessed. “We were in the middle of a baptism. A man & a woman entered and began threatening us. My guards & I went to throw them out, but a third one appeared. He killed the priest. We tried to get back to help, but the woman threw me out that window. The doors are sealed.”

Sam stared candidly at the broken window on the side of the church that had since been blocked from the inside. Whatever they were dealing with was strong, malicious, & could teleport- His stomach knotted.
“The third one appeared?” Sam echoed, then suggested. “Do you think they're demons?”

“I was hoping you could tell us.”

She wanted his help because he was the closest thing to a demon that she knew of. Maybe she had been wary of him before, but in that moment she was desperate.

“I’ve only interacted with one or two demons and read about fighting them.” He tried to lower her expectations.

“I’ll take any help I can get.”

“I don’t know what weapons can kill them, but if they are demons holy water should hurt them.” Sam offered. “And there are ways to trap them, but most of those require some setup. One of the treaties I read suggested that magical binding spells could work on demons- they’re just as vulnerable to magic as anyone else on Earth. It’s the other planes where there’s a chance they’ll have an easier time overpowering things like spells, I guess it’s more head-to-head, battle of the wills there.”

Melinde nodded at his comments, then began discussing binding options with her people. As they were talking Sam spotted an old black Crown Victoria pull up on the other side of the crowd. Two men got out, withdrawing badges from their pockets as they approached the police line. For a second, he made eye contact with one of the men, who did a confused double take. Evidently the man also had a vague feeling of recognition. They had to be hunters who’d happened to be in the area, drawn to the unusual scene. Sam turned his body & face away from the hunters, hoping to convey to them to not talk to him.

Part of him didn’t want to mention the hunters in the hopes that the pair would just go unnoticed and leave without incident. But ignore the risk of a confrontation was too reckless. In her worry over her daughter & niece, Melinde was talking too candidly in a public place. She was distracted by one threat and not paying attention to another that might very well blindside her- or worse, track her people back to the other covens.

“With respect.” Sam interrupted in a hush voice. “With a big scene like this, your people should be careful about hunters turning up.”

“Good point.” Melinde lowered her voice and waved over a woman, then instructed. “Keep an eye out for hunters. We can’t have them interfering.”

“How can I help?” Sam asked once the guard had been put on notice.

“Three of us are going in to get our people out.”

“You said that the doors were sealed?” Sam furrowed his brow as he looked between the bloody door and the police barricade.

“We're using shadow gates.” One of the witches explained.

“We’re going to enter an adjacent plane, walk into the church, then re-enter Earth.” Melinde elaborated. Sam thought of the vision, he’d been the one to find the two girls. He’d probably been one of the rescue party if he was looking for them. Thinking about it, he wasn’t sure whether the rescue party was capable of finding the girls without him, he’d been alone after all.

“I’m going with you.” He volunteered.

“I asked you to come as an advisor.” Melinde gave him an out. “You don’t have to go in with us.”
For a moment he thought about explaining the vision to Melinde, but he hesitated. He was helping them, but that didn’t mean that he entirely trusted them. Little Portugal was supposed to be the best diviners on the West Coast— who knew what they would do with access to a psychic?

“There are kids in there.” Sam replied, both explaining his motivation and trying to summon his courage.

“We could use another person to protect our exit.” One of the underlings suggested.

“Alright.” Melinde nodded. “Let’s move.”

“You don’t have to reenter the church on this plane, but if you can keep watch to make sure there aren’t any demons waiting in the adjacent plane that will cover our retreat if needed.” Melinde explained to Sam as they walked to an adjacent building and into a storeroom. “The demons appeared from out of nowhere, which means they probably used some parallel plane to get the drop on us. We don’t want to have the poor luck of running into them on our way out.”

“How am I supposed to defend your exit?”

He considered himself a decent fighter, but it’d been years since he’d been in combat. Anyway, his foes might be demons— granted, by some standards he was supposed to be a demon. Though he wasn’t sure if that might manifest in his combat someday. Knowing his luck the demons inside the church were Abyssal or Infernals, the two legitimate and undoubtedly more powerful species of demon. Being completely outmatched in every metric sounded right.

“We’ll place some warding. You just have to keep to it up.” Melinde offered the less than effective reassurance, which she undercut by immediately warning. “Even with the protection, don’t consider yourself safe until you’re on back Earth and outside of that church.”

With the storeroom door closed and locked, Melinde took a piece of chalk from her pocket, then quickly drew an elaborate sigil on the concrete floor. When she was done, she placed her hands on it and said a few words. Sam felt a strange almost imperceptible shift, like the center of gravity of everything in the room had moved incrementally to the left. The other witches didn’t seem to notice, they were busy helping Melinde up.

“Are you okay?” Sam asked her.

“Making a gate requires a lot of power.” She said while straightening herself with conviction. “But I have plenty more where that came from.”

Without even stopping to give instruction, she just stepped forward onto the chalk sigil and disappeared. The other two witches followed her without hesitation. Sam stood for a moment, taking a few seconds to gather his courage, then stepped through.

The world shifted in a dark blur. It felt like he’d slipped and was falling backwards, but partway through everything spun around, making him land on his right side. The male witch offered him a hand up, though all of the witches looked a bit worse for wear. The female underling was leaning against the wall of the alternate reality’s storeroom. Sam didn’t actually feel that bad, a little tired, but not worn out by any means. Maybe there were a few perks to being an Anathema.

“This is a binding spell. If your reading is correct it should immobilize a demon.” Melinde gestured a few times, creating a thick cord of glowing orange light that hung in the air. The spell was in the shape of a very loose knot. She pushed it around with her hands, reshaping it slightly, but the cord continued to float, unconcerned with gravity. “You can manipulate it, but in order for it to bind a
creature it must actually be tied onto them.”

Sam touched the cord as Melinde made several others. The spell hummed with an energy that struck him with a sort of nostalgia for the spells he used to cast while hunting. An intuition in him suggested that it was the flavor of arcane spellcraft, as opposed to all of the planar sensations he’d been experiencing recently. The realization that there were at least two distinct domains of what he’d always considered “magic” made him regret not being able to cast any spells off the top of his head. But for the moment he had bigger concerns.

He’d never explored an alternate plane before. The only other time he’d left Earth just involved walking down a hallway and into a room. At the meeting with the coven leaders the other plane had differed slightly from Earth- there’d been an extra section to the basement, but aside from that it had appeared superficially similar. Though it had felt different - this plane felt different in a whole new way. He suspected that each plane had its own unique character. But the abstract knowledge that the planes were unique didn’t prepare him for the bizarre setting they’d found themselves in.

When they stepped out of the building it was clear that the area had experienced some sort of disaster. There wasn’t any plant or animal life to be seen. A few cars had been burnt and abandoned in the middle of the road. None of the windows in the surrounding buildings contained glass- Sam wasn’t even sure if any of the buildings had all their walls intact.

The church was barely standing. It’s large wooden doors had either been burnt or rotted away long ago. Enough light trickled out through the main doorways that it hinted at a partially collapsed roof. A few pieces of rubble fell from one of its two bell towers as Sam watched- and Melinde wanted to go in there.

“Does anyone have a geiger counter?” The male witch groaned.

“It shouldn’t be toxic.” Melinde assured. “I might not be able to select which specific plane the gate opened into, but ensuring habitability of the plane is part of the spell.”

“Habitability is loosely defined I’m guessing?” Sam commented. “Should we find another plane to travel through?”

“Each time we change planes it will hurt us. The harm is even worse when neither planes involved are Earth. If we go to another plane we might end up too weak to get out.” Melinde shot down the idea. “We move quickly and nobody touch the walls or other structural elements. Once we get into the basement we should be safe from minor collapses.”

He thought about pointing out the risk of being trapped in the case of a collapse, but Melinde was capable of making them an exit almost anywhere they needed one. She was planning on doing just that- He didn’t know whether it was safe to take that exit, back to Earth, right into the fray with several demons and a church surrounded by police. But at least it was an alternative to getting trapped in the basement of some decrepit building.

They moved through the ruins of the church. Somehow it was even more unnerving on the inside. The skeletons of small animals hung from hooks along the wall, alluding to either ritualistic killings or some sort of people having lived in there. All of the blood appeared old, dried & flaking, just like everything else in this plane, some hint at long ago death & destruction.

“Do you know any offensive magic?” Melinde whispered to Sam as they made their way cautiously through the building.

“No.” He replied. “I think that just became the top of my to do list when we get back.”
“That would be wise.” She nodded in agreement. “Hopefully, whatever demonic advantages you have in this place will make up for that.”

“I’m not really sure how to be demonic.”

Sam saw a hatchet imbedded in one of the wooden pews. He very lightly touched its handle with his fingertips, but didn’t attempt to yank it free and risk disrupting their fragile surroundings. Instead he glanced around the building, rechecking to see all the possible openings were for attackers—three doorways, four broken windows, & a hole where one wall was partially broken… though if someone tried to rush them the church falling on them would probably be the more pressing concern.

“I’ve never seen locals on an alternate Earth.” Melinde commented after seeing Sam’s face dim at the assessment. “Whoever did this is gone or never existed to begin with.”

“Something happened though—how else does it get like this if there aren’t any people?”

“No idea.” Melinde admitted, then quickly added. “But keep your eye out for other creatures.”

“Other creatures?”

“The oddities that can slip between planes.”

“Like witches?” Sam offered some context to her statement in order to include their present company.

“Or demons.” Melinde replied, technically dragging Sam back into the hypothetical.

They reached the small opening in the floor where the concrete staircase descended into the basement. The door or hatch and arm rails had decayed or been burnt away long ago just like the front doors and half the pews. Cautiously they went into the basement, which was surprisingly well preserved, untouched by whatever had destroyed so much on the surface.

Despite the soundness of the basement, he didn’t like the idea of being left alone in that morbid place. Growing up he’d been in more than enough situations like that, alone in the dangerous unknown waiting for the more combat experienced people to return. He thought about arguing that he knew how to fight, but when it came right down to it in a match up with demons maybe the witches were better equipped. The witches could perform ranged attacks and he had no idea how to physically fight demons.

“You know the way back? In case there’s an emergency.” Melinde checked in a rather considerate gesture.

“Yeah.” Sam confirmed. “If I sense something should I come get you?”

“You’d be walking into who knows what. Try to hold the area unless you need to retreat for your safety.” Melinde and the other two began crafting wards around the area. When she was done, she looked to Sam, then demonstrated how to activate them by touching them in a sweeping gesture.

“Keep these wards powered. If they need more energy, touch them and force some power into them.”

“How do I force power into them?”

“They’ll try to draw on your power, so it should be intuitive.”
Sam watched as Melinde & the other two witches passed through a wall, presumably back into Earth, inside the church’s basement. Looking around at the dim basement he wondered how he’d managed to get himself into that awful situation. He’d been trying to help save two kids, but somehow he’d been given a job that involved being stationary, in moderate danger, and relying on magic that he didn’t understand. At least the protective warding glowed with faint reassurance, though it didn’t illuminate the whole labyrinthine basement by any means. He almost held his breath, straining to observe any hint that the witches might be returning from their mission or any change in general… a sound, motion, anything.

A piece of the building shifted above him. The basement appeared structurally sound and he was far enough away from the staircase to avoid being hit by anything that might fall through the opening, so he wasn’t actually worried about being crushed. Despite that small measure of safety, the rumble caused a few pieces of the aging stucco on the basement’s nonstructural walls to shift and part of the farthest ward crumbled away. Sam took the chalk and started trying to recreate the symbol next to where the previous one had been. When he looked back to see if he was drawing the sigil correctly he was struck by the feeling that something was watching him.

Working frantically to get the protective spell back in place, he had barely finished the last line and was reaching to activate the ward when he was tackled from behind. He fell hard to the concrete floor, then rolled onto his back.

The man on top of Sam was possessed by a demon, but in this otherworldly plane he didn’t look human. Black smoke swirled in the demon’s eyes and through its veins. The demon itself emerged, occasionally blurring through its body in transparent charcoal grey wisps. The wisps wavered around particular areas, alluding to inhuman features of the demon itself. Sam could almost see horns, pointed ears, a tail, claws– it had claws.

Sam punched up at the demon’s chin, snapping its head backwards. Before the demon could look down at him Sam balled up, then kicked the demon in the chest, knock it out of arm’s reach. Sam scrambled to his feet, then lunged for the ward, but the demon was faster than him and blocked his path. Giving up on that ward, Sam turned to run for the limited protection of the still active warding on the other end of the basement. He only made it a few feet before the demon was in front of him again.

It grinned menacingly at him, knowing perfectly well that Sam was physically outmatched and looking to retreat. Sam pulled the binding spell out of his jacket pocket, then held it up, ready for the impending melee. The demon swung a clawed hand at Sam’s chest, but he threw himself backwards. His shirt was ripped, though he wasn’t hurt. Sam dodged another swipe, but instead of moving away from the demon he dove forward trying to get the binding spell on it.

The demon barely missed Sam ensnaring its hands and managed to grab Sam’s jacket. They collided with the wall, sending dust & fragments of stucco flying. The demon slammed Sam’s arm into the wall while squeezing his wrist, knocking the binding spell from his hand. Sam swept the demon’s leg, tripping it, but was pulled down in the chaos.

They grappled on the ground. Sam was nearly acting on instinct or muscle memory, blocking, kneeling, jabbing, desperately tried to avoid being mauled. After landed a solid hit, Sam grabbed for the binding spell. His fingers gripped the cord of orange light as the demon pulled him back along the ground. The demon rolled Sam onto his back and Sam carried that momentum into a punch with the hand that was holding the spell. The demon caught his arm, but they continued to roll across the concrete floor. The binding spell swung wildly and Sam threw all his weight to the right in order to avoid being caught in the spell, sending them rolling several feet.
The pair of them fell through the floor- the solid concrete floor. Sam had barely realized they were falling before everything spun around him and down shifted 90° to his left. They'd fallen into an opening between the planes. There had been a fissure or another gate. Either way, he was somewhere he wasn't supposed to be. When they landed, the demon ended up on top of him, pinning him to the ground. One hand pressed against Sam's face, the other fought him for the spell, trying to wrap the glowing cord around Sam’s throat.

He bit down on the demon’s hand as hard as he could. The demon got the binding spell loosely around Sam’s neck, but couldn’t tighten it with one hand still firmly clamped in Sam’s mouth. Sam didn’t even think about the blood that was flowing into his mouth, he was just trying to immobilize that hand long enough for him to get the spell off of his throat. The demon yanked its injured hand away and cursed. Sam hardly thought about spitting out the blood, he was too busy trying to get the glowing orange cord off his neck. The demon swung at his face with the maimed hand, but the clawed hand stopped a few inches short of making contact. The demon struggled to move and had an expression of complete bewilderment on its face. Sam didn’t stop to question the demon holding still for a moment. He pulled the cord off his neck and wrapped it around the demon, jerking the cord tight. When the cord was taunt, the glow of the binding spell turned white and the demon collapsed limply on top of Sam.

It took several minutes for Sam to summon the strength to push the demon off of him. His heart was racing and he felt a little dizzy. Part of him wanted to run a mile or maybe just lay in the corner vomiting for an hour. He absentmindedly wiped away some of the blood cooling on his chin, then glanced up at the approximate area on the ceiling where they’d probably come through.

“What are you doing here?” Sam asked the demon, but its expression was blank. The spell might’ve been interfering with its ability to perceive or react. He thought about loosening the cord just enough to ask it questions, but hesitated. One of the last things he needed was another fight-thank god he’d been practicing with Brady for the last month or two, otherwise he would’ve been even more rusty.

Sam started reaching up to feel out the edge of the planar fissure, but it was just a foot or so out of reach. He decided to look around for a chair or something he could standing on. This version of the basement was a different & more elaborate layout than the one he’d just come from and cold enough that he could see his own breath. It reminded him of catacombs, it even had appropriately disheartening lit torch sconces. After a few minutes of exploring he found a chair that could support his weight, but before he could start bringing it back to the tear between the planes he noticed something odd.

The dim lighting and style of the support beams gave him a feeling of déjà vu. It was like the basement from his vision. No wonder the rest of the rescue party hadn’t been with him in the vision, he was the only one of them foolish or unlucky enough to end up that far from Earth. He paused for a moment trying to figure out how to find the girls in some alien maze- Sam stood up, surprised by a thought. The basement, the whole plane was foreign, but presumably the girls were the only thing aside from him that was from Earth. He closed his eyes trying to sense anything in the plane around him that felt like Earth. The interplanar fissure he’d come through had an allure to it, almost like the faint scent of fresh air trickling into an oppressive cave- but there was something else a ways ahead of him. He followed that sensation through the concrete halls.

Turning the sixth corner he saw the familiar image of the two girls huddled in the corner of the windowless room. The girls were almost slumped together in their fear & fatigue. They were shivering and even through the dim light Sam could see that they were pale. If he had to guess they were in shock- that wasn’t surprising. Somehow they’d been brought to this place after witnessing who knows what kind of violence. He carefully wiped the remaining blood from around his mouth.
“Maria?” Sam asked as he approached the two girls. The older one looked up at him and nodded meekly. “I’m a friend of your mom. Come on, I’m taking you back home.”

“I’m Lucy.” The younger girl spoke quietly, barely looking up at him.

“My name is Sam.” He offered as he knelt down in front of them.

“There are monsters.”

“I know. I stopped one of them and your mom is stopping the others. We’re gonna get out of here, okay?”

“Okay.” Maria tried to stand up, but wobbled and fell back against the wall.

“Is it hard to move?” Sam asked as gently as possible. Lucy started tearing up at the question. It was cold and he suspected that the girls were too numb or weak to be very mobile. “It’s okay. That’s fine. I’ve got you.”

He picked up the two kids, carefully wrapping his jacket around them to try giving them his body heat and some protection from the cold. They wrapped their arms around his neck and Lucy buried her face in his shoulder. He carried them back to where he’d come through. He could feel a difference, like the sensation of cold air creeping in under the cracks around a door. The sensation wasn’t home, but it was familiar- a step in the right direction. He nudged the chair into position below the interplanar hole, then studied the logistical problem.

“Okay, I’m gonna lift each of you up and push you through the ceiling. I know it looks like there’s solid ceiling there, but it’s an illusion.” He assumed their experience with witches helped them accept the weird concept. “As soon as you start passing through the fake ceiling you need to roll up into a ball and use your arms to protect your head like this.”

He placed them on the basement floor long enough to demonstrated how to tuck & roll for them.

“Why?”

“When you go through you’re gonna get turned around a little bit and I don't want you to get hurt.” Sam explained. “As soon as you can move, try to get out of the way because I'm gonna come through after you two and I don't want to fall on you, okay?”

“Okay.”

Sam pushed Maria through first hoping that she might be more capable of helping Lucy once through rather than the other way around. After giving Maria a few seconds to recover, he lifted Lucy into the hole. He took a few seconds to collect himself, then jumped up, hoisting himself through the opening. The dark blur and spinning sensation wasn’t nearly as disorienting as it’d been previously. With only a minor panicked jerk, he was able to avoid landing on the two girls.

Maria & Lucy appeared uninjured, but were even weaker than before. It was the act of crossing planes that was hurting them. And they still had one more gate to pass through in order to get them home. He picked them up and carried them to the part of the basement protected by Melinde’s warding.

“Hey, we’re gonna sit down for a few minutes to see if you both feel a little better, okay?” Sam told the girls.

“What if the monster comes back?” Lucy murmured.
“We’ve got this warding and I’m gonna stay here with you. I’ll protect you.” Sam assured. “Just try to rest.”

The little girls almost immediately fell asleep, completely exhausted in every way imaginable. He held them to him, trying to help keep them warm and sense whether they were improving. Sam waited for Melinde & the other witches to come back, but after maybe a half hour there was no sign of them.

He thought about sneaking up through the gate into the church to see if he could find them, but enough time had passed that in all probability either the demons had fortified or the police had gotten into the church. Either way, going into the church would likely immobilize him, leaving the girls unprotected on the wrong plane with no one else aware of their location. The safest thing would be to just take the girls back through the gate back to Earth in the storeroom, but the girls were alarmingly weakened. He hated to think about the chaos that was taking place on Earth right then, but he needed to prioritize the girls and they needed more time to recover. After a while longer he noticed that the girls had stopped shivering and their grips on him were a bit stronger.

“Are you two feeling any better?”

“A little.” Maria nodded.

“I know going through that hole made you tired, but there’s another one we have to go through. I don’t want you two going through if you think it’s gonna make you feel really bad, but we need to do it before too long.” He tried to explain the situation to them without blinding their judgment by the prospect of getting home immediately. “Does that make sense? Do you girls want to rest some more or do you think we can go through the last hole?”

“I can do it.” Lucy answered.

“Me too.” Maria nodded.

“Okay, I’m gonna carry you through a place that looks scary, but it’s actually safe.” He lied, hoping to prevent the girls from panicking in the macabre church. “I want you both to just hold on tight to me and keep your eyes shut until I tell you.”

Whether it was out of respect for his advice, fear, or fatigue, both Maria & Lucy kept their eyes closed the entire time he carried them through the church. Aside from one time on campus a week or so earlier, it’d been years since he’d prayed, but with every step through that church he was praying with every ounce of his willpower that the building would hold and that nothing would attack him or his fragile charges. He brought them to the storeroom, then sent them through the gate with another quick prayer that they’d be alright.

When he came through after them, he found the girls in even worse shape than before, but somehow they were both conscious. The girls started crying from exhaustion & joy when he told them that they were back on Earth and he was going to take them to their family. The storeroom door had been unlocked from the inside, indicating that at least one of the others had already returned. He picked the girls up and started making his way out to the street.

Based on the positioning of the cops, the crowd, the media, and the church’s now open front doors, he could tell that the police had raided the church some time earlier. For a worrying moment Sam wondered if Melinde & the others had been in the church when the police had entered, but then he remembered that at least one person had used their exit through the storeroom. He carried the girls through the crowd trying to find anyone he recognized as a member of the Little Portugal coven. Catching little snippets of the news casters reporting live from the scene, he gathered that the police
had entered to find four people dead, including two suspects. Sam reached the front of the crowd and hurried over to the witch that Melinde had assigned to watching for hunters.

“Where’s Melinde?” He asked.

“You found them!” The woman reached out, took Lucy from him and sent a man next to her running to go get Melinde. “They came back about 20 minutes ago, before the cops broke-”

“Maria! Lucy!” Melinde shouted as she ran through the crowd. She was even more bandaged than before, hinting at her own tale. Sam quickly handed the witch her daughter and stepped back to give them some space.

“Mama!” Maria cried as they hugged.

“Oh my, baby. Are you okay?” Melinde asked her daughter, who nodded with her face still pressed into her mother’s shoulder.

“Crossing the planes took a lot out of them, but I don’t think the demons hurt them.” Sam speculated. “I’m sorry it took so long to get them back. I wanted to make sure they were recovered enough to get through the gates alright.”

“Thank you.” Melinde’s face was a mixture of joy, vulnerability, and fatigue that made him want to give her some privacy. “I don’t know how… but thank you.”

“I’m just glad they’re okay.” Sam lifted his hands in a gesture to indicate the he wasn’t trying to impose himself on the moment, then added as an afterthought. “I bound one of the demons two planes down, if your people want to go look for him. There’s another gate or rift on the floor just passed the ward that failed.”

“You went through a second shadow gate?” Melinde’s eyes widened and the other witches gawked at him in a way that made him a bit embarrassed.

“Yeah, I think the demons must’ve made it before we got down there. The girls were on the second level.” Sam explained, causing Melinde to hold her daughter a bit closer. “Like I said, that’s why it took so long to get back. I gave them some time to rest between gates.”

“That’s… and you’re still standing after going two levels deep & back.” Melinde spoke quietly as she looked him up & down. “And you fought a demon in the middle of it?”

“I rested between gates too. And I used your spell.” He could feel himself blushing. She pulled her gaze away from him in an act of mercy.

“Thank you, sincerely- If there’s anything I can do-”

“Focus on your family, your people.” Sam assured. “Maybe later we can talk. I feel like we got off on the wrong foot at the meeting. I’d like to be a friend to Little Portugal.”

“You already are.”

To Sam’s surprise he felt pretty good after helping Melinde. Yes, there was undoubtedly a small victory high that he’d gotten from rescuing the kids, but there was something else. His head felt clearer, like some lingering migraine fog had been washed away. He almost had more energy or a spring in his step. When he got back to his apartment, he sat down on his bed, slipped off his shoe & sock, then began examining his foot. There wasn’t any numbness or pain.
He tried to think if there was anything he’d done that might’ve improved the situation, but all that had really happened was crossing the planes, the fight, and resting a bit while letting the girls recover. Crossing planes was supposed to weaken people- granted it didn’t seem to bother him as much as full humans, but it still wasn’t a positive thing for him. Though the jumps on the return trip weren’t nearly as bad as the first two. The fight was a fight and a profoundly lucky one since he’d managed to escape without any visible injuries. He suspected that the rest between the jumps wasn’t a particularly meaningful event either, he had been taking it fairly easy all day leading up to the discovery of the nerve damage. Maybe it was a chronic symptom? Something that would come & go from then on out.

Regardless of the cause, he was feeling so lighthearted after the rescue and the remission of a symptom that he put on some music and poured himself a small glass of scotch. Furcifer hopped onto the table to watch him dance around a little, booze in hand. As the chorus came on, he scooped up the tabby and danced with it for a few seconds. Furcifer wriggled a bit, debating whether it would allow the dancing to continue, but stopped resisting when it realized Sam’s glass of scotch was within lapping distance.

Sam's phone started ringing, interrupting the fleeting dance. He put his drink and Furcifer down on the table, then turned off the music. For a brief moment he thought about stopping the cat from drinking his scotch, but he honestly barely cared after the evening he’d had. He was expecting it to be Stacy looking for gossip on what had happened with Little Portugal. Instead it was Dean calling.

“Dad's missing.” Dean didn’t bothering with pleasantries. The tension in his voice was worrying.

“What?”

“It's been two days. I haven't heard anything from him and he hasn’t answered my calls.”

Sam was about comment on their dad’s habit of bingeing on booze or women during solo hunts - surely Dean had learned that lesson by the age of nine- but before Sam could start he realized why his older brother was calling him specifically. Dean was concerned that the radio silence from their dad meant an unannounced trip to see Sam while witch-hunter tensions were at the breaking point. Sam felt dizzy. He laid down on his bed.

“Did he take the car? Where are you? How far could he have gotten?” Sam had a million more questions that went unvoiced.

“We were in Sioux Falls with Bobby when he left late in the afternoon on Tuesday. He took his truck.” Dean stated. “If he was driving all out he could've made it to California.”

“Did he say he was coming out here?”

“He was talking about a ghoul, nothing special.” Dean huffed. “I should've gone with him.”

“Why didn't you?” Sam wasn’t trying to be critical, he just wasn’t used to Dean skipping hunts.

“I hurt my back last week.” Dean reluctantly admitted. “Bobby basically chained me to one of the spare beds.”

“I'll talk to the coven- the ones I trust. Maybe they can scry on him or something- figure out where he is.” Sam said before adding. “Just don't start running around. The last thing we need is for both of you getting fucked up.”

“If you find him-”
“If I find him I’ll tell Bobby.” Sam put his foot down. He wasn’t about to let Dean run off into a possibly dangerous situation while injured. “Bobby gets to decide if you get out of bed for this.”

Sam was nearly out of breath as he hurried into Stacy’s family’s apartment. He’d run to catch the express train up to San Francisco and rushed across town to reach Stacy as fast as possible. As soon as he got inside the apartment he checked really quickly to make sure they were alone.

“What the fuck’s going on?” Stacy asked as she grabbed his arms and forced him to hold still rather than pacing.

“I need to find my dad.” He said while rubbing his hands over his face to help him think clearer.

“Find?”

“He ditched Dean and isn’t answering his phone.”

“You don’t think he’s coming back here?” Stacy’s eyes widened. She went to check out the window. “If he’s hanging around-“

“He shouldn’t have any reason to think you’re suspicious- hell, after finding out about Brady I think he forgot you were there.” Sam reassured.

“Could he have followed you here?” Her tone was more serious and professional than Sam was used to hearing from her. It reminded him of her dad- she really was stepping up more in helping with the coven.

“I literally ran and jumped onto the train before the doors closed. I don’t think he could’ve followed me- if he was even watching me.” Sam sat down on the overstuffed floral print couch, trying to find some sort of stability. “I don’t know if he was watching me. I don’t even know what direction he headed.”

“His kind are trackers. Are you sure that he-” She continued for good measure.

“He hates using magic and I watch for the mundane tricks- you know how paranoid I am. I didn’t see anyone following me.”

For as long as Sam could remember he’d always watched for threats. When he was younger it came in the form of monsters or maybe his overly intoxicated or agitated dad. After leaving for school his anxiety and PTSD left him compulsively checking, waiting for something to sneak up on him and shatter his new peace. But when he found out that Gordon Walker and other hunters were actively looking for people like him… he’d started triple checking all his minute habitual glances.

“I know he’s your dad, but if he shows up around here-”

“I’ll tell you.” Sam assured. “I don’t want anything to happen to your family.”

“He’s your family.” She pointed out.

“He’s a relative.” Sam corrected.

“He’s a blood relative.” Stacy amended, making Sam worry that she was gonna press the issue of his loyalty, but she didn’t. “Which means he’ll be easier to find with a locator spell.”

“What do you need?”
“You want me to do the locator spell?” Stacy tilted her head in surprise. “You sure you don’t want to ask Melinde for help? She owes you one and the Little Portugal coven has the best diviners around.”

“If he’s coming back to California, then he might get identified as a hunter.” Sam pursed his lips. “Do you think I have enough credibility to convince all the covens to make an exception for him?”

“Chinatown would give him a pass, maybe Sunset & Little Portugal, too. I don’t know how West would feel.” Stacy mused. “No, the covens wouldn’t let him go.”

“If I can’t save him with my reputation, then I can’t be publicly associated with him.” Sam sighed, a bit ashamed of his decision. “Can you do it?”

“Yeah, let me grab some stuff—” Stacy said as she started heading to her parents’ bedroom, but she stopped to look back at him. “I’m gonna need some of your hair. Luckily, you have plenty.”

“How much do you need?” He reflexively touched his almost shoulder length hair, a bit worried by the thought of having to lose a significant amount of it.

“You can go use my razor in the bathroom to get what you can from your legs and arms. I’ll take as little as possible in addition to that.” She suggested, then added. “Just don’t shave your pubes.”

“Do they not work for the spell?” He asked a bit surprised by the distinction.

“It’s not that. You’d just have some awful itching when it grows back.”

Sam sat cross legged on Stacy’s bed while watching her cast the locator spell on the floor. She had to cut a bit of his hair off, but thanks to the earlier shave she’d only needed to give him a half inch trim. A few candles were lit, a handful of small feathers were burnt in a copper bowl, then Sam’s hair was tossed into the smoldering feathers making the stench even worse. He cracked the tiny window next to the bed, but pulled the curtain to help obscure the ritual from view. After reciting a few words, she snapped a wooden charm in half and her irises turned bright blue. She chuckled slightly then opened her eyes as wide as she could at Sam.

“Check it out, I just need a blonde wig & a pink cardigan.” Stacy said in a valley girl accent. She pretended toss her far too short hair over her shoulder in her best preppy impression, then picked up her cell phone. “Like we should totally go do yoga and drink pressed juice while listening to Coldplay.”

“Cute.” Sam said flatly while rolling his eyes. “Can you focus on the spell?”

“I’m using the map on my phone.” She explained in her normal voice without taking her eyes off the phone’s screen. “It’s so much easier than the big paper maps. That theatrical magic stuff is so 90s.”

“Anything?”

“Shit. This is a little fuzzy.” She muttered, then squinted to see if that helped the clarity before consulting a table written in the spellbook beside her. “I can see a full sibling in Sioux Falls.”

“That’s Dean.”

“Some cousins from your mom’s side scattered around. A bunch of weird little blips, like maybe only a tiny bit of blood in common- probably really distant relatives or something. And it looks like
your dad is in Fort Dodge, Iowa.”

Sam breathed a sigh of relief, laid back on her bed, and covered his face with her pillow. His dad had traveled in the opposite direction. The panic was over, the crisis a mere false alarm.

“I think we’re okay for now.” Sam muttered to himself after calming down for a few seconds.

“You know….” Stacy hesitated for a beat. “When it comes right down to it, he was gonna be the one in danger, not us.”

Sam tossed the pillow aside, rolled off her bed, then knelt down in front of her. He grabbed the sides of Stacy’s face and kissed her before looking her in the eyes, trying to emphasize what he was about to say.

“I don’t care if it’s my family- I don’t care if there’s only one of them. Don’t underestimate hunters.”

Sam was still coming down from his anxiety induced adrenaline rush while taking the train back to his place. He needed to see Brady- he would’ve even gotten off the train a few stops early and gone to Brady’s apartment, except for the risk of seeing Meg again. Instead he texted Brady asking if there was any chance he could slip away from his sister for an hour or two. Sam stared intently at the text message conversation, watching the little typing in progress indicator betray the fact that Brady had rewritten his answer probably a half dozen times. In the end, Brady simply replied ‘I’ll be there.’

When Sam got to his dorm he found that Brady had already let himself inside. Before Brady could even speak, Sam hugged him tightly. Sam dragged the tip of his nose along Brady’s earlobe as their cheeks rubbed, nuzzling against each other. Brady looked at him in mildly concerned confusion, but Sam began ravenously kissing him rather than explaining. In their desperation for each other, they bumped into the table, knocking a pile of papers to the ground, which went unnoticed. They fell onto the bed, then began eagerly stripping each other. The sex was hasty with each of them sparing one irrational glance at the door. There was a forbidden feeling to the whole thing that reminded Sam of when he’d first had sex with a man. They were both rattled, scared to be found out in one respect or another. And their relationship was at the very core of what they were trying to protect.

“What’s wrong?” Brady asked once they’d snuggled up under the blankets afterwards. “I know something happened.”

“Dean called. He’s laid up in bed while my dad ran off somewhere.” Sam answered. He could see Brady putting together the pieces of Sam’s fears.

“He isn’t on his way- coming after you again, is he?”

“No, he’s not headed this way. He’s in Fort Dodge, Iowa.” Sam assured. “It just scared the hell out of me for a few hours though.”

“What x-rays?” Brady’s voice was quiet and thoughtful.

“I don’t know what I’d do if he showed up here again.” Sam admitted, reluctant to answer the actual question. “I told him if he came back that I’d turn him in to the police. I figure I could get him put away for basically the rest of his life if I want, with his pills and the credit card fraud and with the x-rays, it’d all-“

“What x-rays?”
“It’s not a big deal.” Sam tried to evade, but Brady was staring at him with concerned intensity. Of course the medical student would catch that slip.

“What x-rays?” Brady pressed.

“Growing up I had a few breaks that didn’t set right.” Brady propped himself up on his elbow to watch Sam’s reaction more closely. The disturbed, undivided attention was worrying. Sam didn’t want to start talking about his childhood. The day had been too long.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Brady’s voice was offended on Sam’s behalf.

“I shouldn’t have brought it up.” Sam groaned. “I was clumsy-“

“Clumsy.” Brady huffed skeptically, but didn’t explicitly accuse John of abuse. “And when you were clumsy, he didn’t take you to the hospital?”

“He was worried…” Sam knew how it’d sound, but he didn’t have a good excuse. “...about child protective services.”

“So he just let you get fucked up?” Brady didn’t even give Sam a chance to respond to the question-not that there was a response Sam could give. He wasn’t prepared to explain or defend his dad, granted Brady wasn’t actually looking for him to. “How many fractures?”

“Just drop it. It’s in the past. You can’t do anything about it.”

“How many?”

“I don’t know- too many. Okay?” Sam pursed his lips. He could feel his throat get tight and his eyes started to water. “Any would be too many and everything that did happen… I don’t want to talk about it or him. I don’t want to think about it. I don’t want to… I’m living my life and I’m happy and I’m free and at any moment he can just show up at my door. And I don’t know what I’d do.”

Sam didn’t resist when Brady held him tightly. He was trembling. John hadn’t ever directly broken one of his bones, but that was about the only positive thing that could be said. In an effort to instill discipline, John had struck him occasionally. But it was being forced into hunts at such a young age-chronic fear, violence, pain, & injury. He’d hated every moment of it and the only thing that had kept him from trying to get away earlier was his fear of his dad’s anger. And for a brief couple hours he’d been scared that his dad may have been coming after him or the people he cared about, after finally having evaded the moderating presence of Dean.

Sam looked down at his body and thought about the scars that marked it- Brady only had some quaint little scar from having his appendix out in high school. The juxtaposition made him feel sick. It was a small miracle that he hadn’t earned a new one in the fight with the demon. Searching for the girls and fighting for his life, it had felt like a hunt. Now having his past brought up- the old wounds opened a bit wider. He could almost feel his old injuries ache, awoken by the memories.

He started sobbing- it’d been years since he’d cried so hard over his childhood & his fear. The thought that even after coming so far he was still living in the shadow of that same fear… He wasn’t sure if he’d ever escape it. Brady ran his fingers through Sam’s hair and kept whispering that it would be okay. He was suddenly very tired. For months he’d been trying to outrun his illness and problems, but in that moment he felt weak & vulnerable.

“I want you to feel safe.” Brady whispered in Sam’s ear. “I know you don't hate him-”
“I might hate him.” Sam admitted quietly.

“Well I fucking hate him.” Brady stated, then soften. He gently wiped away Sam’s tears. “If I could keep him for hurting you… I just want to protect you, from everything.”

Chapter End Notes

The chapter ended up being considerably longer than I’d been planning, but each individual section just kept needing bits added to it… I'm maybe a bit verbose. It probably could've been broken this out into 2 or 3 chapters, but it's hard to do that with such a solid hunk of action right in the middle of the piece. Regardless of any clunkiness, it's posted and the story continues.
“Dad died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don’t know.”

Sam hit send on the text to Brady, then pulled his hoodie a little tighter around himself. He’d been in such a hurry to buy a plane ticket to Sioux Falls that he’d barely thought to let Brady know he was going out of town for a few days. Sitting in the airport, waiting for his plane to board, he felt like he was just barely starting to piece together the last two hours. Dean had called him, but only stated that their dad was dead and they were taking the body back to Bobby’s. Sam had been too stunned to respond immediately, so Dean had hung up on him. He’d stuffed a bag with clothes and his pills, then called a cab to take him to the airport.

“Are you okay?” Brady texted back within a few seconds.

“I’m catching a flight back for the funeral. I’ll be home Monday.”

Sam could see Brady retyping his reply for an unusually long time. He glanced up at the flight information displayed on the screen next to his boarding gate. There was still enough time to field several of Brady’s questions before he’d have to get in line for his flight.

“You’re going to the funeral?” Brady eventually responded.

“I’m worried about Dean.”

“Want me to go with you?”

Brady’s offer made Sam smile sadly and hug his backpack. It was appreciated, but he couldn’t even begin to count the ways that that would go wrong. Even if he could somehow managed to convince everyone to censor themselves for Brady’s benefit, the whole thing would still be absurd to an outsider. He wasn’t going to whatever funeral Brady was imagining. He was going into something far more complicated than that and couldn’t begin to imagine how many lies would be necessary to rationalize everything.

“Flight’s boarding in about fifteen minutes. I’ll be fine,” Sam assured Brady, then added, “Nobody left to hit me.”

“Be careful,” Brady acknowledged before signing off. “Love you.”

“I’ll be home soon.” Sam hesitated a moment. “<3”
home growing up. Seeing the sentimental location, seeing Bobby for the first time in years, seeing what had become of Dean after such a devastating loss… seeing his dad for the last time…. His chest got a bit tight as he made his way through the graveyard of junk cars and laid his eyes on the large, timeless house.

He hadn’t been back since his senior year of high school. Dean and his dad had left him in a motel one state over while they tracked a wraith. They probably would’ve dragged him along on the hunt, but he’d had pneumonia at the time. Rather than spending his winter vacation in a motel room, he hustled enough pool over two nights to pay for a bus ticket to Bobby’s. They didn’t celebrate Christmas as such, but one night Bobby did come home with extra groceries and made them a real dinner complete with a frozen pie for dessert. It’d been one of the moments that had helped convince him that a better life was possible, away from his dad and hunting.

When he got to the front door he took a few seconds to collect himself. Independent of all the issues with his dad, there was the fact that in that place he was part of the community of hunters. Dean might understand that he was out, but being a hunter was more than just the hunt—and he was going back to the place where he’d learned so much. Maybe it’d be easier to pretend to still be a hunter while there? Though a little voice of doubt wondered how much pretending would be necessary once he started falling into old habits.

“Not anymore. Never again,” Sam whispered to himself. “It’s just a weekend. You’ll never be one of them again.”

He knocked on the door, then held his hands up to show that he wasn’t armed. After a few seconds Bobby opened the door. The old hunter looked shocked for a moment before pulling Sam into a hug. It took all of Sam’s willpower to not just keep holding onto him.

“It’s good to see you,” Bobby said as he released him, then added, “I mean, I wish it didn’t have to be like this.”

“I get it,” Sam assured Bobby as the older hunter ushered him into the living room. “It’s good to see you too.”

“You want a beer or coffee?”

“Coffee would be great,” Sam replied.

While Bobby went into the kitchen, Sam hung up his coat, then grabbed one of the handful of small herb bundles in a bowl next to Bobby’s front door. He carried the bundle to the fireplace and knelt down on the tile. As soon as he lit the herbs on fire, the scent struck him with a profound nostalgia. He remembered as a kid doing the little ritual every time he’d visit in order to purge the evil that might be lingering from a past hunt. Whether it was magic or superstition, he didn’t know—it was what was done.

“You still take it with milk?” Bobby called from the kitchen.

“Yeah, thank you.”

“If you want to earn your keep, you’ll wrap me another dozen of those this afternoon,” Bobby said as he placed two mugs on the kitchen table before digging through one of the cupboards.

“A dozen?” Sam glanced over his shoulder to watch Bobby for any tells. His stomach knotted at the need for so many bundles on short notice.

“A few people are coming in for the wake.”
Sam didn’t need to ask. If Bobby was asking for him to make herb bundles, then they had to be hunters. Sam waved the smoke at himself before he dropped the last remnants of the bundle into the fireplace and took a seat at the kitchen table.

Bobby returned from scrounging through the cabinets and placed a small silver flask and a clear shot glass on the table in front of Sam, then sat down across from him. Sam knew exactly what Bobby wanted as soon as he saw the flask. He felt like an idiot for not foreseeing this complication, but in his emotionally numb haste he’d forgotten how his new circumstances might impact old customs. It was holy water and Bobby was expecting him to take a shot of it. Sam very briefly considered how to avoid drinking it, but there wasn’t a good way that wouldn’t immediately raise suspicions or possibly even get a weapon pulled on him. The experiment with putting his hand in holy water had only caused some minor irritation and that had taken a while to bother him. With a little luck he could drink a bit with only some minor discomfort that wouldn’t be traced back to its source.

He poured a half shot while Bobby watched, then took it. The liquid burned going down like cheap vodka, but he didn’t react outwardly. He swallowed it as fast as possible, gave a small shrug of false indifference to the test, then took a sip of coffee. The coffee barely helped as a chaser. He could feel the holy water gnawing at his stomach. Maybe he could feign food poisoning if it ended up getting really bad?

“How’s Dean holding up?” Sam asked as he leaned forward with interest while covertly holding his stomach.

“He’s….” Bobby looked toward the door, but didn’t appear too concerned with being overheard. “I’m glad I went with him to go find your dad.”

“What happened?”

“Dean wanted to go check on him. I told him that I wouldn’t let him go alone on account of his back. We got to Fort Dodge about four hours after you called. He wasn’t at any of the motels, so we talked to the cops. They pointed us to the last two crime scenes he was investigating.” Bobby pursed his lips. “We spotted his truck by the second crime scene. He was in an alley half a block away.”

“How long?”

“A few hours, maybe?” Bobby guessed. “It was close.”

Sam buried his face in his hands. If he’d been faster getting help from Stacy or told Bobby sooner…. Surely Dean felt even worse. Dean had been stuck getting bedrest while their dad had gone out into danger and then waited for a day and a half to reach out to Sam. Rationally, Sam knew that their dad’s death wasn’t their fault, but the close timing was still a bitter addition to an already painful experience.

“Dean nearly broke his back again with the rage he threw. I had to pin him to the damn wall; he was gonna run off chasing whatever it was. I gave him enough painkillers to numb him all the way around, then left him in shotgun while I put John in the back.” Bobby sighed and shook his head at the memory. “Your brother was quiet the whole ride back. I moved the body into the garage, but Dean was just done. He slept in the car. Today he’s been poring over John’s notes on the last job. I don’t think he’s eaten since we left for Fort Dodge.”

“Is he drinking?” Sam asked, then quickly clarified, “alcohol.”

“He’s taken another year off the life of his liver so far, but he’s functional—that might be all that’s
keeping him functional.”

Dean had always struck Sam as an unpredictable drunk. First of all, it was nearly impossible for Dean to achieve a level of intoxication that was identifiable to a layperson. The guy had been drinking in one form or another since he was fourteen and had nearly two decades’ worth of experience matching drinks with veteran hunters. On top of that, his preference for playing his emotions close to his chest seemed to hit its extremes after a certain amount of drinking. When sufficiently drunk, Dean was equally likely to react to an insult by laughing uncontrollably or pulling a gun while completely stone-faced. There had been a time when Sam had known Dean better than anyone and even then a sufficiently drunk Dean was unpredictable.

Sam thought about bringing up the need for Dean to stop and confront their dad’s death, though Bobby undoubtedly knew that. Hunters might not be the most emotionally healthy people in the world, but Bobby was one of the most mature ones that he’d ever met. He didn’t engage in vices the way many hunters did. The only thing Bobby indulged in was his own isolation... and occasionally several glasses of middle-tier whiskey in rapid succession.

“Dean told me that you’re in law school.” Bobby turned the conversation to something a bit less emotionally exhausting while they finished their coffees. It would inevitably be a long night. They both needed their caffeine and fleeting positivity.

Sam was grateful that Bobby hadn’t explicitly asked if he was quitting hunting. If directly asked he’d answer honestly without hesitation, but he didn’t want to bring it up and risk Bobby taking it as some sort of personal criticism.

“Yeah, I’m almost done with my second year.”

“How long does it take?”

“Normally three.” Sam stared into his mug, avoiding Bobby’s eyes. “Sorry I didn’t tell you. After I left, things were just too much.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I’m not your d—” Bobby caught himself. He tilted his head, then sipped his coffee for a moment. “I thought it was a little weird that you weren’t with your dad and Dean when they came to visit the last few times, but I didn’t take it personally.”

“What’d they tell you, about why I wasn’t there?”

“They said you were off doing your own thing. I assumed they meant a solo hunt or a girl or something,” Bobby explained. “They didn’t really talk about you.”

Sam nearly replied that not talking about him was par for the course, but that felt in poor taste considering the purpose of the visit.

“It was a really bad fight,” Sam confessed. “And then we took a turn or two hurting each other. I’m not surprised they didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Did you and your dad ever work it out?”

“No.”

Bobby nodded in solemn understanding of how that unresolved tension might affect the current situation.

“Are you ready to go see him?” Bobby eventually asked in a nonjudgmental voice. Sam wasn’t sure
whether Bobby was referring to Dean or his dad—either way the answer was the same.

“I’m not sure.”

Dean was seated at the workbench near the garage entrance. He was poring over their dad’s journal and several folders’ worth of crime scene photos. When they got within twenty feet of him, Sam noticed him close his eyes for a minute to collect himself before glancing over to confirm that Sam was there. His face was the usual unreadable mask that he wore at the beginning of all new interactions.

“I’ll go get the linens ready,” Bobby said as he made his retreat, giving the brothers some time to themselves.

“Dean, I’m sor—” Sam started.

“I’m surprised you came.” Dean’s voice was colder than he’d heard in years.

“Dad and I might not have gotten along, but I didn’t want this.”

“Are you staying for the wake?”

“Yeah, I was thinking that I’d stay here for two nights.”

“I never thought I’d see you here again, let alone spending the night,” Dean commented while closing the journal and tidying up the folders of photos.

“Yeah, well, I’m here now,” Sam said a little defensively. “Can I see him?”

Dean stared at him for a long while. Sam almost expected Dean to refuse to let him see their dad’s body before the pyre. He’d been planning on saying goodbye and wrapping the body in linen, but maybe that was too much to ask for. Dean let out a pained sigh as he stood up, before he gestured for Sam to follow him into the back of the garage. On top of a large sturdy table was the unmistakable shape of a dead body covered with a black cloth.

Sam approached the table, hesitated for a moment, then gingerly pulled back the black cloth, just enough to see his dad’s head and chest. There were cuts and bruising across his face and where his shirt had been torn open. He’d been beaten, but the cause of death was obviously something else. His throat had been sliced open in a single rough slash. Whether it was from the sight or the lingering pain from the holy water, Sam hurried to the garage door and threw up in the dirt.

“It’s been too long since you’ve seen a body,” Dean critiqued.

“It’s not the same,” Sam muttered as he spat onto the ground for a few seconds. He weakly got to his feet and slowly approached the body again. This time he was prepared for the carnage even if his emotions were just as raw. Dean hadn’t bothered covering the body back up—evidently he’d seen it enough to already become desensitized. Sam quickly covered the ghastly wound on the neck, but looked at the face, trying to recognize their dad.

He reached out and placed his hand on his dad’s forehead. This was the first time he’d seen a whole dead body since his powers had become active. When Jessica died there’d hardly been enough of a body for him to ID. He tried to reach out, to sense anything—images of the murder, a lingering presence, maybe even where his dad’s soul might have gone. There weren’t any visions flashing the moments of his death, but there was a faint sensation that felt familiar and yet otherworldly.
“Has anyone found it?” Sam spoke softly, still trying to observe any subtle details.

“No, I’m still trying to figure out what did it. He was hunting a ghoul, but a ghoul would’ve taken
the body to eat it,” Dean answered. He shifted a bit, visibly uncomfortable with Sam touching their
dad for some reason.

“I think…. I think it was a demon.”

“What?” Dean’s face lost a bit of color as his eyes flicked between Sam’s face and his hand resting
on their dad. It was the first time he’d seen Sam doing something related to his powers.

“I can feel it, there’s this lingering thing. It’s hard to describe.” Sam furrowed his brow in
concentration, then relaxed again before looking at Dean. “Were you two chasing demons?”

“We haven’t gotten anywhere near one. We’ve been tracking them so far behind their moves that
they couldn’t have known about us.”

“You can’t tell me that this is a coincidence.”

“We’ve been careful.”

“Well, Dad ended up on some demon’s radar anyway.” Sam turned to fully face his brother.
“You’ve got to back off of the demon thing.”

around me. Just say whatever you’re gonna say.”

Sam wasn’t really sure what he wanted to tell Dean when it came right down to it. In his own silent
way it was obvious that his brother was hurting. He wanted something good to come out of the
whole horrible event. He wanted for Dean to finally have some of the crushing burden that their dad
had placed on his shoulders lifted. He didn’t want him to go down the same lonely and destructive
path of vengeance that their dad had.

“Fine.” Sam tried to find a tone of voice between determination and compassionate concern. “Come
back with me. I’ll cancel my flight. We can drive back together. You can stay with me until we
figure something out.”

“I thought your friends are killing hunters out there,” Dean scoffed.

“Don’t hunt when we get out there. I’ll make sure that no one goes after you,” Sam offered. “I can
make them understand that it’s not your fault. He made you—”

“Dad didn’t make me do anything.”

“You were a kid. You didn’t have a choice.” Sam’s voice faltered.

“I’m not a kid anymore,” Dean said flatly. “And I’m not gonna stop hunting just because he’s
dead.”

“I’m worried about you. I don’t want you going all Ishmael.”

“I’ve got leads to run down. This is the best way to keep you safe.”

“The best way to keep me safe is for you to be with me.” Sam tried again. “Dean, things are
coming after me—hunters, demons, who knows what else. I’m trying to fortify, to get my resources
where I live. You can help me with that.”
“Just because you’re holding still, leaving yourself open doesn’t mean that I should do the same thing,” Dean argued. “How am I supposed to get leads on hunters if I quit? It’s not fucking happening, so don’t turn this into a fight.”

“But I….” He could see the stubbornness in every aspect of Dean’s posture. It wasn’t a fight yet, but it easily could turn that way. They were both in emotionally delicate states. It would be a long weekend. He’d have to focus on improving their relationship before continuing to press the issue. “I’ll drop it for now.”

“I really just want to get through the day without a fist fight,” Dean groaned, lowering his guard a bit.

“You don’t have to worry about fighting me at least. I’ll give you that,” Sam offered as a gesture of goodwill, then looked back at their dad’s bruised face. “Can I have a minute alone?”

Dean watched him thoughtfully for a few seconds, then nodded and walked out of the garage.

Sam stared at his dad, the nearly terrifying figure broken down into some empty shell. It was strangely crushing and underwhelming at the same time. He wished that he’d said so much to his dad, but it was too late. His dad was gone… though they hadn’t burnt his bones yet. Sam took a deep breath, trying to gather his courage to speak to whatever might be left. Whether or not there was someone left to hear him, he needed to make his own peace.

“All you’ve ever done is hurt people. I don’t know how Mom could've loved you. Maybe you changed when she died? Maybe you didn't know how to deal with the pain, so you dished it out to everyone? But you shouldn't have done that to Dean and me—we didn't deserve that.” Sam’s voice shook. “I want to say at least you can't hurt anyone ever again, but that kind of damage lives on. Dean's never gonna be happy or fall in love. I'm always gonna feel this fear and insecurity.”

Sam leaned in so close that he was whispering in his dad’s ear.

“I'm part demon. You had a demon right under your nose and you didn't notice because you never even saw me.” A few tears trickled down Sam’s cheeks. “I didn't fail. It's not my fault that I couldn't make you love us. It's not my fault I couldn't get you to stop. There was nothing I could've done, because I was nothing to you.

“I think maybe you were the monster all along. And I can't wait to burn you.” Sam covered the corpse with the black cloth. “Because then you'll finally stop haunting my shadow. Then you'll only haunt my memories.”

When Sam was done he went to let Dean know it was okay to come back in. He found Dean standing outside the garage door with Bobby talking about the timing for starting the wake. Bobby’s arms were full of strips of white linen and a worn brown leather bag.

“It has to start before sunset, unless you want to put off the pyre until midnight.” Bobby continued making his point as the three of them went back into the garage.

“We aren’t waiting another ten hours to burn him,” Dean dictated. “We’re already pushing 36 hours.”

“So are we getting started or do you boys need some more time?”

“We can do this, Bobby,” Dean said as he went to take the linens and leather bag from Bobby, but the old hunter moved it out of Dean’s reach.
“First of all, you broke your damned back. You’re still recovering. I don’t want you hurting yourself any worse trying to lift him,” Bobby pointed out. “Second, have either of you wrapped a body for a hunter’s pyre before?”

The brothers glanced uncertainly at each other. They’d both attended dozens of hunter’s pyres, but they’d never had the responsibility of preparing the body or pyre mound.

“I haven’t,” Sam answered for himself, unprepared to speak for Dean’s last few years.

“You can help,” Dean allowed, despite having no real control over Bobby.

“Half of this stuff is probably just tradition and doesn’t actually do anything, but some of it is protection magic,” Bobby explained as he started pulling wide, flat, rune-carved stones from the leather bag. “Us hunters have violent lives and violent ends. We do this so that we don’t turn into anything really scary. So it’s important to not fuck it up.”

Sam couldn’t imagine what his dad would be like as a vengeful ghost or a demon—well, he didn’t want to imagine it. That was undoubtedly part of Dean’s desire to get the body burned before it got too late. The longer they waited the more complicated the whole thing would be personally and professionally.

In a way Bobby’s presence was incredibly comforting to Sam, both in his reassuring confidence, but also as a much needed distraction during the unpleasant task. Between instructions, Bobby treated them to two of the old hunter legends—a callback to their childhood when their dad would occasionally dump them with Bobby for a week at a time. They used to have bonfires and Bobby would teach them about hunter lore and traditions. Their dad had barely cared about hunter culture; he’d only been interested in the kill. But Bobby had embraced the millennia-old profession in all its complexity and tried to pass it on to the two children he knew that were being raised into the life. He’d been the one to teach them that there was more to hunting than just death. The irony of that thought in that moment made Sam’s heart ache a bit.

They carefully cleaned John’s body before Bobby painted a few symbols on his limbs and abdomen. A sheet of stag hide branded with the image of a bow and arrow was placed over his chest. Sam suspected the tribute to Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, was just custom instead of functional. Then they tightly wrapped him once with the linen. On their second pass the veteran pyre-preparer carefully placed the rune stones between the layers of fabric. When they were done, Bobby announced that he’d go get the supplies for the fire, then left to give them one last moment alone with their dad.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said quietly in some sort of reflex to break the uncomfortable silence.

“You didn’t kill him,” Dean replied after a long pause, then turned and walked out of the garage.

Once the structure of the pyre was constructed, Sam, Dean, and Bobby carried John’s body to it. Dean was convinced to only assist so as not to further hurt his back. They placed the wrapped body on the pile of wood, then stood beside it.

“Did your dad want any sort of Christian service?” Bobby asked.

“I don’t fucking know,” Dean muttered, more frustrated at his own ignorance on that matter than anything else.

“He stopped going to church…” Sam sighed. “I guess I don’t know what he’s been up to.”
“Do we really need to bother with the Jesus stuff?” Dean asked. He shifted his weight, either agitated that the process was being drawn out or from back pain; probably both. “He’s going wherever he’s going.”

Sam almost argued that it was more about respecting their dad’s wishes rather than ensuring that his soul went to Heaven, but the truth was that Sam wasn’t really sure what the practical effects of a Christian service were… nor did he particularly care at that point. He’d spent too much of his life pretending to be something he wasn’t for his dad; he wasn’t about to pretend to know what he was doing for his dad.

“If he wanted something special he should’ve told one of us,” Sam agreed, then tossed a piece of kindling he’d been idly picking at onto the wood pile. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“I know you boys are going through a lot, but both of you need to suck it up and actually cooperate with me,” Bobby scolded. “It’s a pyre, not yer damned laundry.”

“Fine,” Dean acknowledged.

“Sorry.” Sam straightened up, trying to take on a more respectful posture.

“I know we’re supposed to say a few words, but unless either of you has something nice that you really want to say I think we should just stick to a moment of silence,” Bobby suggested. “So… anything you two really itchin’ to say?”

“No,” Sam replied and Dean just shook his head.

“He was never really into this sort of stuff anyway,” Bobby commented.

Sam couldn’t decide whether his dad would even see the hypothetical value of his children’s last goodbyes. He’d barely bothered with goodbye when leaving them to go risk his life. Imparting some sort of lasting message or memory in those around him hadn’t been a priority—unless it was some sort of combat lesson; those had to be learned fast.

Bobby was the first one of them to place an offering on the pyre next to the body. He set an old paperback book that Sam didn’t recognize on the pile. Sam trusted that it wasn’t a unique tome of wisdom—Bobby was respectful, but he wasn’t wasteful.

When Bobby was done, Dean double-checked his dad’s preferred sawed off shotgun to make sure it was unloaded. He held the weapon for a few seconds in a surprising showing of sentimentality, then placed it on the pyre.

Sam tried to think if there was anything he had to offer to the fire. He didn’t own anything that belonged to his dad nor did he really know what might’ve been meaningful. A default offering was blood from someone the deceased hunter loved, but Sam didn’t even feel like he could sincerely offer it.

“We’ve sacrificed enough,” Sam said when Bobby and Dean looked to him.

No one said anything. Sam and Dean each took a box of matches, lit them, then tossed them onto the pyre. The smell of the fire brought back countless memories of childhood hunts, pyres of family friends, and the bonfire of his fake IDs that Sam had made the night he left to go to Stanford. Sam pulled his hoodie tighter around himself despite the heat of the flame.

When the pyre was nothing more than embers they went back inside the house. Bobby resumed his
effort to get Dean to eat something while Sam went to claim a spare bedroom upstairs. Sam quickly identified the room Dean was using thanks to the green duffel bag of clothes and meticulously organized collection of personal weapons on top of the desk. He opted to take the smaller room next door to Dean’s—it was the one the pair of them had shared as children.

Sam dropped his backpack on one of the lumpy twin beds, then walked around the room full of memories. Hardly anything had changed. The wallpaper was peeling worse than before. One of the three lightbulbs in the hanging fixture still flickered randomly—the “ghost light,” as they’d called it.

He spotted a small wooden footlocker under one of the beds. When he pulled it out, he saw that it was the one Dean and he had used to store things between their visits. His lips helplessly curled into a small smile as he opened it up. There were a few baseball cards that they’d been given as a gift by a shopkeeper who’d been a witness during some mundane hunt. He reexamined the yo-yo his dad had broken by throwing it against a wall; his youthful determination to salvage it had always blinded him to the toy’s hopeless prognosis. After gently tracing his fingers along its damaged side, he solemnly placed it back in the box.

Sam rolled his eyes at the old familiar etching of a hulder, a seductive Scandinavian forest spirit. He was fairly sure that Dean used to jerk off to the etching as a teenager, back before learning to shoplift porno mags. Sam tossed the etching aside as he casually wondered how many hunters secretly got off to the things they hunted.

There was a coupon book, of all things, in the bottom of the crate. He couldn’t remember why it had been in there. It was probably something of Dean’s. Picking the flimsy book up, Sam could see that it was from Lawrence, Kansas. When he experimentally thumbed through the booklet a photograph fell out.

He picked up the photo and froze. It was of his dad and mom in an embrace, but each facing the camera. Pictures of his mom had been almost unheard of. They were a too harsh reminder of what his family had lost. Until that moment if someone had asked him what his mom looked like, he probably would’ve given some vague answer about her being blonde. Yet, he stared at the image of Mary and was struck by painful recognition.

He’d seen her before, but not merely in a photograph. She’d been in one of his visions and he hadn’t even realized it at the time. It was when he’d first interacted with Zoya. His mom had had her stomach sliced open and was pinned to the ceiling when a nursery caught fire. There had been a baby boy in a crib. He was the baby from the vision.

Sam dropped the photo, then hastily scooted away from it, backwards across the floor. His dad had saved him from the fire and must have seen Mary. His dad had to have known that there were supernatural elements at work, even back then. It wasn’t some new development that had been discovered while Sam was away at school.

Growing up he and Dean had known that their mom had died in a nursery fire and their dad was a hunter. Dad had never talked about their mom or told them what had happened that night. Sam had never actually heard about how his dad had gotten into hunting—he’d always been a hunter… for Sam’s whole life. Of course after having a kid it’d make sense to take a break from hunting for a while. But thinking about that assumption for the first time in years with fresh eyes…. His dad wouldn’t have stopped for anything, not even the birth of his child.

On two occasions his dad had been so drunk that he’d told Sam that Mary’s death had been his fault. Sam knew that she’d died in a nursery fire, but for years he’d secretly wondered whether she’d started the fire. If his dad had been such an oppressive force before her death, then Sam wouldn’t
have blamed her for breaking down. But she hadn’t. Something really had killed her, just like the parents of some of the other Anathema—the demon that had changed him and stolen his soul. It had all started that night and he’d seen a glimpse of it. He felt like he was so close to understanding what had been done to him that night; he could almost taste it. His visions really did mean something…. Sam felt like he might throw up again.

He tried to remember the vision of Jessica’s death. There was fire and she was bleeding; she’d been cut. He’d assumed that in the vision she’d been lying on the ground, but thinking about it more critically, the flames were going the wrong direction. She’d been on the ceiling. He hadn’t understood the flashes of what he’d seen because he hadn’t suspected foul play at the time—Yes, there had been blood in the vision, but he couldn’t guess how much and there wasn’t anyone else as far as he could tell. The fire investigators determined that the fire had started in the kitchen. With the door and windows locked from the inside it was suggested that she’d hurt herself and tried to get to her phone to call for help, but passed out resulting in the unattended stove starting the apartment fire. But that whole theory was premised on the idea that no one could leave the apartment without undoing the locks. A demon could do it.

For some reason a demon had killed his dad, and likely killed his mom and Jessica. Something really had been following him his whole life. He wrapped his arms around his knees and pulled them to his chest. The way his life was subject to the whims of a demon, he felt almost violated. It held his soul and was playing with his life. He wasn’t sure why the demon would think killing his dad was a good idea, since there were plenty of people he liked more. Maybe his dad really had gotten too close? Based on the beating that had been reserved for his dad, pissing the demon off was a more likely scenario. His dad’s death needed to be investigated, but first he needed to get through the wake.

He wanted a drink—he wanted several drinks. How the fuck was he supposed to handle the next few hours? Maybe he shouldn’t have come at all? Dean hadn’t expected him to show up and the two of them weren’t exactly comforting each other. He hadn’t come to pay respects; he didn’t respect his dad. He’d come because he was worried about Dean and maybe he needed whatever closure he could get from seeing for himself that their dad was dead. But in this old place full of memories a new scenario had clicked and dozens of new worries were breaking through the floodgate.

The pyre hadn’t even finished smoldering when the first guest arrived. A woman in her late twenties or early thirties knocked on the front door before letting herself in. She had skin that had a rich warmth that reminded Sam of polished tiger’s eye, long frizzy, light brown hair, and thin, dark eyes. Her clothes were utilitarian—combat-ready with a few minor adjustments meant to strategically emphasize her breasts and ass. She was immediately intercepted by Bobby for an almost affectionate greeting followed by all the standard security protocols.

Sam was surprised to see a female hunter show up by herself so early in the evening. It was normal for female hunters to arrive at social gatherings later or in groups in order avoid having to endure the ample testosterone alone. She’d managed to beat all the usual suspects to the wake, but whoever she was, she was staring down the prospect of dealing with at least three male hunters, two of which were emotionally compromised and potentially looking to make bad decisions.

Bad decisions were routine for most hunter gatherings. If it had been a hunter wedding instead of a funeral there would’ve almost certainly been at least one fist fight as the most eligible bachelors tried to show off. The somber event didn’t bar the possibility of a fight breaking out; it just meant that no one would initiate a fight with Dean or him, and he didn’t expect any of the older hunters to be competitors for their status as most eligible. He cringed internally at the thought of fending off
advances for most of the night.

“Jeda,” the woman introduced herself while offering him a handshake. “You must be Sam.”

“Yeah.” He put down one of the herb bundles he’d been assembling for Bobby, then took her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Jeda has more years under her belt than you’d guess by looking at her. She used to work with the Belmont gang up in Wisconsin,” Bobby offered for Sam’s benefit before going off to check on the remaining preparation.

“That wasn’t for all that long,” she corrected, then added, “I was actually first picked up by Henry Armont and apprenticed under him for five years.”

Sam was a little surprised to hear that she had studied under a male hunter for so long, and right after being recruited. It was a major taboo for hunters to recruit members of the opposite sex. Usually recruitment came in the wake of the recruitee losing their entire family to a monster, which left them in a vulnerable state. In Sam’s opinion, it was inappropriate to try recruiting a person that was like that, but he supposed otherwise no one would ever voluntarily become a hunter. The idea of potentially adding an unhealthy sexual dynamic was what made Jeda’s origins so controversial.

“Then I traded myself over to apprenticing under Karen Davis,” she continued.

He loathed the term “traded.” It always struck him as a harsh reminder of the origins of the profession. As a teenager he’d discovered the irony that a people so defiant against the authority of human society and laws would be so comfortable with sacrificing their personal autonomy in the name of their combat skills.

Their dad had never considered sending his sons away for their education; he wanted to maintain whatever authority over them that he could. Dean was too loyal to investigate training under anyone else. But when Sam was younger, before he’d realized what reaching the age of majority meant, he’d considered trying to finagle an apprenticeship under a female hunter. It was almost unheard of, but he wanted to know what the female hunters knew and for some reason he thought that they might be more accepting of him. He’d heard that part of their training often involved how to flirt with men in order to get intel—when he was younger he would’ve killed for those insights.

“Davis, she was a real master,” Sam offered the proximate compliment. Praising a hunter’s mentor was always an easy way to win points—well, most of the time.

“I was with her for seven years before starting my solos.” Jeda sipped her beer. “I met your dad and brother when Karen had us answer a call for help on a rugaru hunt.”

“If you don’t mind me asking...” Sam hesitated for a second. “...How old were you when you started?”

“Sixteen,” Jeda replied, then quickly added, “Henry was good to me.”

“I didn’t mean to suggest...” He hadn’t meant to suggest that she’d been abused, but he’d have been lying if he said the concern hadn’t crossed his mind.

“It’d be better if more people were concerned about that stuff,” she commented, giving him some reassurance that she wasn’t offended. “Then maybe our people wouldn’t be so segregated.”

He smiled sadly at her comment, her commitment. She was one of those hunters that understood they were a people with an identity and a history. To that extent he agreed, but unlike him, she was
proud of the association. If she lived long enough, someday she might have little hunters of her own. The idea made his heart hurt.

“I think we stay separated so that we don’t get too happy. Can’t have everyone settling down with families.” Some of Sam’s cynicism on the subject helplessly slipped out.

“A little group R&R every once in a while would at least give us new blood,” she mused. “Aren’t you and Dean both cradles?”

“No, our dad wasn’t actively hunting when we were born. I was really young when we went on the road….” Sam pursed his lips at the recent realization that he didn’t actually know the circumstances of his dad starting hunting. He decided to just evade the topic. “It’s kinda complicated, but I’m not an actual cradle-to-the-grave.”

“Ah, the way Dean talks about it I thought you two were both cradles.” Jeda shrugged. “I guess you two more than count though.”

Traditionally, wakes were one of the few opportunities for hunters to gather and potentially start a family wholly within the culture. It was normal for hunters to hook up at these sorts of events and custom called for abstaining from contraceptives for at least one week of mourning. A few of the more orthodox hunters even carried fertility or virility talismans on them, but amusingly that crowd was dying out. Regardless, he expected at least one female hunter to hit on him that evening and, independent of the fact that he was in a relationship, he wasn’t about to risk fucking during that dangerous time.

The children from those hunter flings were sometimes called cradle-to-the-graves or cradles. They were usually raised by one of their biological parents, or, if neither parent wanted to stop hunting, they’d go to another relative or an older hunter. At the age of eight daughters would start apprenticing under their moms and at the age of ten sons would start apprenticing under their dads. That was one of the things that had always made hunters turn their heads at Sam and Dean; their dad hadn’t waited until they were ten to start the field portion of their training.

“Yeah, well….” He didn’t know how to respond. She thought that starting training that young was a positive thing. “In the long term that extra time doesn’t count for much.”

“I wished I’d been able to start at eight.” Jeda’s voice sounded nearly wistful. “Imagine having an eight year head start on all the monsters—“

“Je,” Dean said as he approached them. He put his hand on her back and started redirecting Jeda away from Sam. Sam tried not to show his relief at that conversation ending. It would be too hard to make someone like her understand that hunting as a child was a terrible experience. “We need to talk about that werewolf hunt outside Denver.”

“Shit, do we have some clean up?” she groaned. “You have a file started?”

The two of them walked out of the room and down the hallway. Sam was more than happy to stay away from their discussion of hunts. He’d undoubtedly have to listen to a certain amount of that talk once the other hunters arrived. There was only so much seasoned hunters chatted about when they gathered in a location where they could be themselves—everyone except for Sam could be themselves. He’d have to put on even more of an act. Realizing that he was alone for a few moments, possibly for the last time that day, Sam snuck back up to his room, took out his cell phone, and texted Brady.

“How’re things on your end?”
“I think Meg is done torturing me for now,” Brady replied. “She has some actual work that’s come up, so I think she’ll be out of our hair for a while.”

“Hopefully, a long while.”

“How’re you handling your asshole sibling?”

“Dean’s being a bit standoffish and he’s drinking. No fight though,” Sam assured. He closed the bedroom door, then lay down on the nearly too-small mattress. “I can’t wait to come home.”

“I miss you. I know you’re with your family and me being there would just start a fight,”—Sam wasn’t sure if Brady was suggesting that he’d instigate a brawl or that Sam’s family was all homophobic—“but I might be able to put up with your dick brother if it meant being with you.”

“That’s the sweetest thing anyone’s ever said to me,” Sam replied, uncertain whether he was being sarcastic or not.

“Any chance you’ll be able to talk on the phone later?” Brady asked, causing Sam to wait a beat for a follow up text suggesting phone sex, but it didn’t come.

“There’s gonna be a wake tonight, but if I can break away for a few minutes I’ll call you.”

“Looking forward to it.”

Sam started to get up to go finish the last few herb bundles that he hadn’t gotten to before becoming distracted by Jeda’s arrival, but he didn’t quite get moving. While he may have been stuck halfway across the country from Brady, Stacy was only a short train ride away. He settled back down on the bed, then texted Stacy.

“Are you free?”

“Aren’t you in South Dakota or something?” Stacy replied, implicitly answering the question of whether Brady had told her that he was out of town.

“Yeah. I was wondering if you can spend some time with Brady? I don’t want him getting all moody or worked up about me visiting my family.”

“Sure thing. I’ll make him take me out to dinner,” she responded. “Are you okay?”

“Things with Dean are tense. I’m worried about him.”

“I was thinking more being in the wolf’s den,” Stacy corrected. He hated that characterization of his pseudo-childhood home, but he hated even more the fact that it rang true on some level.

“It’s awkward, but I don’t think I’m gonna get killed or anything,” he assured her. “How’re things with you?”

“Mixed bag.” That probably meant bad considering her normal positivity. “I guess Little Portugal bagged a hunter while you were dealing with that church thing.”

Sam put the phone down on the bed and ran his fingers through his hair. After taking a moment to collect himself, he gingerly picked up the phone, resigned to asking a question with no good answer. “Is he alive?”

“Last I heard. Melinde has him in stasis somewhere, so he isn’t getting out or anything. Their diviners are trying to figure out if they can use him since he’s in mint condition.”
He tapped the phone on his knee while trying to process the news. There he was about to be surrounded by hunters and he was getting intel on the fact that one had been taken prisoner—they had one prisoner.

“They only got one? I’m pretty sure there were two there.” He wasn’t entirely certain why he was telling her that… actually, self-preservation came to mind.

“You saw the hunters in Little Portugal? And there were two of them? You sure?”

“Maybe? It was just for a few seconds when I got there. I saw these two guys. It’s just the way they moved and one of them looked familiar, like I’d probably met him as a teenager or something. I warned Melinde to have her people on guard.” Sam rubbed his face. He was caught in the middle of both worlds again. It was becoming a very familiar feeling. “Are they gonna kill him?”

“I think that’s the plan,” Stacy texted back after a long pause.

“Do you know his name?”

“No,” she answered, then added, “If you really want to stick your neck out on this guy, then I can try to get Melinde to hold off on offing him until you get a chance to do whatever.”

Just a day earlier he’d refrained from risking exposure when his dad’s life had been potentially on the line… well, in hindsight maybe “potentially” was a mischaracterization.

“Don’t put yourself or me in danger, but if there’s an easy way to stall until I get back I’d appreciate it.” Sam settled on that, then admitted, “I don’t really know what I’d do.”

“I’ll see if there’s anything I can do to stall, but things are starting to heat up around here,” Stacy warned. “Tenderloin and Santa Cruz both had signs of hunter activity yesterday. Calvin’s worried that’s gonna keep people from doing physical sales on the Quiet Market. It’s gonna be nuts if everyone’s too scared to make deals and can’t get their stuff.”

“Like reagents? Is the”—He hesitated to even type the word ‘coven’ while in a building full of hunters—“family gonna be okay?”

“We have emergency reserves. Was thinking more non-humans and freelance witches. They’re gonna have to start getting virgin hearts the old fashioned way.”

“Well, I’m glad Brady and I could do our part to help keep your heart off the market.” He’d meant for that to be a sex joke, but rereading it he wondered if that was venturing into an almost romantic sentiment.

“Don’t worry about us. I’m gonna go ride Brady until we’re safe,” she assured him. “Text me if you need any flip side backup.”

“Will do,” Sam replied, then considered her unsolicited offer of help at the very end. “Don’t worry about me. It sucks, but I’ll survive.”

Sam stretched out on the bed and sighed at the thought of being back in his own bed, snuggled between the two of them. After indulging in a few seconds of self pity, he took the precaution of deleting all the texts containing reference to magic, the covens, and demons. He lay on the old twin bed trying to work up the courage to end those few precious moments of peaceful isolation. Things would inevitably get lively soon enough.
There was a dull crashing sound in the bedroom next door that Dean was using. Dean wasn’t particularly clumsy, though he was operating on very little food and sleep balanced against enough painkillers to counteract a fractured vertebral and the emotional trauma of the last 36 hours. Sam got up from bed and went to check on Dean. He was about to try the doorknob when he heard a rhythmic pounding noise. It didn’t sound like a drunk or injured person struggling to get off the ground. Sam hesitated, then knelt down to peek through the antique keyhole for just a moment, but what he saw turned out to be more than he’d bargained for.

Inside the room Dean was fucking Jeda. They were both almost entirely clothed except for their jeans pulled down around their hips. Jeda was bent forward over the heavy wooden desk and Dean was thrusting into her with an almost unsavory amount of force. With each thrust Dean let out a quiet grunt of either enthusiasm or pain from his back, but that didn’t stop him.

The sight made Sam’s stomach knot. He wanted to open the door and stop them, but that would almost certainly start a physical fight. Dean was a hunter to his core, but he wasn’t the kind of idiot to have unprotected sex during a week of mourning…. Except for the fact that the elder Winchester was also grieving and intoxicated to an almost immeasurable extent.

Sam reached for the doorknob, hesitated, then started pacing in the hallway. His heart was pounding at the potentially damning mistake that Dean may have been barreling into in that moment and his own struggle as to whether to intervene. He didn’t want to be making these decisions—deciding whether to risk his life for some random hunter or whether to risk his relationship with Dean to try and stop what certainly seemed like a bad idea. It was too much pressure.

The risks and worries were piling up in him, triggering his anxiety. He could feel an attack coming on; his mind was already refusing to listen to him. He retreated to his room and popped an anti-anxiety pill, but he could still hear the newly-identified and woefully-memorable pounding. Sam tossed the bottle of pills back on the bed, then continued down the hall. Following some sort of primal impulse, he went into the hall closet where he used to hide when he was a kid. Over a decade later, it was cramped and dusty, but there was something comforting about being in such a still place. Maybe that’s what being swaddled felt like?

There were too many confusing emotions and events happening. He could feel his anxiety manifesting in his shaking hands, his pounding heart, his racing and scattered thoughts…. The smell of his dad’s pyre was on his clothes. Dean was potentially engaging in self-destructive behavior.

That fucking holy water had left an echo of pain throughout his torso that was fading far too slowly. He missed his partners, his feeling of belonging, not having to confront his past—He missed being the better version of himself that he had started creating. His old mantra that he was out of the life wasn’t really correct anymore, so he tried to find something new to focus on while he calmed down.

“You can do this. Good, not great, not perfect,” Sam whispered to himself. “You can do this.”

When he had gotten himself under control he peeked out the closet door to make sure no one spotted his awkward emergence. The rhythmic pounding had stopped and the door to Dean’s bedroom was open. Despite the impulse to just mind his own business, Sam cautiously went in—the place even smelled faintly of cum. He nearly gagged and debated just leaving, but took a moment to glance in the trash can. It was more or less empty. There was no used condom or even just a condom wrapper in it. Dean had just made such a dumb decision that Sam started questioning whether Dean’s judgment was so impaired that he wasn’t even capable of fully consenting to sex and all its implications. Sam began walking out of the bedroom and groaned at what he was about to do.

Sam found Dean seated in an armchair in the living room while Jeda examined the contents of a nearby bookcase. He saw Dean holding what had to have been his fourth glass of hard alcohol that
afternoon. Without bothering to give a warning, Sam grabbed the tumbler of whiskey out of Dean’s hand, then poured it into the fireplace. The sudden insulting move made Jeda take a step back, getting out of the way of whatever was happening.

“What the hell—“ Dean started.

“You’ve had enough.”

The faux pas of calling out another hunter’s excessive drinking was enough to send Jeda awkwardly retreating to another room. Dean stood up from his chair, either upset at the insult itself or maybe even embarrassed by having been called out in front of a girl he’d just had sex with. Sam planted his feet, ready to defend himself. Thankfully, Dean didn’t move to take a swing at him. It wouldn’t be that sort of fight.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!?” Dean yelled. Bobby hurried into the room at the sound of raised voices, but didn’t intervene.

“What’s wrong with me?” Sam shouted back. “You’re the one that’s barely been keeping it together. You aren’t eating. You’re drinking way too much. You’re being harsh and reckless—”

“I’m grieving. I actually give a shit that he’s dead,” Dean interrupted. “Maybe you’d be upset too if you were a good son.”

“Dean watch your—“ Bobby started trying to get them under control.

“Stay out of this Bobby,” Dean snapped.

“You think I’m happy about this?” Sam threw his hand up in frustration, then gestured in the direction of the pyre. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve wanted things between him and me to be alright, and now it’ll never fucking happen? Maybe I hated him, but he was Dad and hating him has never filled that hole in me—that pit from knowing that he didn’t care. And now… now I have to live the rest of my life knowing that no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t make him love me.”

Dean stared at Sam with a suppressed intensity that threatened to snap tendons. Sam was waiting for Dean to yell, argue, throw something, rail against his pain with accusations of weakness or self-pity—but what actually happened was wholly unexpected. Dean’s composure faltered and Sam could actually see traces of softness or uncertainty on his face. Dean turned away from him, then gripped the fireplace mantel.

“You don’t know…. He loved…. He cared….“ Dean rested his forehead against the mantel. His voice had become quiet, but not nearly as cold as normal. “Dad was such a fucking asshole.”

It was the first time that Sam could remember Dean insulting their dad. He didn’t know how to respond. He could barely process the statement at all. With no more risk of a brawl starting, Bobby quietly crossed the room to where Jeda had fled in order to give Sam and Dean some privacy.

“I’m not about to lie to you,” Dean observed. “So how the hell am I supposed to say something like he loved us? I don’t fucking know if he did.”

“Dean… I know it hurts and there’s nothing I can say or do to make it better, but I love you, even with everything that’s happened.” Sam took a step towards him. “I’m worried about you.”

He watched for any sort of tells as to how Dean might react to his moment of vulnerability and concern. Sam knew that he was asking for a lot. As much as his brother worried about Sam’s safety, Dean’s own well-being had always taken a more sacrificial priority. And Sam’s opinions
barely even carried any weight against all other considerations. He couldn’t tell what the clenching and unclenching of Dean’s jaw meant—resistance at least… but maybe contemplation?

“I’ll cut back on the booze for a while, but there’s no way I’m getting through a whole wake dry.” Dean offered a partial concession as he turned to face Sam. His eyes were perfectly dry in spite of the emotional moment just seconds ago. Sam wondered if his brother had cried over their dad’s death yet, but he didn’t dare ask.

“That seems fair,” Sam acknowledged. He wasn’t about to get Dean on the straight and narrow after only a single heart-to-heart. Though it felt like Dean was leaving something of an opening; he hadn’t left the room, after all. Sam took the opportunity to investigate the trigger for the confrontation… just maybe he’d do it with a bit more finesse than he’d started with. “So… are you and Jeda a thing?”

“What?” In his almost-imperceptible way Dean flustered a bit at the question before regaining his full composure. “No.”

Sam pressed the issue. “Tell me you normally use a condom.”

“What?” Dean repeated, nearly recoiling slightly in what Sam suspected was embarrassment.

“I heard you fucking Jeda. I went into your room for a book.” Sam didn’t even care that the lie didn’t make much sense. They were both too distracted by the bigger topic. “No condom wrapper in the trash.”

“Okay, yeah,” Dean admitted. “Jeda and sometimes fuck when our hunts intersect or we’re stressed out. And no, maybe we didn’t use a rubber—”

“You gotta take care of yourself.” Sam jumped right to the heart of the issue. “STDs aside, you know how it is at wakes. She could be off the pill or worse—do you even know if she’s one of those old-fashioned types? She could have a fucking fertility charm on her. I don't want to be an uncle.”

Sam didn’t appreciate Dean rolling his eyes in a patent showing of exasperation. It was easy for Dean to dismiss the concern; he’d probably happily unload some hypothetical child on Sam or Bobby until the kid was old enough to start training. Not only was Sam concerned about the possibility of taking care of a kid, there was the secondary concern about potentially fighting Dean and Jeda to prevent the kid from eventually getting training. The whole scenario sounded awful.

“Stop freaking out. You aren’t gonna be an uncle,” Dean replied confidently.

“Just because something hasn’t happened so far—“

“I got a vasectomy a few years ago,” Dean explained.

“What?” Sam managed after a few seconds.

“It was right after you left.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

“You were, what, twenty-two?”

“Yeah.” Dean’s expression was completely unreadable.
Sam was about to question his brother’s reasoning behind the surgery until he remembered what Dean’s concept of parenthood entailed. As long as he was committed to hunting, a best case scenario would likely be losing custody of his kids until they were largely estranged. And there was the added impact of their own childhood on the decision making process. Dean had watched their dad terrorize them both to the point where Sam had run away at the first decent opportunity. Sam couldn’t blame him for not wanting any part of a possible round two of abuse.

“I’m sorry.” Sam had no idea what to say.

“It’s not a big deal. It makes fucking around easier,” Dean dismissed the weight of the choice, then added in an apparent attempt to break some of the tension, “Speaking of, is your girlfriend seeing anyone?”

“Stay the fuck away from California,” Sam shot back in a caricature of concern. He trusted that Dean could tell he wasn’t actually revoking his offer to help Dean settle in the Bay Area, but he didn’t dare kill the almost lighthearted mood by mentioning it.

“I’m just saying she’s cute. Lots of tattoos—” Dean’s eyes widened and his eyebrows rose, then he lowered his voice. “Were those magic tattoos? Is she a witch?”

Sam turned serious. “Leave her alone.”

“I’m not gonna hunt your girlfriend.” Dean stated, then decided to put Sam on the defensive minus the threat of actual harm. “Is it weird fucking a witch?”

“I’m not having this conversation.” Sam crossed his arms in front of his chest anxiously.

“Does she use magic in bed?” Dean pursued the subject, clearly trying to make Sam uncomfortable as retribution for the earlier discussion of Jeda.

“Brady doesn’t know about the flip side—“

“The what side?”

“Flip side. It’s what witches call the supernatural stuff—magic, monsters, demons,” Sam explained. “We don’t talk about that stuff around Brady.”

“If I was fucking a witch, I’d have her make us fuck on the ceiling or some other exorcist shit. You might as well get the most out of it while you can.”

“There isn’t ‘while you can.’ I like her. We do stuff regularly. This isn’t some one night stand thing,” Sam pointed out. “That’s what happens when you stay in a place for more than a week at a time.”

“Eh.” Dean shrugged off the subtle pitch for him settling down. “I’m just saying if you’re already taking the risk with her, you might as well get a good story out of it.”

“I’m not taking a risk with Stacy. She knows about the whole hunter thing. I trust her. Her family likes me. They’re nice to me.”

“They don’t know you,” Dean speculated. “They don’t know you used to be a hunter. You still do the rites. You know our lore and legends better than 99% of us. I bet if you stayed out here for a week or two you’d slip back in fine. You’re just a hunter that hasn’t killed in a while.”

“I’m not a hunter,” Sam replied firmly.
“Where’s the line for knowing when it ends? When do you think a coven full of witches is gonna call it fine?” Dean asked. “You’ve killed witches. Don’t act like fucking one and getting all cozy with them isn’t a risk. You need to protect yourself.”

“You have no idea how long it’s been since I’ve thought someone was just going to swoop in and save me. I have been protecting myself,” Sam stated with more determination than Dean had been expecting. “What I need is people who support me—and they do.”

“Okay,” Dean said after a thoughtful pause. “Good.”

Sam thought he heard the hum of a car approaching, but when he peeked out the curtains to see if the other hunters had started arriving the dirt driveway was clear. The sound had been something else, or maybe his imagination was getting away from him. Yes, he had seemingly improved things with Dean, but his nerves were still a bit raw and his anxiety medication was barely taking the edge off. The prospect of dumping a dozen hunters into the mix wasn’t good. Sam rubbed his neck as he glanced at Dean, who was watching him in return. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, debating whether to say something.

“What?” Dean asked.

“Do you have any weed?”

Dean stared at him for several seconds in disbelief, then rolled his eyes in a completely intentional showing of his annoyance at the question. Sam could see the apparent irony in hassling his brother over drinking and then asking him for drugs.

“You know how Dad was about that stuff,” Dean reminded him. “I haven’t had any in at least three years.”

“That’s just great,” Sam muttered while pacing a bit.

“We’ve got a lot to drink—“

“Weed helps with my anxiety. It’s part of my medication. I just couldn’t take it on the plane,” Sam explained. “I can’t drink to deal with my anxiety.”

“I don’t know, drinking works pretty well for loosening up—“ Dean continued.

“No, I mean if I drink when I’m upset I’m worried I’ll drink too much, so I can’t start. Like I full-on go to AA meetings,” Sam admitted. “If you see me drinking anything other than beer take it away from me.”

“You’re serious?”

“Completely.”

Dean studied Sam for a moment, then nodded. It was nice to see that Dean wasn’t going to make fun of him for going to AA or ask a ton of questions. Granted, Dean seemed well-versed in drinking problems, so maybe a little sympathy or, dare he hope, respect was understandable.

“Are you gonna be messed up without weed?”

“It’s just my anxiety will be worse than normal.” Sam realized that Dean probably had no idea what anxiety actually meant. “It’s like there’s gonna be part of me that’s scared of all sorts of things,
“We’re at Bobby’s house,” Dean said, unable to really appreciate what Sam was saying. “What do you have to be scared of?”

“I’m gonna have to talk to people all night long. Maybe I’ll mess up one of the rites? How do I explain that I quit hunting? Should I just lie about everything the whole night? What if I can’t keep it up? What if these hunters want to come out to visit me in California? What if I embarrass Bobby? What if they ask me about my relationship with Dad? What if they bring up Mom? Not to mention, I don’t know—” Sam lowered his voice. “—I’m a fucking psychic spending the night surrounded by hunters.”

Dean’s lips thinned at the way Sam had described himself as a psychic, implicitly prey to the hunters who would be arriving soon. Sam couldn’t tell whether his older brother was offended by the fearful mention of hunters or worried about the legitimate danger…. Granted, the way Dean’s eyes flicked to Sam’s furrowed brow, withdrawn posture, and fingers fidgeting compulsively with the zipper on his hoodie—yeah, Sam didn’t doubt that the barely perceptible expression of concern on Dean’s face was from seeing his anxiety manifested.

“Are you like this all the time?” Dean asked in a tone that toed the line between attentiveness and annoyed discomfort.

“More or less. Mostly less,” Sam huffed, then forced his hands into his pockets. “I just have enough experience with my anxiety to not let it make me hide in the corner most of the time. And usually I’m at least a little high going into stuff like this.”

“If you feel like you’re gonna freak out, just go hide upstairs for a minute and breathe into a paper bag,” Dean suggested.

“That’s for hyperventilating,” Sam corrected.

“Listen, nobody is gonna hurt you here,” Dean stated, trying to force some calm into his little brother. “Okay?”

“I appreciate it, but—“

“I’m serious. If anyone tries anything I’ll kill them,” Dean assured him. “I’m not watching you get another black eye.”

The hunters started arriving no more than a half hour later. Smoldering herb bundles and shots of holy water were promptly replaced by cigarettes and shots of various amber liquids. Dean and Bobby mercifully took the lead on greeting guests, but that didn’t excuse Sam from all interaction. Hunters were too used to death for custom to grant them privacy to mourn. As much as Sam hated being put in the spotlight it’d be too much of a red flag for him to sulk or hide out in a bedroom—it would be un-hunter-like.

Sam skirted the living room that was quickly filling with trained killers softened and enthused by the presence of so many of their own. He tried to avoid being pulled into any of the conversations by not making eye contact whenever possible. His hands, eyes, and lips feigned preoccupation with a bottle of beer that he wasn’t particularly interested in drinking. He settled on the couch, reducing his height and hopefully helping him fade into the background like a piece of furniture.

To everyone else the gathering was becoming light and lively, but to Sam the room felt oppressive—almost claustrophobic—and the impression worsened with each hunter that arrived. He only
recognized a couple hunters, the rare ones who had managed to both get along with his dad and had survived beyond Sam’s multi-year absence.

Everyone made a point of mentioning how amazing a hunter and a man his dad had been. He didn’t know how to respond beyond agreeing that his dad was a great hunter… by one standard. His dad had accumulated an almost legendary number of kills during his run, but whether that made him a good hunter was debatable, and as far as Sam was concerned it counted against the claim of being a good man. But Sam didn’t want to argue with anyone about the reality of the situation. This crowd wasn’t likely to respond well to a nuanced worldview that undercut their moral high ground.

Three female hunters arrived as a group and the conversations took a turn toward everyone’s personal accomplishments, with only the occasional reminiscing about his dad. Evidently the hunt was on, so to speak.

One of the women took off her grey leather jacket, revealing a black shirt with an incredibly low back. Her flesh was marked with several expected scars, but the true centerpiece was the image of their patron huntress intentionally crafted from meticulously-sculpted scarring. Scarification wasn’t as common as tattoos among hunters, but it wasn’t unheard of by any means. Sam couldn’t help but gawk at the physical manifestation of her devotion—back before he decided to get out of hunting, he probably would’ve found that sort of thing attractive. She must’ve had her pick of male hunters and the way she carried herself she clearly knew it.

“You’re the son that’s out on the west coast, right?” one of the male hunters asked Sam, drawing his attention away from the woman with the scarring.

“Yeah, for the last few years,” Sam replied, but didn’t try to encourage conversation.

“What’s it like hunting out there?”

“I’m going to school. I haven’t actually been hunting out there,” Sam explained, then quickly added as justification for not hunting, “you know, don’t hunt in your backyard.”

“That’s a shame you’re tied down, being stuck on the bench like that,” one of the women interjected, expanding the conversation to include a larger group, to Sam’s dismay.

“He’ll finish his schooling and be back at it soon enough,” the male hunter speculated. “He’s one of John’s boys. You can’t keep them down for even half a count.”

Sam forced himself to smile at the vote of confidence. There were so many things wrong with that praise that he couldn’t even bring himself to respond verbally. Being so closely associated with his dad again… the thought of returning to hunting…. He felt physically ill—though that might’ve been some lingering effect of the holy water working its way through his intestines.

“Well, what’s the lay look like at least? I heard that there were some kitsune in southern Oregon,” another hunter commented with a particularly hopeful expression on his face.

Certain non-humans favored particular geographical regions, making them exotic hunts. Kitsune originally came from Japan, but in the last decade or so a few of them had turned up in the U.S. along the west coast. Exotic kills were just as impressive in the hunting community as big game, and kitsune counted on both fronts. But Sam didn’t want to add to the west coast’s allure.

“I haven’t heard of any kitsune in California,” Sam replied. Technically speaking it was the truth; he’d just failed to mention that he wasn’t actually looking out for non-humans.

“Did you guys hear about that killing spree at that church near San Francisco?” The female hunter’s
question riveted the attention of the half dozen people in the room. Sam’s eyes flicked around trying to find the comforting familiarity of Bobby or Dean, but neither of them were in the living room. He shifted on the couch and tried to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. “Frankie’s ex-partner says that there were a couple demons there. Killed a bunch of people before ditching, including a hunter.”

“I’m not surprised. There’ve been so many hits for demonic omens—last month there were six separate omens across the midwest.”

“What do demonic omens look like?” Sam asked quietly, interest piqued sufficiently to allow the risk of interacting.

“Dead cattle, crops failing,” the senior-most hunter explained. “Even the crickets don’t chirp at night. It’s just this damned quiet.”

Sam noticed that all of the omens were measured against a more rural setting. The Bay Area where he lived was a sprawling mix of urban and suburban neighborhoods. These hunters didn’t have the tools necessary to hunt in a metropolitan area. It was both comforting, but also begged the question of what urban hunters looked for.

“Demons have to be summoned and are under the control of the witches who captured it,” another hunter added in an attempt to show off his knowledge.

It took a little effort for Sam to not react to the gross mischaracterization of demons. Zoya wasn’t bound to any witches, except through the employment contract that he’d drafted. She was an independent contractor operating on commission. Not to mention that Furcifer didn’t seem to listen to anyone. He was fairly sure that none of these hunters even knew that there were different species of demons.

“What kills a demon?” the female hunter asked. “Salt and burn?”

“Demons aren’t like ghosts,” replied the hunter who was trying to show off. Sam silently noted how incorrect the statement was when it came to Infernals. “No, if you want to get rid of a demon you need to kill the witches controlling it.”

Sam’s stomach knotted at the mention of killing witches. He’d been lulled by the mild amusement of watching a group of hunters making wild guesses about demons that were pointing away from him. But the talk of killing witches struck too close to home and chilled him. Some part of him knew that there was a chance he’d hear something like that being discussed, but it was still hard to be confronted with the fact that everyone else in the room would happily kill his friends given the chance. If the hunters knew more about demons they might happily kill him too. Sam took a few deep breaths through his nostrils, trying to keep himself calm.

“Well that doesn’t sound too bad,” the female hunter commented.

“You’re saying witches are a cakewalk? They look human—Most of the time they even work in groups. Do you have any idea how long it takes to off a whole coven?”

“If you find a coven you should just call for support and hit ‘em from two or three sides,” she replied. “They never expect getting flanked.”

Sam was imagining the non-militaristic coven that had taught her that lesson. The ignorance in the room was devastating, both emotionally and in the lives it’d claimed in the interest of “good.” He needed to get out of there before he started sweating or showing his unease. With a false smile and
Apologetic nod, he got up and went into the study.

He spotted Dean talking with Jeda and two female hunters. To Sam’s relief his older brother was holding a bottle of beer instead of a stronger beverage. Sam considered joining them, but having both brothers in a single conversation would almost certainly invite reminiscing about their childhood and dad. That was one of the last things he wanted to do, though bad memories didn’t need to be vocalized to reopen old wounds.

Sam could almost see Dean’s discomfort. When one of the women asked Dean a question, his eyes evaded her while he offered a brief answer. Dean compulsively adjusted his shirt so that there wasn’t any gap between his shirt and pants, where exposed skin might be visible. It was the sort of thing almost anyone else would overlook, but the familiar gesture always made Sam feel sick.

Sam had been about eight years old, so Dean must’ve been twelve. After hearing the gruesome facts of a case, he had been scared to go shadow his dad and Dean on the hunt. Intent on getting moving, their dad had grabbed his youngest’s arm and started dragging him across the motel room floor. Sam had begun crying from the rug burn and the pain from having his wrist yanked. Dean had shoved their dad, yelling that Sam didn’t need to go.

Their dad had let go of Sam, who’d scrambled across the floor to hide behind one of the beds. He saw Dean get knocked into the wall and their dad take off his belt. He was too scared to move. He’d tried to think of where he could find a weapon, but he couldn’t think through the sound of his brother being whipped. When it was done, Dean had refused to talk to Sam for almost two weeks. The beating had broken the skin repeatedly and there were scars there to that day. Dean liked to tell people it was from a draug hunt.

Sam was shaken from the memory by the sound of Dean laughing at one of the female hunter’s stories—it was his fake laugh. Sam suspected that Dean was hating the entire wake almost as much as he was. Beyond propriety, Sam couldn’t think of a single positive thing about sharing stories of their lives and father. As far as Sam could tell, the only good memories they had were when he was off on one of his benders and had left them at Bobby’s, or when he’d simply passed out sufficiently to give them half a day without having to walk on eggshells.

Time felt like it was moving painfully slowly. Everyone else appeared to be having a pleasant enough evening considering they’d all been brought together by a man having his throat slit. Small groups formed, shared stories, then dispersed in order to reform with new assortments. Sam tried to stay close to either Bobby or Dean, but it wasn’t always doable nor was it an absolute source of comfort. He may have been sympathetic to prey and Bobby and Dean may have cared about him, but that didn’t change the fact that Bobby and Dean were both veteran hunters with lots of stories of their own.

The constant barrage of everything hunter was wearing him down. He would’ve killed for some weed to take the edge off… well, not actually killed. The jury was still out on whether anyone else in the room would’ve been willing to endure such an overwhelming discomfort in order to avoid violence. Based on the snippets of stories floating around the lower floor he highly doubted it. That realization made his heart pound a bit faster. He pretended to push his hair out of his face in order to feel if there was any visible sweat on his brow.

A middle aged hunter was in the middle of explaining why he thought hunters needed to increase recruitment efforts when Sam’s phone buzzed. He made sure the phone was positioned so that no one else could see it, then checked the text. It was a selfie taken by Stacy while being fucked from behind by Brady. He could feel himself blush, then hastily excused himself and hurried to the
upstairs bathroom with the lock on the door for some privacy to look that the full message.

“Wish you were here,” read the text.

He pursed his lips and put the phone back into his pocket. His hand moved toward the door, but the rest of him didn’t follow. He was alone, in a moment of quiet if not peace. Sam pulled the phone back out of his pocket and looked at the photo some more. After rechecking the lock, he propped the phone up on the sink and started trying to masturbate.

It was completely awkward, standing fully clothed in a dingy little bathroom while he could hear his dad’s wake downstairs, but he didn’t really care. At that point he needed whatever he could get to help him relax. He stared at the photo as he stroked himself. Both Brady and Stacy were glistening with sweat from having been at it for awhile. Stacy’s hair was wild, her cheeks flush, mouth probably letting out a little moan. Brady’s abs were visible, tensed as he was thrusting, maybe about ready to cum. God he would've given anything to have had Brady inside him right then.

Sam came into a handful of toilet paper, then flushed it and washed his hands. He stared at his reflection in the mirror. The release had soothed his nerves a bit, but he’d underestimated the emotions and memories it would stir in him. He’d masturbated to the thought of men for as long as he could remember, and when he was younger it had carried so much shame and fear.

When he was fifteen he’d been doing homework in their motel room while Dean packed salt shells and their dad watched TV. Three weeks earlier he’d snuck off to a gay bar for the first time. He’d met a cute guy and made out a bit, but nothing serious. For almost a week he’d been working up the courage to try oral at the next opportunity. It was a big step, but exploring that side of himself felt right. He was finally starting to understand where he fit in the world. There were other people like him. It was okay.

The television had switched over to breaking news, drawing all their attention. A young gay man had been found tortured and murdered in rural Wyoming. Sam had felt numb. They were only a few hours’ drive from where the attack had happened. On some level he’d known that there were risks involved with being out. That was one of the main reasons he hadn’t told anyone about his late night trips when they were in large enough cities. But seeing the news report had made it more real.

“Serves him right,” their dad had muttered while changing the channel. “The cock-sucking perv probably did something.”

Dean had lost a little color, but he didn’t say anything. At the time Sam had assumed that Dean’s reaction was a criticism of homosexuals, imagining whatever perverse acts their dad had implied. In hindsight, he’d probably been imagining what those statements had meant to Sam— or worse, imagining scenarios where that sort of hateful violence was inflicted on his little brother.

Standing in Bobby’s bathroom, Sam looked at himself in the mirror, then checked for the thousandth time to make sure the weeks’ old punch from his dad wasn’t visible. For a moment he found himself falling into old habits. He was looking at himself and wondering if there was anything about his appearance that might suggest that he liked men. Rationally it didn’t make sense, but when he was younger he’d anxiously look at his gentle features and worry that someone might think he was effeminate. After living on his own he’d gotten over that insecurity—so much so that he’d sincerely been okay with Stacy putting makeup on him—but being back at Bobby’s house, he was suddenly aware of his shoulder length hair, groomed eyebrows, and soft skin.

Yet his dad hadn’t known about the men until Brady had shown up essentially naked. He’d managed to hide his preferences and his one-night stands for years. Now he was an adult. It was no one else’s business what he did in his personal life. No one needed to know he liked men unless he
wanted to share that information. He was safe.

When Sam got back downstairs he spotted Dean talking to the female hunter with the ornate scarring on her back. Jeda had wandered off somewhere, possibly to another room in search of a refill on her beverage or maybe to visit the ashen remains of the pyre for a customary moment of silence... though nine times out of ten the tribute was undermined by the mourner being too intoxicated to shut up and hold still for ten seconds. He paused for a moment to watch Dean and the other female hunter, curious if, with Jeda gone, Dean would try to hit on the woman who by traditional hunter standards was the most attractive woman in the room.

“I haven’t seen your brother around much,” the female hunter told Dean. “I almost thought he was an urban legend.”

“He’s got his own thing going on,” Dean evaded.

“How long is he gonna be in town?”

Sam couldn’t see their faces, but she asked the question with a flirtatious lightness in her voice.

“He’s got a boyfriend. Don’t even bother,” Dean replied with a shrug and sip of his beer.

“Oh.” Her shoulders slumped a bit, visibly deflating at the discovery. “He’s…. Okay.”

Sam could barely process what had happened let alone think of how to react. Dean was talking candidly about him liking men, in the middle of a bunch of hunters. Maybe hunters weren’t necessarily as bigoted as their dad had been, but there was a certain amount of comorbidity between gun-toting conservatives and gun-toting hunters. He didn’t actually expect to get shot at his own dad’s wake, though whatever minimal sense of safety that he’d had just a few minutes earlier had started crumbling away.

As soon as the woman left Dean’s side in search of other prey, Sam hurried over and grabbed his brother’s arm. He quickly led Dean down the hall into Bobby’s first-floor bedroom. Once they were inside, Sam closed the door, then threw his hands up in the air. He didn’t even have words and instead waited for Dean to explain himself, but the elder Winchester just looked confused.

“Don’t fucking out me,” Sam eventually managed in an intense voice that didn’t rise to the level of shouting.

“Are you looking to get laid?” Dean raised an eyebrow. “Because I could explain to her—“

“No—stop! You aren’t helping. You aren’t fucking helping.” He didn’t like the idea of his brother trying to broker a hunter hook-up for him. “Just don’t go around telling people I like men.”

“But you do—“

“It doesn’t matter if I do or not, I don’t want the whole fucking community to know it.”

“What does it matter now? It’s not like Dad is gonna give you shit,” Dean countered. “You shouldn’t have to be in the closet.”

“Don’t pretend to be so fucking naïve—Anyway, it’s not your thing to share.” Sam struggled not to raise his voice. He was pissed off by Dean’s overstep, but he’d apparently done it with the intention of letting Sam be himself to some extent. “Listen, I don’t know how many of these hunters are gonna be bigots.”
“Just because they’re hunters doesn’t mean they’re gonna lynch you,” Dean replied, showing his own mild annoyance at Sam’s overgeneralization. “If they’re assholes they’ll leave or I’ll break their faces. It’s not like you’re planning on being around here long enough for them to cause you any real trouble.”

“I don’t want any trouble. I especially don’t want hunter trouble. I just want them to hear the same boring story about me burning my first bones, then I want them to decide there’s nothing interesting about John’s other son, okay?” Sam gestured back towards the living room. “Go tell them all about how you killed a trow with your bare hands or soloed a vampire nest. Go tell them all your fucking amazing stories and leave me out of it.”

Dean stood there studying him for a moment. The way he almost imperceptibly furrowed his brow, it looked like he wanted to correct Sam—not argue or fight. There was too much unspoken pity hanging in the air for hostility to actually break out. Sam rubbed his face, knowing perfectly well that he’d brought up a lifelong point of tension between them. Outwardly, Dean had always been the golden child and Sam had been more of a footnote. Personally, Sam had never wanted to do what it took to earn the praise that Dean had acquired, but on some level it still hurt.

“I’ll try not to say anything that they’ll latch onto, but I don’t want you giving me shit if I can’t keep everyone here off of you,” Dean warned. “You know, for all that education you’re still an idiot.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re the most interesting person here,” Dean stated as he started walking back towards the hall. “The question is are any of them smart enough to notice.”

Sam felt like all the women at the wake were sneaking peeks at him, but their glances lacked the subtle pouts and fluttering of eyelashes that normally baited men from across the room. He was definitely no longer at risk of accidentally knocking up any of the female hunters. Despite it being clear to him that all the women in the room thought he was gay, there was no good way of telling if the gossip had spread to the male hunters. He tried to make his way back to the safety of the couch but was intercepted by a man he hadn’t seen earlier in the evening. The hunter was nearly middle aged with a long scar running diagonally through his short reddish-brown beard.

“Name’s Phil.” He offered his hand to Sam, then shook with a little too much vigor. “I ran a few long hunts with your dad last year.”

Long hunts were normally multi-week affairs that involved tracking one or more targets across state lines. It was common practice for hunters to call in backup if the species of the prey tended to cover that much ground. Hunters would often carpool or caravan, sometimes splitting up and moving in formation to herd a target into a laid trap. Those types of maneuvers were only ever attempted by experienced hunters who worked well with others. In fact there were some hunters that specialized in long hunts.

“Nice to meet you,” Sam offered while trying to position himself so that he could continue moving towards the couch.

“John made it to a good age for a hunter,” Phil commented before he could slip away. It was true that his dad had survived over a decade past the average life expectancy for a hunter, but that didn’t make Sam feel any better about the situation. “How old are you?”

“I’m almost twenty-four.”
He couldn’t tell which prospect he disliked more, that he’d be told he was just a kid or that he’d be expected to only have another ten or twenty years of life left in him. Of course, the fact of the matter was that it might be considerably less for reasons completely unrelated to hunting, but that didn’t lessen the potential sting of the comment. He hated that hunters just assumed that they would die young—that their families would die young—just because that was the way it’d always been.

“You’ve still got some years ahead of you.” The hunter patted his shoulder in a wholly unwelcome gesture. Sam inched away, breaking contact as a thoughtful look came over Phil's face. “Twenty-four…. I guess your mom must've died when you were real young, just a baby—”

“Hey, Sam,” Dean called from across the room, then hurried over to them. “Bobby needs your help moving something in the basement.”

Sam happily left Phil in order to go down to the basement looking for Bobby, but he didn’t see the old hunter there. He thought about heading back up to the gathering when he realized that he could drag his feet a bit and buy himself an extra few minutes of peaceful isolation. When he was just starting to convince himself to go back upstairs he saw Dean close the basement door and come down. Dean rushed over to him, then spoke in a low, deathly serious voice.

“Be careful around Phil,” Dean warned.

“Why?”

“He’s one of Gordon Walker’s buddies,” Dean explained. “I didn’t know he was coming.”

“Walker—is he one of the guys looking for the Ana—powers people? You don’t think he’s scoping me out, do you?” Sam’s pulse started rising again. “I’ve only been talking to him for like a minute.”

“I don’t know if he’s suspicious or anything,” Dean replied. “Calm down. Just don’t go anywhere alone with him. I’ll try to deal with him—”

“Deal with him?” Sam grabbed Dean’s sleeve to ensure that for at least those few seconds Dean wasn’t murdering anyone. “You can’t kill anyone at Dad's wake. That’s gonna attract so much attention.”

“I'll try to find out what he knows,” Dean suggested as an alternative to exclusively violence.

“He might not even be thinking about that stuff.”

“I won’t tip my hand,” Dean assured Sam, then pointed at him. “But he might be thinking about that stuff, so watch your ass.”

When Sam went back up to the party he opted to go into the active room that was farthest away from Phil. He tried to hide among a group, but there was only so much that he could do as a 6’5” man standing in a sparsely-filled study. After several minutes Phil peeked into the room, then moved to stand next to Sam. For a moment Sam thought about giving some feeble excuse and fleeing, but at a certain point that sort of behavior was its own giveaway. A little small talk might be just the thing to convince Phil he wasn’t worth investigating.

“So I heard you haven’t been on any hunts lately. Where have you been hiding out?” Phil offered as an ominous opening.

“Nowhere special. It’s all pretty boring,” Sam evaded, then redirected the conversation away from himself. “What sorts of hunts have you been up to?”
“Running down some leads for a friend,” Phil replied. “Lieutenants of some big bad.”

“A big bad? That sounds exciting.”

“Yeah, a demon.” Phil took a half step toward Sam, but his hands were safely away from any possible hiding places for concealed weapons. “You know much about demons?”

“No.” Sam shook his head. He thought about leaving it at that, but a follow-up question seemed called for with such a meaty hunter topic—anyway, maybe he could get a better idea of what Gordon was looking for. “Demons are pretty intense. What do they even look like?”

“Well, they possess people or do things to them. They’re like ghosts ’cause they can’t cross salt or iron. Both those and holy water hurt them.”

Sam feigned ignorance and academic curiosity. “How about silver?”

“Silver’s no good,” Phil explained. “Gordon says there’s a type of blade that works on them, but it’s some foreign make. I’m not sure what it was called. But you can trap them. I know that for sure.”

Sam wanted to ask if he’d trapped any of the big bad’s lieutenants, but he didn’t want to sound overly focused on the prisoners. These lieutenants could’ve been demons in league with the one that had stolen his soul or they could’ve been the Anathema from his vision—people like him. If some of the other Anathema had been captured by hunters he wanted to help them, but for all he knew they were already dead and investigating would just expose him.

“Good to know—”

“There’s a catch though,” Phil continued, apparently enjoying having an audience. “They can do things, all sorts of freaky things. One had telekinesis, kept messing up our traps. I heard another was a… when you control electronics?”

“A technomancer?” Sam exhaled. It hadn’t occurred to him that the Anathema could have such broad-ranging powers. He’d never heard of a real-life technomancer, but it was possible that the hunters had misinterpreted what was actually happening with their prey’s powers.

“Like I was saying, freaks.” Phil shrugged, then sipped his bourbon.

“So you trap them?” Sam pressed a bit more since Phil seemed happy to talk about it.

“If we can. Gordon likes to keep them on lockdown for awhile. He tries to work them over to try to get some intel out of them before he finishes them.”

Sam felt faint. Unusual powers definitely sounded like Anathema. And they weren’t just being hunted by Gordon Walker’s group, they were being captured and tortured. But unlike him, the others probably didn’t know what was happening to them. He only had a partial grasp and that was because he’d grown up with the flip side.

“Something wrong?” Phil asked him warily.

Sam tried to act like he wasn’t mortified, but it seemed that some of his distress had already slipped through in his body language. “Just thinking about how much of a pain in the ass it’d be to hide that kind of place.”

He hoped the excuse would also act as an invitation for Phil to start going on about the holding facility and possibly even its security. Unfortunately, the hunter didn’t seem entirely soothed by the
Phil nodded at Sam’s point, but continued to stare at him with a more critical eye. Sam reconsidered the tactic of offering a feeble goodbye and fleeing, but he opted to take a more discreet exit via introducing a less-worrying topic.

“So you met my dad doing a long hunt?” Unfortunately, as soon as he’d gotten the question out he realized how unnatural the redirection had come off.

“We’d actually met at the Roadhouse a few years back,” Phil explained, though he continued to eye Sam. “He kicked my ass at cards. I didn’t have enough to cover it by the end, so he let me pay the debt with an assist. Turns out it was a stroke of luck because we ended up working a good number of cases after that.” Phil cocked his head, never taking his eyes from Sam’s. “Have you ever worked a long hunt?”

“Not really. When I was a teenager I was brought on a few interstate hunts, but they weren’t anything like the real deal,” Sam replied.

“You want to know the secret to long hunts?” Phil’s tone had just enough of an edge to it that Sam got the distinct impression that he was being baited, but he didn’t dare blow the farce by not playing along.

“Sure.”

“Vigilance. You spend so long, meeting so many new people in so many new places. The key is that you never let your guard down. You never stop looking until you find those little, subtle clues—that gut feeling that tells you something is off. When you catch that feeling, then all you need to do is follow it ’til the time is right.” Phil stared at Sam for a painfully long moment with an appraiser’s eyes. “You know that feeling? When something’s not quite right?”

“Yeah,” Sam replied, trying to hide his concern at being tested like that. “It comes in handy for hunters like us.”

Phil’s posture relaxed subtly at Sam describing himself as a hunter like him. There was something disarming about finding common ground, but any decent hunter would know that trick well enough to identify it after even a small amount of scrutiny.

Sam felt a small measure of relief when he spotted Dean in the distance over Phil’s shoulder. His brother was walking by the doorway and briefly made eye contact with him. Sam nodded to his brother, pretending to react to something out of Phil’s view, but in actuality signaling Dean to stop for a moment.

“Sorry, but Dean’s flagging me down again,” Sam excused himself, then added as a final attempt to quiet Phil’s suspicions, “I’ll find you later and tell you about the time my dad and I tracked a shade across two counties during a new moon.”

Sam patted Phil’s arm as he moved by him in what he hoped was a disarming gesture, then walked over to Dean. Thankfully, Dean caught onto the fact that Sam was looking for an escape and immediately started ushering Sam out of the room while spouting a bullshit line about needing him to corroborate some story. When they found a room that offered them privacy, Dean looked at him with a knowing and unamused expression.

“You aren’t talking to Phil anymore,” Dean dictated. “I will babysit him and I’m not fucking happy about this.”

“Thank you,” Sam replied, then jumped into the secondary objective. “He said that Gordon is
“Okay.”

Sam waited for a second to see if Dean was going to have a follow up question, but his brother didn’t take the opening.

“Okay. That’s it?”

“I’ll try to play nice and find out how they’re finding you guys,” Dean conceded, “but I don’t know what else you expect me to do.”

“Try to find out what happened to the others.”

“Look, I know you have these ideas of how to do things, but I can’t go trying to save these people while I’m still getting information out of their captors.” Dean crossed his arms in front of his chest. “I don’t care how much you do the puppy eyes. I’m not burning a bridge with some kind of rescue mission. If I can get that information out of them while I’m killing the whole gang, then I’ll go pick them up, but don’t start getting on my ass about one of your stupid suicide missions.”

“They’re innocent people.”

“You don’t know that,” Dean countered. “You like to think they’re innocent because you like to pretend you’re innocent, but you haven’t met them. I saw one of them brainwash a woman into lighting herself on fire. Another was electrocuting people for kicks. Don’t act like they’re all angels.”

“Maybe some of them are off,” Sam acknowledged. “Finding out that you have powers if you don’t know the things we know—“

“It’s dangerous. They’re dangerous. There’s no ‘if’ about it.”

“I’m one of them—“

“And you’re dangerous too. Don’t act like you aren’t.” Dean’s voice was so matter-of-fact that Sam could tell it wasn’t meant as an insult. “The difference is that we both know you don’t like killing. You’ll do it if you have to. Who knows if all the other powers kids feel the same way? But as far as everyone else is concerned, you’re just another one of them.”

Sam considered the apparent association between the Anathema and violence. Whether that perception was accurate remained to be seen, but he had to admit that he’d have a hell of a time convincing people who knew he was a trained killer that he didn’t fit into their theory of Anathema being dangerous.

“I’ve got to believe that some of them are good people,” Sam said quietly.

“Believe whatever the fuck you want, but don’t go getting yourself killed over some bullshit thing like what’s right.”

The agonizing night stretched on into the early hours of the morning with no sign of winding down. Dean was true to his word and spent his time distracting Phil with thrilling tales and a hopefully-incapacitating amount of booze. Sam checked his watch a few times debating when it might be appropriate for him to retreat to his room and go to sleep. He felt like shit. The weight of everything
was really adding up. Whatever amount of stress-reduction he’d gotten from making amends with Dean and jerking off had been drowned out over several hours of legitimate fears compounded by his anxiety disorders and years of emotional trauma. Too many old memories were being brought to the surface, and everyone around him didn’t understand what it was doing to him.

“Remember when John took down that whole pack of werewolves during the summer of 95?” an intoxicated hunter said loudly while raising his glass in a toast to the dead.

“I heard about that one,” answered another woman in the room. “There were five fucking werewolves—five. He got them all on one full moon.”

Sam sat in his chair, staring straight ahead, trying not to think about that hunt. He'd barely turned twelve. Dean and his dad had gone into the farmhouse where the werewolves had been staying, leaving him to cover the back door in case there was a runner. He’d stood there in the deathly moonlight with a shotgun loaded with silver shot shells, straining his ears for any insight. He was trying to focus on the sound of someone sneaking up on him, but the crash of fighting inside was too distracting. He took a few steps closer, trying to tell if Dean and his dad were alright, when a werewolf charged him from the side.

He’d turned toward her, but couldn’t get the shot off in time. Her knee had connected with his torso, knocking him backwards into a raised brick planting bed, breaking three of his ribs. Sam had pointed his sawed-off at the werewolf—the teenage girl—standing in front of him, but hesitated a second too long. She’d already turned and started running for the edge of the corn field.

She didn’t make it. Just a few yards short of her escape, his dad had emerged from the house and shot her in the back with a silver bullet.

For the entire drive back to the motel he’d endured a largely-shouted scolding for letting his guard down. To teach him a lesson, his dad had refused to give him any painkillers for his broken ribs during the first day. After the adrenaline had left Sam’s system the stabbing pain in his side became unbearable. Even just moving made the pain worse, but his dad didn’t give him a pass on his chores and training just because he was hurt. Dean had watched him with a steeled concern, unprepared to risk intervening. In spite of barked instructions to keep up, the energy-draining pain had slowed the three of them down enough that Sam was eventually allowed to take something. He'd nearly passed out in the back seat of the Impala from the physical relief the medication had given him.

Sam got up from his chair near the reminiscing hunters and made his way over to Bobby’s makeshift bar. He stared at the collection of bottles filled with high-proof liquids. His hand settled on the neck of a bottle of whiskey. After taking a moment to reconsider, he grabbed a bottle of low-ABV beer and started drinking it. It wouldn’t do much to get him drunk, but it was at least something other than hard alcohol to keep his hands busy.

He moved through the party catching random sentences here and there. The casual way everyone was talking about murdering people…. Well, he supposed they probably thought most of the things they hunted weren’t people. There was something about categorizing someone as prey that took away the moral turpitude. As of that moment everyone around him seemed to treat him warmly, but if they knew that he was part demon or was friends with a coven, he suspected that nearly everyone would’ve gladly taken a shot at him.

As he looked around the living room, he noticed a sharp pain suddenly growing behind his eyes. The onset was too fast for it to be a migraine. He was going to get a vision. His body was already trembling slightly from the crippling pain and fear. He tried to set his beer bottle down on a bookcase shelf but accidentally dropped it on the floor, turning several heads. Rather than trying to pick the bottle up he covered his face with his hand in case his nose started bleeding.
He staggered past a couple who were talking in the hallway. The man grabbed Sam’s arm to help stabilize him, but being restrained, even minorly, made his anxiety attack worse. He pulled away and stumbled, hitting the wall. The looks of surprise, maybe even suspicion, on the hunters’ faces made his heart hammer even harder. He hurried up the staircase, gripping the banister to stop himself from falling.

Sam needed to get to his bedroom where he could lie down. He grabbed some tissues from his pocket and held them to his nose. Everything was getting too bright. It was happening. He was too dizzy to reach the bed but managed to at least get seated on the bedroom floor so that he wouldn’t be injured if he passed out. The vision overtook him.

There was a town straight out of a cowboy movie. In the town center was a large metal bell with an oak tree on it. The place looked like an abandoned ghost town, but there were a few people about the same age as him wearing modern clothes. They were trying to figure out how they’d gotten there. A woman explained that she’d been taken from her bed while she slept. One of the men was wearing camouflage and said that he’d just been in the Middle East. The group was trying to piece together what was happening when an acheri attacked them. One of the women’s hands caught fire, then she shot flames at the childlike demon, but the fire didn’t seem to hurt the monster or even slow her down. None of the people—the victims—knew what they were dealing with. The acheri cut through two of them before the vision ended in another flash of light.

Sam pressed his face against his knees trying to get the new images of shredded bodies out of his head. It was taking all his energy to keep it together. His clothes smelled like charred flesh. Raucous laughter and boastful voices from the party drifted through the floorboards with anecdotes of slaughtering witches. He wanted to hide—to escape. He thought he might pass out. With a small wave of disorientation he fell over sideways, but he didn’t hit the floor.

Instead of crashing through the living room ceiling, he tumbled past the seemingly incorporeal barrier. Light and gravity shifted around him suddenly. Before he could really get his bearings he landed hard on his back. His head connected with the ground, knocking him out.

Sam woke up sometime later. He was lying on his back on the floor on Bobby’s living room, though things weren’t how they’d been earlier. It was still nighttime, but the lights were off and he couldn’t hear anyone talking. The room was empty, untouched. There hadn’t been a funeral. Sam covered his eyes with his hands. He’d slipped through an interplanar hole, one of those shadow gates. It was just his luck that he’d managed to find one while surrounded by hunters. He looked around the room expecting to see a witch or a demon lurking about. Someone had to have made the damn thing—

Sam froze. He’d wanted to hide or escape. He’d made the damn thing.

Creating an interplanar portal was supposed to be hard, but he’d just made one accidentally. He propped himself up in a sitting position and looked at his hands. His powers were getting stronger for some reason. It would’ve been different if his increasing powers were limited to inconspicuous abilities like psychic visions, but he’d just used a power to act upon the very fabric of reality. That was a whole other level of visibility and he didn’t know how to control it. If he’d fallen through the planes in a room full of hunters he would’ve either had to come up with some brilliant explanation or he would’ve been a marked man.

Sam glanced up at the ceiling. There was an open interplanar hole in one of Bobby’s bedroom. He had to get back there and figure out how to close the fucking thing before someone fell through by accident.
He gingerly stood up, but the blow to the back of his head was making him woozy. His fingers probed his scalp experimentally and found a large bump, but thankfully no blood. His face was a different story. Blood trickled from his nose and one of his tear ducts.

He stretched upward, trying to reach the shadow gate, but couldn’t quite touch the ceiling where it was located. When he tried jumping to grab it the sudden motion made him fall to his knees with nauseating dizziness. He’d need to stand on some furniture.

While weakly shoving a desk across the room he noticed some differences between the place he was in currently and his Bobby’s house. There was an oil painting of a field of sunflowers hanging over the fireplace. It was too pleasant to belong in Bobby’s house. The old hunter’s house had always been little more than a base of operations ever since Bobby had lost his wife and begun his new, less-wholesome life.

Sam’s eyes swept the area looking for any weapons or other telltale signs of hunters and he nearly missed the other piece of artwork. He stopped shoving the desk and walked into the kitchen. There was a young child’s drawing on the fridge. It looked like a family portrait of an adult and two kids. Sam smiled sadly as he recognized the vague shape of a dark blue baseball hat on the adult. It wasn’t clear what the story was, but this was some more quaint iteration of the world. He took the drawing from the fridge, folded it up and put it in his pocket.

He considered going upstairs to explore this version of Bobby’s house, untouched by violence, but decided against it. This place wasn’t real. There wasn’t anyone there. As unpleasant as Earth might be, especially in that moment at Bobby’s house, that’s where his family was. He didn’t want to think about what Dean would do if he discovered Sam missing. Never mind the shit show that would occur if the gate was discovered. Sam turned away from the quaint setting, climbed on top of the desk, then hoisted himself through the interplanar hole.

He managed to control his tumble as he emerged from the gate, appearing on his hands and knees on the floor in the upstairs bedroom. The second trip had drained his already scarce supply of energy. It was taking all his strength to hold himself up. Blood fell from his face onto the rough hardwood floor. He thought he might pass out again from the throbbing in his head that was almost drowning out the sounds from the wake. At least everyone was still distracted. He sighed, then looked up to see Bobby standing in the doorway staring right at him.

“I’m sorry, it was an accident.” Sam tried to raise his hands defensively.

“What the hell is going on?”

Sam glanced down at the floor, imagining the dozen or more hunters between him and the exit. He could try to slip back through the shadow gate, but he was exhausted and another trip might be too much. The fatigue had made him raw and the fear of explaining himself was overwhelming. He was beyond tired or scared. Tears started rolling down his cheeks and he didn’t know what to do.

“Please don’t tell them I’m like this.” Sam tried to get up, but stumbled back onto his knees. Blood dripped from his face and he let himself collapse to the floor. He was too weak to do anything else. “Please don’t kill me.”

Sam woke up in one of the beds. His hoodie and shoes had been taken off. A rolled-up towel had been placed around his head in order to stabilize it. He slowly glanced over at Bobby, who was seated on a stool next to the bed. They both looked at each other, unsure which one would break the silence.
“You scared the hell out of me,” Bobby started. “You passed out and were bleeding from your nose and eyes. I got Dean. He told me about how you have some kind of neurological problem—did some hand waving, so I’m not sure what he meant.”

“It’s kinda complicated.” Sam reached up and began checking his face for dried blood. Someone had cleaned him up after he’d passed out.

“Never heard of brain tumors causing teleportation.”

Sam felt like his stomach had dropped a few inches. Bobby really had seen him… yet he was being surprisingly calm about it. He didn’t assume that Bobby wasn’t wary of the whole situation, but he was at least giving Sam the ability to defend himself.

“Did you tell him?” Sam asked.

“I don’t even know what I saw, how am I supposed to explain it?” Bobby tilted his head to one side and crossed his arms. “So are you gonna tell me what’s going on with you?”

“It turns out I’m… I’m not entirely human,” Sam confessed, then added, “I just found out about it, but I think I’ve been like this for a long time.”

“What’s the part that isn’t human?” Bobby asked cautiously, eyebrow raised.

“I think… well, it’s….” Sam chewed his lip anxiously. “…Demon.”

Bobby stared at him for a long while. Sam could feel the old hunter weighing his options, debating how to take the news. It was asking a lot of him; demons were notoriously high up in the hierarchy of monsters—not prey. In general hunters feared demons enough that they weren’t categorized so dismissively. And there he was hoping that Bobby would be able to overlook that bombshell.

“Something changed me—did this to me,” Sam continued, despite the tightness in his throat. “I didn’t do anything. I swear, I didn’t ask to be like this.”

“Does your brother know?” Bobby’s voice was a bit too quiet and cautious—well, understandably quiet and cautious.

“Not about the demon thing,” Sam admitted. “He knows I have powers.”

“Like teleporting?”

“I didn’t know I could do that—and it's not teleporting, I can just go somewhere else. It's kinda hard to explain, but I’ll try later when my head isn’t killing me.” Sam was too weak to start explaining about the other planes right then. “Dean knows that I have visions, like psychic visions.”

“You're a psychic?”

“I'm not very good at it,” Sam sighed. “I can’t control it or anything.”

“So you can see visions, but not very well. And you can go someplace else, but it’s not teleporting?” Bobby said, trying to wrap his head around the development. “Is there anything else you can do?”

“Not that I know of,” Sam offered. “That was the first time I went somewhere else—with my powers. So that’s new.”

The old hunter nodded at the explanation, then thought for a long while.
“I need you to be straight with me,” Bobby said. “You know me—I'm pretty sure you do. Are we gonna have a problem? Because I'm too damned tired for this to turn into a fight if it doesn't have to.”

A fragile smile slowly spread across Sam's face. He huffed a small laugh as a few tears rolled down his cheeks.

“Thank you,” Sam whispered, then glanced at the door. “Is everyone accounted for down there?”

“Yeah,” Bobby replied a little confused before remembering the implications of Sam being part demon. “Nobody's come up here except for me. Dean and I will keep them away from you. Just get some rest. You look like you just got out of a brawl with a bag of hammers.”

Bobby stood up to leave, but Sam called out stopping him.

“Hey, Bobby.” Sam's voice wavered slightly. “Next time, can I skip drinking the holy water?”

After Bobby had returned downstairs, Sam reached out toward the unseen gate between planes. He could feel its presence, lingering as an invisible hazard in the corner of the room. He held his hand out, hoping to give him some help focusing his will, then tried to close it. His headache intensified and he could feel warm, fresh blood dripping from him. Just when he thought he might pass out again the sensation of the gate flickered away. His arm fell limp off the edge of the bed and he was unconscious before he could wipe away the blood on his face.

Occasionally he was awoken by random noises that triggered his self-preservation instincts, but he quickly fell back asleep each time after realizing it was nothing. Later in the night he awoke to find Dean standing next to the bed checking on him.

“You look like shit,” Dean told him. “Is this what you look like when you use your powers? Because if so you got fucked on the deal.”

“Tell me about it,” Sam muttered. “Bobby knows.”

“Yeah, he told me that he’d put me in traction if I keep secrets about your safety again.” Dean shrugged. “We should’ve just canceled the wake when you showed up.”

“It’s tradition,” Sam countered. “I just shouldn’t have come. I knew there was a chance other hunters might be here.”

“Bobby and I might be dyed-in-the-wool hunters, but we’d rather have you here and safe than get 100% on all the rites,” Dean corrected. “You're an angsty pain in the ass and you probably aren’t worth anything in a fight nowadays, but you're family.”

“I’m not worthless in a fight,” Sam argued weakly.

“Hopefully you won’t have to prove it. I told everyone you drank too much. Bobby and I have been trying to clear out as many people as we can, but you know how these things go.” It was routine for hunter wakes to last until dawn—some combination of their love of drinking away feelings and a tradition of being on guard against vengeful spirits. Dean reached into his jacket pocket and gave Sam a handgun. “In case Phil or anyone else gives you trouble.”

“Thanks.”

Sam tucked the pistol under the blanket and watched Dean close the door behind himself as he left.
the bedroom. He listened to the faint murmur of the remaining few conversations downstairs as he started to nod off. When the doorknob jiggled, he slid his hand under the blanket, but it turned out to only be Bobby, who came in and sat down next to the bed.

“I did a little research. If you’re feeling up for it there’s a flight back home tomorrow morning. I could switch your tickets,” Bobby offered.

“Thank you.” Sam evaded Bobby’s eyes. “You’ve always been good to me.”

“You’re a good kid. You make it easy.”

Sam had to fight back the urge to cry. His dad had made it clear that it wasn’t easy being kind to him and Dean. Bobby didn’t have kids of his own, but he’d given the two of them the closest thing they’d ever gotten to a caring family. He’d given them a chance at a life about more than just violence and vengeance.

“I’ve got something for you.” Bobby pulled a little polished stone carving of Artemis standing with a stag out of his pocket. When Sam used to visit Bobby’s house as a kid he would play with it. He accepted the figurine and turned it over in his hands a few times. He’d nearly forgotten about it.

“I know this doesn’t really make any sense, but when I went somewhere else…. I think this belongs to you.” Sam pulled the folded up children’s drawing from his pocket and handed it to Bobby. Bobby unfolded the paper, then stared at the drawing for a long while.

“You get some rest,” Bobby finally commented, patting Sam’s shoulder before standing up.

“Bobby,” Sam said before the older hunter could leave the room. “It’s not the right time now, but when things quiet down, if I asked you to come out for a visit—”

“You know either of you boys just need to tell me where and when and I’ll be there.”

“Who ever said that a hunt had to be part of the deal?” Bobby replied, then turned off the light and shut the door.

Sam stared at the ceiling, thoroughly confused about everything that had happened in the last day. His dad was dead. He’d been emotionally dragged through the dirt. His powers seemed to now include opening shadow gates. Bobby had stepped up into a nurturing role that he hadn’t dared risk while their dad had been alive. And for the first time he could remember things with Dean weren’t terrible.

After the wake had died down, he was lying in the darkness, dragging his thumb over the smooth edges of the stone figurine, when he heard the door of a nearby room close loudly. Before he could convince himself to get up and check he could hear the unmistakable sound of the bed in Dean’s room squeaking. After a few minutes Jeda’s moaning became audible. Sam actually checked his watch several times waiting for them to finish. Maybe part of him wished that Dean would come to the Bay Area and stay with him, but there was something to be said for not having to share an apartment with his brother.
Both plane fights back to California were turbulent and exhausting. Sam kept nodding off in his seat only to be awoken by a sudden jerk. Each jostling motion made him worry that he’d accidentally punch an interplanar hole through the side of the aircraft. Knowing his luck the pressure differential would’ve sucked all of the contents of the airplane into an alternate reality, thousands of feet above the otherworldly ground…. After that thought he may have had two in-flight gin and tonics in order to help sedate himself.

Rationally he doubted that he was capable of opening another gate at that point. He was too damned fatigued. The act of opening and closing the shadow gate he’d made at Bobby’s had completely drained him of his strength and he’d barely started to recover. Bobby had forced multiple cups of black coffee on him prior to leaving for the airport. Dean had given him a distance respectful of something akin to a hangover, instead assuring Sam that they’d be in touch before retreating back to his room where Jeda had probably been hiding out. Beyond needing about 36 more hours of sleep and evidently looking awful, Sam just all around felt like shit.

Throughout the flights, he wriggled his toes, testing the amount of sensation. After taking his shoes off for the airport’s security checkpoint, there had been an unusual tingling in a few toes. At first he’d just hoped it was the result of stepping awkwardly or the cold airport floor, but the feeling hadn’t stopped. It reminded him of the numbness he’d had a while earlier, some sort of possible nerve damage. He’d being hoping that it was temporary, but it had come back, which was deeply worrying.

Sitting in the uncomfortable economy-class chair, Sam folded the airline napkin into an origami crane, then dropped it into the plastic airline cup. He watched its fragile paper form wither as it absorbed the slowly melting ice cubes.

He considered the new issues that had cropped up in his life during the last two days. There was a hunter that had been taken prisoner by the covens. Stacy was going to try to arrange an opening for him to see the hunter. He had no idea what he was supposed to do with that opportunity, but it seemed cowardly to just pretend that the situation wasn’t happening, that he wasn’t already involved.

For a bit of symmetry there was also the Anathema that Gordon Walker was holding. Dean was going to try to covertly find out more about Walker’s hunting methods, though Sam seriously doubted that his brother would volunteer any information that might lead to the captured Anathema. There were dangers associated with getting involved with that whole nightmare, but in a very real way he was already at risk of being found out. Whether Walker’s team knew it or not, he was somewhere on their list.

Sam stared at his boarding pass, made out in the name of Samuel Holden Campbell. He’d never much cared for the middle name of Henry and he’d quickly grown to hate the name Winchester. He hadn’t expected such an act of spite to be so beneficial in the long term. As far as he knew the whole hunting community inextricably associated him with his dad and the name Winchester. Even the Henry he’d been named after had been a Winchester. It was true that he’d kept two family names, but almost no one knew his long-deceased mom’s first name let alone her maiden name. As far as he
knew the name Campbell wasn’t remotely associated to him or his corner of the hunting community.

Some small selfish part of him considered how easy it’d be to change his name again and run away from the conflict—between the covens, the hunters, the flip side. But he’d never be able to outrun his literal demons, the demon who owned his soul or his illness…. He’d never be able to forgive himself if he abandoned Brady. If push came to shove he might be able to leave the rest of it behind, but Brady was too important.

Things were starting to get serious with Brady; there was no denying it at that point. Faced with the drama of dealing with their families, they’d grown even closer than before. It was different than their initial bond over a common alienation. Back when they’d first started dating their families had been in their pasts. Now both of them were struggling with those old wounds being reopened—the question was whether any good might come from the pain. At the very least, there was the juxtaposed profound comfort of being wanted in spite of everything else going wrong. That strange sense of being loved, belonging somewhere with someone, he didn’t want to lose that again even if it meant taking risks to stay together.

Sam had barely gotten the door to his dorm room open before Brady was hugging him. It hadn’t even occurred to him how much he’d needed to be embraced. He clung to him, burying his face in Brady’s shoulder. Reassuring fingers ran through his hair and soft lips caressed his earlobe in something between a kiss and a nibble.

“You’re home,” Brady whispered.

Sam had used the term “home” before, but it hadn’t ever carried the weight it did in that moment. He’d just spent almost twenty-four hours in what he’d historically always considered the closest thing to a home and it didn’t remotely compare to being back in his sparsely furnished dorm room with his boyfriend. Despite knowing the word for as long as he could remember, he was starting to get a better grasp on what home truly meant.

His throat was too tight with emotion for him to reply, so he just nodded.

“Are you okay?” Brady asked.

“Yes and no.” Sam didn’t let go of him. “Parts of it were awful, but I think…I think Dean and I are on better terms than before.”

“You know that if you ever need me to be with you, for support—I can deal with your family or anything. I just want to make sure you’re okay,” Brady offered.

“I’ll be okay. I promise.”

Brady leaned in and kissed him, delicately at first, but then more deeply. Sam hesitated for just a moment—he was emotionally exhausted and physically weakened from the entire incident with the shadow gate. But Brady was the embodiment of so much of what he needed.

Sam returned the passionate kiss. He didn’t miss a beat when Brady started taking off his shirt and even helped with undoing his belt.

In a slower, more delicate manner than usual, Brady pushed Sam down onto the bed, then started unwrapping a condom. Instead of using it himself, Brady gave it to Sam to put on, then went down on him. Sam gently gripped the back of Brady’s head and groaned. Brady started fingering him, getting him ready for more than just oral. After a few minutes, Brady slid up and kissed Sam once more before putting on a condom and pressing into him.
“Tell me you want me,” Sam said, desperate for every reminder that he was where he belonged.

“More than anything,” Brady panted between thrusts.

Sam could feel Brady getting harder, nearly ready to cum. He pushed back enthusiastically.

“I love you,” Brady moaned.

Sam had heard the words before, but in that moment he finally craved that love. His eyes rolled back as they came together.

For a moment before Brady’s even pulled out, they both just watched each, panting, glistening with sweat, and flush. Brady smiled down at Sam with a look of pure adoration, then kissed his neck one last time before getting up to grab two damp cloths from the kitchenette. He tossed one to Sam then dabbed at his forehead and neck as he cleaned himself off. His lips curled into a smile of pride as he watched Sam skip the towel, instead just lying on the bed, completely overcome by his post-sex fatigue.

Sam didn’t have the heart to break it to him that some of the wear was certainly related to the emotional nature of the last two days along with the whole interplanar travel thing. But he let Brady enjoy the thought that he’d so thoroughly ravaged him; to be fair, it had been quite good. As an extra level of much needed relief, Sam turned onto his side and began rolling a joint as soon as they’d cleaned up and were resettled in bed.

They lied there smoking together, arms and legs loosely intertwined. Sam took two hits while eyeing the used condoms in the trash can and his mind began to wander.

Dean hadn’t bothered with protection. It was arguably a risky move despite the vasectomy, but at least Dean had exercised some form of precaution. Of course, he and Brady didn’t use condoms with each other for their contraceptive properties. They hardly even used them for protection. On several occasions they’d had unprotected sex—granted that was before they’d split up, but it was hard to imagine that the devoted Brady might be concealing any recently acquired STDs. It was possible that the condoms were a physical manifestation of their reluctance to engage, or maybe just something to help with clean up. If Stacy hadn’t been involved, they might’ve very well gone back to having unprotected sex. With a woman in the mix it obviously changed the implications, whether she’d said she was on contraceptives or not. He considered the conversation that he’d had with Stacy regarding whether Brady wanted to have children someday and the fact that he didn’t know the answer.

“Do you want to have kids?” The question slipped out of Sam thanks to his tired, mildly-high mind.

“What?” Brady rolled over to stare at Sam. “You can’t be serious. We’re both way too busy—“

“Shit.” Sam mentally kicked himself for letting the thought be voiced so soon after Brady’s expression of love. “I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“Hey, wait—“

Sam could feel himself blushing. “Just forget it.”

“Don’t fucking put up that wall,” Brady warned, but his voice wasn’t angry. “You started this. We’re in a relationship; you’re supposed to be able to talk to me.”

“It isn’t personal.” Sam handed off the joint, then rubbed his face. “I’ve got issues—you know it’s hard for me sometimes to…”
“You’ve got a fucking therapist. I don’t know—” Brady’s tone turned slightly sarcastic. “—maybe you should try talking through some of your issues.”

“I’m trying. It just takes time.” Sam sighed. “This stuff doesn’t improve linearly. Sometimes… sometimes things are hard for me, but it isn’t you, okay?”

“Okay,” Brady acknowledged, then cautiously tried to hold him. Sam appreciated the attempt to respect boundaries, but the hesitation in the gesture also made him feel a little guilty. They’d been having a good thing until he’d overreacted to suddenly finding himself in the deep end of intimacy. Sam embraced Brady reassuringly.

“Like I said, I’m trying. It’s hard to unpack years of no one caring about me.” Sam’s stomach knotted a bit. “But you’re worth it, trying to fix myself.”

“It’s just… you’ve never said anything about kids before.” Brady was a sharp guy and Sam had just returned from his dad’s funeral. Brady was probably already piecing some approximation of the situation together, but he wanted to hear it from Sam. “Where’s this coming from?”

“I wasn’t talking about now—or anytime soon. I just meant in general. We’ve never really talked about it.” Sam suspected that he’d turned red from embarrassment. “Dean told me that he got a vasectomy. It just got me thinking about… things.”

For the few minutes at Bobby’s he’d been worried about the possibility of becoming guardian of a hypothetical niece or nephew. In his panic his anxiety-fueled mind had begun trying to process caring for a child, specifically outside of hunter culture. But aside from the thought of fighting to keep the theoretical kid out of the life, and the terrible burden it would be at that moment… it wasn’t the worst thing he could’ve imagined.

Back when he’d lived with Jessica he’d hoped to someday have a family of his own. He’d assumed he could have a simple life with her. It was certainly logistically simpler than his current predicament. It wasn’t just the fact that Brady was a guy, there was Stacy making their relationship somewhat three-sided, Brady and he were both still in school, he was ill—and part demon… however the fuck that impacted things.

Stacy had been raised in a household of witches, surrounded by the craft. It was part of her heritage—a heritage that directly conflicted with his own. Dean wasn’t entirely wrong when he’d said that Sam wasn’t entirely free from the hunter community. Maybe he didn’t hunt or keep up with his rites, but the cultural identity would continue to be hard to shake for years to come, especially after the funeral had stirred it all up again in him.

But Brady wasn’t like them. He was a normal guy—Maybe he came for a family of assholes, but that sort of issue was on a whole other level. He might have a chance for normalcy, to help ground Sam… maybe even Stacy if she continued to stay with them.

“Do you think you’d want a family?” Brady asked pointedly.

“It’s not important, not now,” Sam partially evaded, then caught himself. “Maybe later, when we’re done with school and things… are less crazy.”

“I think you’d make a good dad.”

Sam’s lip trembling slightly as he tried to suppress a bashful smile while avoiding eye contact.

“How’d you even know what a good dad looks like?”
“I’ve watched tv,” Brady replied causing Sam to eyeroll so forceful that he risked causing a mild headache.

Stacy arrived about an hour later. At her knock, Brady got up from the bed and slipped on his pants before answering the door. She bounced up on her toes to plant a kiss on his cheek, then slapped his ass on her way to greet Sam who was still naked in bed.

“Welcome back,” Stacy said as she crawled across the bed to give Sam a kiss.

Sam wrapped his arms around her, pulling her to him. Her hair smelled like pineapple and her cherry lip gloss made him go back for seconds.

“While you’re up…” Sam started, looking at Brady hopefully with his best puppy eyes. “Can you get us some dinner? I didn’t eat on the plane.”

“For you.” Brady made a grand sweeping bow as he picked up his shirt from the floor, then checked the box of condoms. “We’re running low. I’ll hit the drugstore on the way there.”

“Get the ribbed kind if they have it,” Stacy chimed in while snuggling up against Sam.

“Sam, any preference?”

“That works for me,” Sam replied.

Brady turned the box upside down, dumping the single remaining condom packet onto the bed. “That’s all you’ve got until I get back. Make good choices.”

Brady tossed the empty carton into the trash can on his way out the door.

Stacy kissed Sam with a surprising tenderness. Her thumb caressed his cheek as she looked him in the eyes, trying to gain some insight into the undoubtedly-distressing last day and a half. He rested his forehead against hers, glanced down at her lips, then pulled her into a deep kiss.

“I was worried about you,” she whispered, barely coming up for air. Her hands made quick work of pulling off her dress.

“I survived.” Sam sucked on the soft skin of her neck. His hand slid down her back, then began pushing off her lilac panties. They rolled and Sam was on top on Stacy, grinding against her for a moment before starting to kiss down her body.

“How many hunters were there?” She ended up almost humming the question thanks to Sam’s hair tickling the sensitive flesh near her hip bones.

“Too many.” Sam looked up at her across her bare torso. “Do you want me to eat you out or do you want to keep talking about my dad’s funeral?”

“Sorry.” Stacy cringed. “I’ve just never heard about a group of hunters getting together. Can’t blame a girl for being curious.”

Sam pushed himself up to look at her more directly. He was only slightly put off by the discussion of a less-than-desirable topic during foreplay. Witches probably did find hunters more interesting than he did and a few questions were objectively reasonable. Despite him being hard and ready to do something about it, she was clearly distracted and he didn’t feel like competing for her attention. With a small sigh, he crawled back up to lie next to her.
“It was a traditional hunter pyre and wake. Those are an all-night thing,” Sam started explaining. “I think there were at least thirteen men and four women—”

“Female hunters?” Her eyes widened a bit.

“Yeah,” Sam answered, then furrowed his brow at the question.

“I didn’t know there were female hunters.” Stacy shrugged.

Sam blinked at her for a moment. The idea that there weren’t any female hunters sounded pretty silly. Yeah, the culture was a little macho, but women could have the same troubled histories and sense of righteousness as men. Also, without female hunters there’d hardly be any cradle-to-the-grave hunters since male hunters would have a nearly impossible time fighting a civilian woman for custody of a kid. Granted, female hunters were less common than male ones; that might’ve played into her confusion.

“I’m pretty sure they’re outnumbered like ten to one by men,” he offered to excuse her ignorance. “But they definitely exist.”

“Were they attractive?”

“What? At the wake?” Sam shifted. Stacy certainly didn’t seem like the jealous type. “I wasn’t interested, but yeah, I guess—in a hunter kinda way.”

“A hunter kinda way? So they had muscles and facial hair?” Stacy smirked.

“Haha,” he said unamusedly. “There’s all sorts of traditional things: tattoos, scarring, kill record, certain clothes, adherence to customs—a couple of branches are into a ritual that involves a type of incense so that smell is attractive to a couple of sects—”

“You guys literally sniff each other?”

“I don’t—we don’t sniff each other,” he replied a bit defensively. “It’s a sign of being really hardcore into certain practices and some hunters are into that kinda thing.”

She grinned at him flustering, then kissed and sucked on his collarbone before asking, “you ever fuck a hunter?”

Her hand slid down his torso and started stroking his dick. He bit his lower lip. Evidently, she wasn’t done with him just because they were talking. When he didn’t answer right away she looked up expectantly, but didn’t stop playing with him.

“No.” Sam could feel his ears turn pink. “I made out with a female one when I was a teenager, but we didn’t actually have sex.”

He’d attended a hunter wedding when he was seventeen. A nineteen year old hunter named Vivian had matched shots with him. The pair of them had ended up in the back seat of her car. He hadn’t expected to find himself in such a cliche, but at that point in his life he was trying to figure out where he fit in the world and had ended up in all sorts of odd encounters. It was customary for hunters to pair off and sneak away to motel rooms, cars, or any other moderately-private location to have an intoxicated one-night stand. So he’d given it a shot.

They’d gotten as far as stripping to their underwear, but the mood was prompting killed by Sam’s awkward fumbling around when she asked him to go down on her. Had he actually known what he was doing, it would’ve been his first time having sex with a woman, but his nervousness and
ignorance had gotten the better of him. After that night he’d made a point of researching how to please women. Years later, to his amusement, he’d found out that most of his heterosexual male friends hadn’t bothered with that corrective measure much to the disappointment of their countless female partners. So overall the awkward night had resulted in a net positive.

“That’s almost a shame.” Stacy purred as she started intertwining herself with him. “Imagine a hunter fucking a demon without even knowing it.”

He pulled away from her slightly. “Don’t call me a demon like that.”

“What—“ Her brow furrowed slightly at the realization that she might’ve just offended him. “You’ve gotta get over that stigma thing.”

“That stigma thing’ is a serious problem that I have.”

“I’m sorry.” The sincerity in her voice made him relax a bit. “Between you and me it’s not a thing. I guess I got used to it. I got used to your whole hunter—“ She quickly caught herself. “—Sorry, ex-hunter thing.”

He appreciated her attempt to correct herself. Part of him didn’t blame her for the slips. It made sense that a lifelong witch would be painfully aware of a person’s association with hunting. She had her own survival instincts that she was having to overcome in order to be with him. But at least she was trying, and her casualness about everything did help take away some of the sting once he’d accepted that she wasn’t being mean-spirited.

Stacy’s eyes glinted at a thought and her lips curled into a mischievous smile. “Actually, thinking about it, maybe it’s a little kinky.”

“Kinky?” Sam stared at her skeptically.

She rubbed her thumb over the tip of his dick, earning a moan. Her legs spread as she moved to straddle him. She ground against him baitingly.

“A witch like me taking away a sweet piece of hunter meat like you.”

“I’m not...” Sam started to correct her, but she knew hunter was a misnomer. It was just a bit of roleplaying, a weird bit of roleplaying, but she seemed to be enjoying herself. He gripped her hips and moving her back and forth so that her warm pussy was right against the shaft of his dick.

“No more hunts. No more guns,” she whispered as she leaned in to kiss him. “Just your literally enchanting girlfriend and her tight, wet pussy.”

Whether she’d foreseen it or not, she’d hit her target. He let out a soft groan, then his hands hastily searched the bedding for a moment before he asked, “where’s the condom?”

She held it up and slowly began opening the wrapper. It had all the tease of a burlesque show, but for him it was more seductive than that. The fact that she used a condom made him want her more. She wasn’t like a hunter girl. There wasn’t all the baggage that came from 2,000 years of custom distilled into harsh rules. Stacy didn’t put some sense of tradition before the two of them in that moment. He could trust her to let them just have that moment of fun without the weight of responsibility.

Ironically, the thought almost made him cum between her legs before she slipped the condom on him, but he managed to stop himself. As soon as the condom was on, he slid her up and onto him. He gripped her to him as she rocked back and forth.
“Do you like fucking your witch?” Stacy panted while riding him.

“God, yes,” he moaned as she came. “Yes.”

Sam was maybe eight years old, lying in a bed in the second-floor bedroom at Bobby’s house. His left leg was in a rudimentary homemade cast, propped up on a stack of pillows, and his arms had several bandages of gauze covering them.

“He fucked up.” His dad’s voice traveled down the hallway. “I don’t want you rewarding him for almost getting us killed.”

“If you keep pushing him like this, he’s gonna get hurt even worse,” Bobby countered.

“And if he doesn’t learn, he’ll be dead before he can shave.”

“Maybe he isn’t ready for the field? He’s still young—“

“He might not be like Dean,” Bobby pointed out. “If he took some time to go back over the basics. He could spend a few months here—“

“He’s my kid and he stays with me.” For a second his dad’s voice almost had a growl to it. There was a tense silence, then he continued, “he’ll learn on the job. God knows that kid doesn’t need to be spending anymore time in books.” The sound of footsteps carried his dad’s voice down the hall toward the stairs. “That break should be fine in five weeks. We’ll be back for him then. Don’t let him weasel you into….” the voice faded away.

He was lying in the lumpy twin bed, largely unable to move thanks to the cast and his bandaged arms. His family had left him at Bobby’s again. He never knew how to feel about that. On the one hand Bobby was very nice and let him do all sorts of neat things like reading books or watching hunters’ spells. But at the same time, he was only ever left at Bobby’s when he’d done something wrong or when he wasn’t good enough. He was supposed to be with his family, to help keep them safe, but once again he’d failed them and they’d abandoned him while they went to go do the job right. Despite the fear that his dad might still be around to see it, a few tears trickled down his cheeks.

Bobby came into the bedroom and sat down in a chair that was beside the bed. He was holding an old paperback book with a faded brown cover. His expression was warm and filled with pity, but he didn’t do the disservice of mentioning that Sam had clearly been crying.

“I didn’t mean to mess up,” Sam said meekly.

“I know you didn’t,” Bobby assured. “You’re still training.” He opened his mouth, hesitated for a moment, then corrected, “you didn’t mess up.”

“But... Dad said I should’ve been faster.”

“Everyone messes up, even adults. But this wasn’t your fault.” Bobby stared at the bedroom door, then without looking back at Sam added, “you shouldn’t’ve been out there.”

Sam didn’t know what to say. He’d never before heard that adults might make mistakes too. His dad could mess up—he shouldn’t have been on that hunt. His dad was wrong.
Bobby glanced back at Sam and watched him slowly process the implications of the revelation for several seconds. After giving him a little time to think, the older hunter picked up the stone carving of Artemis that was on the nightstand, then placed it in Sam’s hand. A weak smile began to form on Sam’s face as he turned the figurine over in his hand, tracing its familiar shape.

“Do you want me to tell you a story?” Bobby asked.

“Sure, thank you.”

Bobby lit a cone of healing incense on the nightstand, then opened the book. “Long ago there was a young hunter named Erkan….”

Sam woke up in his dorm room bed. It was the morning and Brady had evidently slipped out without waking them. After gently dislodging the sleeping Stacy from him, he rolled onto his side and looked at his nightstand. The stone carving of Artemis was watching over him. He lightly touched the figurine. For a moment he wondered whether the small comfort it was providing him came from some deep-rooted connection to the hunter community or just the memory of Bobby’s kindness during such a long, difficult time. As much as he wished it was the latter, he indulgently said a quick prayer for protection as his fingers caressed the stone deity, before he turned back to hug his girlfriend.

“Are you okay?” she murmured through her fatigue.

“ Weird dream—not bad though,” he replied. “Just some stuff I’d forgotten.”

“Speaking of forgotten, in all the excitement,” Stacy said as she lightly touched the flesh just above his dick. “I forgot to mention that I managed to talk to Melinde for you. The hunter’s alive and she’ll try to hold him long enough for you to see him.”

The concept of holding the hunter long enough for Sam to see him left very little doubt in his mind that they were planning on killing the hunter. He didn’t know what else he would’ve expected. The covens were actively trying to kill many hunters, maybe even dozens of them. This man would only be the beginning.

“I don’t want him to die,” Sam said softly. “I don’t want anyone to die.”

Instead of saying anything, Stacy snuggled up closer to him and he held her a little tighter. He couldn’t really blame her for not saying anything. There wasn’t much to say while they didn’t have the power to stop the momentum of the conflict. And maybe beyond that, he wouldn’t have been surprised if she wasn’t as fazed by the thought of a hunter dying. She was more sympathetic than most witches, but the fact of the matter was that she’d lived her entire life seeing them as the enemy and that was a hard thing to shake. It was the same sort of reluctant indifference smothering learned bias that Dean had felt when he’d found out that his little brother’s girlfriend was a witch. That feeling would probably be the best he could hope for as long as the witches and the hunters refused to interact civilly. And that was such a far-fetched idea that even he couldn’t pretend to believe it might happen someday.

It seemed like as soon as the flip side came flooding back into his life he’d been faced with the weight of so many lives on his conscience. If it wasn’t the hunters and the witches whose lives were in danger and weighing on his mind, it was the other Anathema. Somehow in the last few weeks his own mortality had taken a backseat to all the others he didn’t know how to save. Eyeing the half dozen bottles of pills on his nightstand he wondered if maybe worrying about everyone else was an apt distraction from his own potentially looming demise.
“There’s a group of hunters searching for people like me, the Anathema.” He tried voicing some of his concerns, hoping that that might take away some of the sting. “Their leader is capturing them and torturing them.”

“Do they know how to find you?”

“I don’t know—I at least didn’t make it easy for them. I changed my name when I moved out here. I haven’t used any of my pre-Stanford aliases or accounts. Dean knows to cover my tracks.” Sam sighed. “He’s trying to stop them from finding me.”

“The coven can help protect you,” Stacy offered. “Hunters or not, they’re still human and this is our territory.”

“Are you gonna ask me to move into your closet of a bedroom?” Sam tried to lighten the mood somewhat. “Brady’d be jealous.”

“You aren’t moving into my place.”

“You’d need a much bigger bed, in a bigger room,” Sam pointed out as she intertwined her legs with his. “And I’m sure your family would love to have your sex life right in their faces like that.”

“Sort of maybe related….” Stacy started ominously.

“Ho, no, no—” Sam chuckled nervously at whatever she was about to say.

“Tomorrow night I’m gonna introduce Brady to my family. I’d like you to be there too.”

The little smile on his face faltered as his pulse started rising at the thought of her family finding out about the true nature of their relationship. As much as he hated lying to people, part of him had gotten used to the arrangement, keeping those aspects of his life partitioned. Some instinct in him cried out that they shouldn’t do that, that it was better to keep Brady secret… but that was the same sort of arrangement that had eventually led to the fight between Brady, Jessica and him. He didn’t want that again. He didn’t want to risk losing Brady again over his own fear.

Sam swallowed some of his nerves before clarifying, “like introducing the three of us?”

“Yeah, like ‘Mom and Dad, this is Sam’s and my boyfriend Brady,’” she confirmed.

He ran his fingers through his hair. Somehow he managed to feel clammy cold and as though he was flush at the same time. He rubbed his face, then nodded to himself, trying to regain some composure. They’d have to do it at some point.

“And this can’t wait until after the drama with the hunters and covens calms down?” he asked in one last attempt to see if there was an easy out.

“My family should know who he is. That way if something happens they can make sure he’s okay.”

The concept of Brady being brought into the whole mess with the flip side was another matter. Someday maybe Sam would be able to explain everything to him, but there was so much to get through, both in content to tell and the emotional weight of it all. That was a conversation he needed to prepare for, to really be ready for. He couldn’t just convey his deepest, darkest secrets and fears on 24-hours notice. Not to mention with the conflict between the hunters and the witches heating up, he wanted Brady to stay as removed as possible from all things flip side.

“He’s a civilian—a muggle. He stays out of this,” Sam countered.
“If something happened to you, don’t you think he’d be asking questions? He’s a muggle, but he isn’t dumb. It’s dangerous to risk him retracing our steps without help,” Stacy argued, silencing Sam. “Anyway, Brady knows you’re always coming up to my place. I don’t want him thinking I’m playing favorites.”

“I’m not your favorite?” Sam asked in jest.

She grabbed a pillow and pretended to smother him. He pulled it down off of his face, then allowed some of his sincere worry to paint his face.

“Any chance your parents will try to murder me?”

“It’ll be fine.”

“I like your family.” He felt odd admitting it. “I don’t want to screw this up.”

“They like you too,” she replied as she took his hand.

Lying there, he considered how far that goodwill might go. He seemed to be getting along with the Chinatown coven, even going beyond a professional relationship thanks to his involvement with Stacy. But he wasn’t sure how much they’d be willing to go out of their way to help him. There were hunters out there searching for people like him and while protecting him might be a priority, he wasn’t sure if any of the witches would be willing to help him with saving the other Anathema.

“Can I ask you something?” His voice wavered slightly.

“Yeah, what’s wrong?” she asked, seemingly oblivious to the weight and implications of his earlier-voiced concern.

“I’m not just worried about that group of hunters coming after me. There are other Anathema out there, who don’t know what’s happening—that they’re in danger.” His throat felt tight at the thought of what was being done. “They’re being hunted.”

“Sam…” She wasn’t sure what to say, so she kissed his cheek.

“My people are hunting my people,” he muttered. “I don’t know how I’m gonna save them without help. I’m not enough to save them and I don’t know how to convince anyone to help me. I’m scared to ask your dad. Bhavya might be more supportive, but she’s so caught up with the fighting around here…. How hopeless is it?”

“Sam, I like you and all…” Stacy rested her forehead against his chest and let out a long sigh. When she looked up to meet his eyes her expression was unusually serious. “People don’t like demons. I know you guys are human too, but I don’t know how to convince the covens to spend resources trying to save some demons—especially if it means dealing with hunters that aren’t even pressing our territory.”

In both the hunting community and the flip side overall, demons were generally considered an apex predator, more than capable of defending themselves and well worth avoiding. But Sam didn’t feel like a predator. He didn’t feel so capable even with years of combat training under his belt. The thought that his kind were something to fear or at least be wary of, it was harmful.

“They need help,” he said despite knowing how little that mattered compared to things like practicality.

“I know.” Stacy pulled his face to hers, then kissed him between the eyes. “I wish I could get you
these resources, but I don’t know how we’re supposed to do that.”

“If it was me—“

“If it was you, I would do whatever I could to get to you. Chinatown, Bhavya, Melinde—for you I’m sure they’d all try....”

“But I’m special.” He was reminded of Brady telling him that for years, but he’d never felt it was true. “Even among the freaks.”

After Stacy left, Sam grabbed his laptop and began checking on his missed homework and emails. While he was reading, Furcifer emerged from its preferred kitchenette cupboard. The tabby scampered across the floor, hopped onto the bed then curled up on Sam’s chest, partially blocking his view of the screen.

“I see you’re glad to have me back,” Sam told the cat as he scratched it behind the ear.

Furcifer purred loudly, then grabbing Sam’s hand with its clawed paws. The cat gave him a few licks followed by an affectionate bite that didn’t break the skin.

“Were you worried about me?” Sam asked, eliciting a tiny headbutt. “Don’t worry. My family aren’t the hunters I have to be worried about. It’s just the rest of them.”

Furcifer gently bit his hand again, but this time the tabby didn’t immediately let go.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he assured, then gestured to the space between his chest and left arm. “If you curl up next to me I’ll scratch you by the tail when I’m done with my laptop.”

Furcifer promptly relocated itself to the bed beside him, then patiently waited for its reward.

There was an email from Dr. Neves asking him to schedule an appointment with her when he got back into the area. Evidently his email informing several professors that he had to abruptly leave town for a funeral had been forwarded to her. He appreciated the concern shown by his professors, if not their proactiveness.

He replied with reassurance that he would come see her within the next week. It wasn’t ideal for either of them. She undoubtedly wanted to see him as quickly as possible in order to make sure he was alright. And while he wanted to buy himself some time to figure out an apt analogy for the hunter’s wake, he didn’t like the idea of letting the lie linger for too long. There was so much going on that he couldn’t confide in Dr. Neves and a large unaddressed distraction from his dad’s death would definitely ping her radar.

Maybe he could talk to her about Brady meeting Stacy’s family? He wouldn’t be able to fully explain his relationship with the Chen family, but he could at least discuss the stress of being outed as poly to people he liked.

In a perfect world he’d tell her about his feelings of helplessness to protect the other Anathema. On some level he felt like they were his responsibility. As far as he could tell, he was the person in the best position to help. He knew the name of the lead hunter and he might be able to identify the Anathema themselves with enough visions. But he wasn’t sure how to locate the captured ones or how to singlehandedly rescue them. It’d been over six years since he’d been in a real fight, aside from that demon while rescuing Melinde’s daughter and that had been unnervingly close. He was out of practice, out of options, and had no idea how to even cope with the anguish that left in him—surely that was the kind of emotional frustration that therapy was designed for.
But he would only be able to get partial relief. As with every aspect of his life, his troubles were to continue being partitioned. He would put on another incomplete portrayal of himself. And with a little luck he would move an inch forward on that fragment of his life. Hitting send on the email to Dr. Neves, he wondered how much longer he’d have to wait until he could just be himself—whatever that might be.

Riding in Calvin’s 2004 Prius, Sam began to debate the merits of buying a car. If he sold some of his interest in the emotional intangibles that he’d acquired through Zoya, then he could buy a car with a lump sum payment and avoid the red tape associated with financing. Unfortunately, he’d either have to hide the existence of a hypothetical car or he’d have a hell of a time explaining where he’d gotten the money to buy a car. He supposed he could say that his dad left him some money. Sam rubbed his cheek where his dad had hit him…. Maybe he could say that Dean gave him a portion of his inheritance?

“Thanks for giving me a ride,” Sam told Calvin for the second time.

After catching up on all his mundane crises, he’d called Stacy and asked about how and when he could meet up with Melinde to visit the hunter prisoner. In hardly any time, she’d managed to enlist her brother to give him a ride to the makeshift prison. It probably wasn’t how Calvin had been hoping to spend his afternoon, but Sam suspected that it was far from the strangest errand the thirty-four year old witch had been sent on.

“No problem. I’ve got a meeting in the area this afternoon anyway.”

“Flip side or…”

“It’s normal work.” Calvin shrugged. “It’ll be a welcome change of pace.”

“How’ve things been the last two days? Stacy told me things are picking up.”

“We’ve been having reports of what we think are hunter sightings around the Bay. They seem to be starting to investigate the area.”

“How long do you think before the diviners get a reading on how many are in the area?”

“There was some sort of problem early on; getting the search parameters set has been difficult, but they’ve made a lot of ground in the last few days.” Calvin explained. “Hopefully in three or four days we’ll have some real intel to let us go on the offensive.”

Sam wasn’t surprised that it was taking them longer than expected to pinpoint how to identify hunters. Personally he’d search for a combination of trace amounts of lead from handling guns for so long, cold-treated silver, and slightly suppressed melatonin levels from the routine chewing of wither root while in the field. Of course he wasn’t about to volunteer that information. As much as he wanted hunters off the streets, he didn’t want them all rounded up and slaughtered.

“In the meantime, I take it everyone is just hunkering down?”

“As best we can,” Calvin commented while fiddling with the radio. “The Quiet Market is trying to operate, but business is at less than half. The covens are all lending people to help with security…I’m not sure how long it’ll take for everyone to feel safe coming back, especially with the hunter sightings. So we have more non-human activity in the streets than usual. There was a break in at a morgue, a spike in missing persons, and more cold spots—even for San Francisco.”

“That’s just going to attract more hunters.”
“Understatement,” Calvin replied unenthusiastically.

“What happens when civ—muggles start noticing something weird is going on?”

“For small groups or people by themselves we can distort their memories.” The witch nearly smirked. “It’s not erasing or replacing the memories, think more like getting thoroughly drunk.”

“That wouldn’t work on a captured hunter, would it?” Sam asked with only a flicker of hope.

“Not that’ll do the job right. They’ll just run down the same leads a second time and maybe even show up better prepared. Every coven I’ve ever heard of that tried catch and release was wiped out.” Calvin chewed his lip for a second before adding, “I know you used to know a hunter or whatever, but these people are dangerous. They’ll kill you—they’ll kill all of us, the whole family if they get the chance. You seem like a sharp guy. You get that, right?”

“Yeah, I do,” Sam acknowledged. “I just hate how everything’s going down.”

After a long pause, Calvin added, “me too.”

They drove for several minutes in silence before Sam noticed a small picture of Calvin’s son clipped onto the far side of the dashboard. He considered the weight of cultural heritage, both its benefits and how it’d led them all into their current predicament. There was no risk that he would ever raise a child as a hunter, but that wasn’t the only life that children could be raised into. He wasn’t anywhere near prepared to have a child, though he couldn’t help but think about how Stacy had been raised into a different yet similar life, maybe with the same expectations to carry on tradition.

“Can I ask you a personal question?” Sam asked.

“Sure,” Calvin replied.

“Are you and your wife raising Maddox as a witch?”

Calvin didn’t reply at first and instead spared a sidelong glance at him. “You and Stacy aren’t—“

“No,” Sam assured. “It’s nothing like that. I just… I was wondering how much of your life and identity is being a witch.”

“It’s what I am—who I am.”

“I don’t think I’m ever gonna be a witch.” Sam sat up straighter as he realized that his statement may have come off as an insult, then quickly added, “that’s not a criticism. It’s just not me. I have all these other things going on in my life.”

“Your... talents do put you in an odd position,” Calvin agreed. “Even if you aren’t a witch, I’m definitely glad you’re around. You know, if you want I could actually get you set up with some regular income. I could put you on as part of my PCA firm if you don’t want to keep dealing in cash transactions.”

Sam considered his need for income. As much as he’d like to think that he could juggle everything that was going on in his life, there was a very real risk that his preoccupation with the flip side would impact his grades. If his grades took a hit within reason during that semester he wouldn’t be expelled, but he might lose his scholarships. Without the scholarships he’d have to find a way to continue going to school and all of its associated expenses. He didn’t even want to consider dropping out of school, not when he had already invested so much of himself into getting that far. And if he did drop out, what was left for him? Getting brought in to work for the Chinatown coven
as a full-time, long-term employee? He didn’t want to have his future so quickly or narrowly
defined. But a temporary job, to act as a safety net…. As long as he was already helping Chinatown
out, he didn’t see the harm.

“Actually, getting paid in cash is best for a while,” Sam suggested. “Part of applying to the state bar
involves a background check. I don’t want anyone looking too closely at your business.”

“You really are a catch.” Calvin smiled. “I need to pay Stacy a finder’s fee on you.”

Calvin pulled into the parking lot of the vacant office building that Melinde had told Sam to come to,
then parked in a free spot by the rear entrance. Sam stared at the reflective silvery structure covered
in floor to ceiling windows. Somewhere in that massive glass cage was a very unlucky hunter. He
placed his hand on the car’s door handle, then looked back at Calvin, having remembered one last
favor he’d been hoping to call in.

“Before I forget, there’s an item I’m looking for, the kind that might be on the Quiet Market. With
Wren dead, how do I get things like that?”

“I’ve started going through enough account records that I’m getting a better sense of it. And I’ve
physically been to the Market a few times before. So I might be able to get you pointed in the right
direction,” Calvin offered. “What’s the item?”

“I heard a rumor that there’s a type of blade that kills demons,” Sam replied, making Calvin’s
eyebrows rise with interest.

“I’ll see if I can locate a magical weapons dealer and find out what I can,” Calvin offered.

“I need this to be kept quiet.”

“Absolutely.”

The office building’s manual door opened before Sam, allowing him past whatever magical barrier
had clearly been put in place. To his surprise the interior was completely silent. For some reason
he’d been expecting screams, but those had probably stopped long ago. He took the elevator to the
fourth floor, then walked through a set of long-abandoned cubicles toward a grouping of interior
conference rooms.

Melinde was seated at a conference table reviewing something on her laptop. Beside her laptop sat a
pair of black leather gloves and some sort of iced coffee beverage from a local boutique cafe. She
was hard at work in her hidden fortress. He supposed all she needed was a commercial real estate
broker with an ear to the ground to tell her if the office park was going back on the market.
Depending on how extensive their prisoner’s restraints were, they could probably get him out of
there in only a few minutes.

When Sam entered the conference room, she stood up and approached him. For a moment he wasn’t
sure what to make of the move, but she ended up hugging him and giving him a kiss on the cheek. It
was unsettling to receive such an affectionate greeting from someone who had spent over twenty
hours with a man kidnapped and tortured at her direction… granted Sam had saved this woman’s
daughter and niece. Even the most calculating leaders had their soft spots.

“I should thank you again,” Melinde said as she released him from the hug. “This hunter tried to
sneak up on us.”

“I’m just glad that there wasn’t any more death,” he replied. “I’m sorry for your losses.”
“It seems like we’re being hit from every side these days.”

“Did you manage to find out why the demons attacked you?”

“They’re demons. No one knows why they do anything.” Her brow furrowed subtly. “I… I didn’t mean to suggest.” She flustered a bit at the realization that technically she was talking to a demon. “We don’t even know where to begin investigating that. It’s not as though there are just demons walking around on the streets.”

She gestured for him to follow her as she walked out of the room, then continued, “Your friend, Denny’s girl, she said that you were busy with an emergency.”

“Family emergency,” he responded. “Nothing to do with all of this.”

“I’m sorry. I hope it was nothing too serious.” She seemed sincere.

“I…. He debated how much to say. Chinatown knew that his dad had passed away. With all the gossip that might be floating through the newly opened lines of communication between the covens he decided it was probably best to avoid lying as much as possible. “Actually, there was a death in the family.”

Melinde stopped walking and turned to stare at him in shock. Her professional demeanor softened, then she took his hands in hers.

“My sympathies. If you need more time, this can wait. We can try to preserve him for you for another day or two.”

“No, I’d rather deal with this now.” He hated the idea of stringing along the hunter for any longer—not knowing who he was or dwelling on the seemingly insurmountable task of finding a humane way of dealing with the situation. “Thank you, though. I truly appreciate the offer.”

“It was very clever of you to be on guard against hunters at the church.” Melinde commented as she continued deeper into the labyrinthine office building.

“You had larger concerns. I’m sure your people would’ve thought to watch out for them even without me there,” Sam deflected some of her praise and his own guilt.

“And now you want to meet with this hunter.” She glanced back at him. “You seem to have an interest in hunters.”

“I’ve had a few run-ins over the years.” Sam pursed his lips. “I like to know how to protect myself. Understanding hunters is part of that.”

“Do you enjoy playing with fire?”

“No. Fire just really likes playing with me.” He caught himself considering the accuracy of that statement in light of his mom and Jessica’s deaths as well as his affiliation with the Hell of Burning Light. The thought made his stomach ache.

“I imagine you face difficulties because of your condition.”

“And by that you mean?” Sam asked, having been distracted by thoughts of fiery damnation.

“Hunters hate witches. I can’t imagine what they do to creatures like you,” Melinde replied.

He thought of the other Anathema that Gordon Walker was hunting. They were out there, probably
frightened by their powers, destined to be captured and tortured. Even without some organized long
hunt, those people would be vulnerable to hunters for as long as their powers were manifesting,
possibly for the rest of their lives.

Melinde gave a little half-nod of acknowledgment at his silence before continuing. “Your run-ins
must be some interesting stories.”

“Stories I don’t want to relive,” he said in an attempt to stave off anymore elaborate lies.

“I understand. We all have those.” She nodded. “Denny’s daughter said you wanted me to hold
onto this one for you. Do I want to know?”

“It’s nothing that bad,” Sam assured her. “I just want to conduct my own round of questioning.”

She led him to a door that was guarded by two witches. Her hand slid across the doorknob, causing
several runes of blue light to glow into existence before dissolving into a fine mist. After nodding to
the guards, she opened the door then stepped inside. Sam took a moment to gather himself, then
followed her in.

The small room had no windows and only the single door. There was no furniture except for a
sleeping mat that had been brought in for the hunter to use. Five bundles of herbs had been placed
around the sleeping mat and were connected with a series of intricate linework made out of what
looked like blood. The prisoner was lying on the mat with his eyes closed, completely unmoving but
for a slight rise and fall of his chest. He didn’t react to the sound of the door opening or them
entering. The hunter was probably in his mid to late thirties with light brown hair, a cheap fake Fed
suit, and a square jaw that was covered in a few days worth of whiskers.

Sam didn’t recognize him; it’d been the other hunter that he’d had a vague feeling of recollection
with. He wasn’t sure what he’d have done if it had been the hunter that was possibly capable of
IDing him. Instead, this man was something of a mystery. A hunter in the wrong place at the wrong
time, who’d been bested by his potential prey. That was the position that Sam had grown up fearing,
for himself, for his family—Hell, except for the jawline the guy looked a bit like Dean. The thought
made Sam want to step outside to confirm that his brother was still halfway across the country, but he
couldn’t put off this meeting anymore. Stepping out for a moment might very well lead to him
retreating from the uncomfortable scenario and he couldn’t afford that. He needed all the intel he
could get, even if it required a stronger stomach.

“Is he capable of talking?” Sam asked Melinde after seeing the hunter’s state.

“It depends on what kind of information you want.” She tilted her head back and forth to the side
uncertainly. “He went through a lot before I found out you wanted to see him. We tried to preserve
him as best we could, but….” Her hand clutched her crucifix absentmindedly. “You can try.”

“Can I have some time alone with him? To question him.”

“Alone?” She raised an eyebrow, but didn’t question the wisdom of his request.

“Please,” Sam asked. “I want to know how exposed I am because of my circumstances.”

“As an Anathema,” Melinde speculated.

“I have reason to believe that a group of hunters might be looking for people like me.” Sam tried to
anchor his excuse in some truth. “I don’t want his captors hovering over my shoulder while I play
good cop.”
Melinde nodded. As she left the room, she told the guards to give him some privacy before closing the door.

Sam sat down cross legged on the floor beside the magical herb bundles and blood design. He might’ve otherwise remained standing, ready to leap away at a moment’s notice, but the hunter looked beyond defeated already. It was a risk, but he suspected there was more to be gained from appearing friendly than keeping the prisoner at more than arm’s length.

“Can you hear me?” Sam asked.

The hunter didn’t say anything, but his eyes rolled over to look at Sam. His chapped lips trembled slightly.

“Do you know me?” Sam tried again, hoping to get anything from the man.

“Are you going to kill me?” the hunter asked in a quiet voice.

“No, I just want to talk. I’m not gonna hurt you.”

Sam watched as the hunter drifted away again, eyes slowly following something that Sam couldn’t see. He’d wanted to ask him fairly direct questions in order to keep the interaction brief and as painless as possible, but that was probably the sort of interrogation that had gotten the man into his current shape. Sam pursed his lips, then decided to speak in a more familiar manner. “Who did you apprentice under?”

The hunter looked back at him, drawn by the unexpected customary small talk. “My… my first was Ben.”


The corner of the hunter’s mouth curled up at the suggestion. “Nah, Ben Whitby…. He could track.”

“You’re really tough; I bet you were a cradle, weren’t you?” Sam offered a compliment and invitation to talk.

“No.” The hunter’s voice was faint, distracted by something, yet not nearly as defensive. “I got recruited… when I was twenty five. Ben saved me from a vampire—great guy.”

“He sounds like it.” Sam swallowed some of his emotion. “Are you still hunting with him?”

“Not for the last few years.” He stared at the ceiling for a moment, then murmured, “I forgot his birthday last month.”

“I’m sure he understands.” Sam tried to comfort him. “Is there anyone I should contact—anyone who would be looking for you?”

“My partner, Michael Lewis…. I think he got away.” The hunter’s brow furrowed. “He went to get something… He wasn’t there. Is he alive?”

“Yeah, he’s fine. Don’t worry about him.”

The hunter’s hand tried to reach out towards Sam, but it weakly dragged along the floor. “They… they got you too?”
“Yeah, but I’m gonna get us out of here. I just need your help, okay?” Sam could feel his eyes watering and hoped that the hunter was too disoriented to tell that he was starting to cry.

The hunter nodded, then whispered, “okay.”

“What were you and Michael looking for?” Sam began pressing the real reason he was there. He needed to know whether an Anathema was the target or if it was one of the covens.

“Revenant.”

Sam sat up and his eyes widened. Revenants were an undead creature that were particularly menacing. He’d never actually faced one, but it was the subject of several favorite stories to tell adolescent hunters. Most hunters who sought glory would eagerly seek them out—it’d always sounded like an idiot move to Sam, at least without ample backup. The fact that this hunter was only working the lead with a single partner was a red flag of either recklessness or poor training.

“We heard... there was a coven in San Francisco... one where Conrad had the shootout. We came to help... but things... were weird.” The hunter’s eyes started to close, but opened again at Sam’s next question.

“What do you mean things were weird?”

“Went to a spring,”—Sam appreciated the use of slang for a hunter’s bar—“heard that omens... sightings were popping up everywhere.”

“What kinds of leads?” Sam baited some more.

“Blood bank was robbed... or was it a morgue... missing persons... cold spots in the cemetery... partially eaten bodies.”

“How’d you hear about the revenant?”

“At spring... on the radio.” The hunter’s mouth moved, trying to get more words out, but for several seconds he only managed an ominous rattling breath. “Thought the church.... so much EMF.... so much cold.”

Sam was so caught up trying to listen to the hunter’s fading words that he nearly missed the strange feeling that something was watching him. He turned to check over his shoulder. There was no one else in the room... rather he couldn’t see anyone else in the room. He closed his eyes, trying to block out the distraction of sight. There was a presence lingering in the room with them, waiting for something. It reminded him of the presence that he’d felt the night he’d saved that girl from overdosing—Sam looked back at the hunter and touched him.

With a flash of white light, Sam saw himself kneeling over the hunter, checking him for a pulse. He started to perform CPR, but it wasn’t working. Behind his back there was a flicker of something that he couldn’t make out. He abruptly turned around, trying to spot the creature, but his eyes didn’t settle on a specific point. He took a defensive posture, then shouted, “stay away from us!”

Sam let go of the hunter, stopping the vision, and clutched his own head. The hunter was about to die. He scrambled for the door, opened it and called for help. But the hallway was empty, having been cleared to give him some privacy. He hurried back to the hunter’s side, leaned over him and checked for a pulse—he couldn’t find it. He tilted the man’s head back, breathed into him, then began doing chest compressions.

The presence was right behind him, watching his futile attempts to save the hunter. It had been
waiting for that moment. Sam turned around despite the fact that he knew he wouldn’t be able to see
the reaper. He’d never fought a reaper and had no idea what might be effective, but he stood
between it and the hunter.

“Stay away from us!”

He could feel it linger for a moment longer, either out of curiosity or as a threat, before fading away.
For a split second his hope had gotten the better of him, thinking that he’d scared the reaper off, but
looking back at the hunter’s still form—it had already completed its task.

Sam collapsed backwards into a sitting position, knocking over two herb bundles and smearing his
pants with blood. He stared at the body for a long while wondering if there had ever been a chance
that he could’ve saved him or whether he’d been too late from the beginning.

He rubbed his temples to slow down his growing stress-induced migraine. There was a dead man—
a previously kidnapped dead man who’d arguably been tortured to death. His head started spinning
and he scooted backwards across the floor so that he could lean against the wall as he started trying
to figure out if he was technically guilty of first degree murder as some sort of co-conspirator or
accomplice. He lightly hit his head on the wall.

If he’d had to do it over again, seeing the hunters outside of the church…. He probably still would’ve
warned Melinde. The hunters were venturing too close to a very dangerous situation. There were
demons and witches—not just the ones there, but potentially all of the Little Portugal coven or the
other covens could’ve been exposed. With the Quiet Market on the brink, the impact of hunter
interference could be huge; that was partially how they’d gotten into the damn mess in the first place.
He hated that he felt that way, but with the stakes getting so large there were substantial risks to
everyone if random skirmishes broke out in the street.

As he sat there struggling to figure out what to do, one of the guards returned and peeked in the open
door. He listened to the guard’s hurried footsteps running down the hall to get help. It reminded him
painfully of the sound of his dad’s receding footsteps after Sam had messed up—that wasn’t right.
Everyone had messed up.

“Sam, are you alright?” Melinde asked as she knelt down to check on him.

“Yeah.” He shakily stood up and brushed himself off, trying to regain his composure in front of a
professional like her. “It’s just been a long time since I saw a man die.”

“I’m sure that must be difficult right now especially.” She likely was referring to the recent death in
his family. “Did you learn what you needed?”

He was tempted to tell her yes and leave it at that. Yet there was still a very dangerous loose end
running around in the area with just enough correct and incorrect information to either attack a
coven, cause another shootout at the Quiet Market, or maybe even come after him.

“There was a partner who got away… Michael Lewis,” Sam offered. His insides hurt so much it felt
like he’d pounded another shot of holy water. “They’re looking for a revenant that they thought
was controlled by a coven. It didn’t seem like they knew about the actual covens though. He was
speculating about a San Francisco coven. That’s what he thought the Quiet Market was. They were
getting their intel from a hunters bar and he mentioned something about the radio.”

“He thought there was a revenant?” Her expression was candid disbelief.

Sam nearly replied that everybody makes mistakes, but truth or not, he doubted the sympathetic
statement would be well received. Instead he just sighed and gave her a fatigued shrug.

“How’re you gonna get rid of the body?” he asked.

His mind was already racing with thoughts and memories. He’d broken down and destroyed more bodies than he could remember. His stomach ached with all the anxious acid churning at the situation. He wasn’t sure he could handle destroying another body. The sights and smells would certainly send him into an episode. But as much as the dead man was Melinde’s problem, he was implicated and needed to make sure that it was taken care of properly.

“Weigh it down and dump it in the bay,” she replied. “That’s our standard way of getting rid of unwanted things.”

As much as he disliked the idea of hunting, the thought of leaving a hunter’s body unburned… it struck him as offensive on top of being dangerous. There might’ve been a legitimate risk of the hunter’s soul turning into something nasty over time, but that wasn’t the first thing that occurred to him. Letting the body rot had a profound wrongness—it was a truth he’d known since he was a child. Maybe the hunter couldn’t get a proper pyre, but cremation was probably possible.

“Burn it. Always burn hunters,” Sam told her. “They can come back as vengeful spirits, especially after a malicious death.”

“How do you know much about ghosts?” She stared at him, visibly impressed by his breadth of knowledge.

“Some, not enough though.” Sam considered the rumor of the revenant. He’d been quick to dismiss it because the creatures were so notorious that surely he would’ve heard about it, but the truth was that he wasn’t well enough versed in the lore to assess the situation. More importantly though, mistaken or not, the hunter had thought there was a revenant in the area. Michael Lewis and others might be working on that same information. That could inform where hunter attacks might occur.

He turned to face her. “Actually, I need to find an expert.”

“Would a necromancer do?”

Sam had been to several microbreweries in the last few years. They were a trendy sort of place, quickly encroaching on the traditional Napa Valley inspired wine bar scene. Despite his experience, he still took a moment to appreciate the manicured, unabashedly-hipster aesthetic of the brewery’s taproom. He took in the rich artwork, thick wood counters and tables, and brick walls that dared to be hazardous during an earthquake in exchange for achieving a desired look.

Walking past the tables of twenty-somethings enjoying their dinners, Cat Power by David Bowie came on over the restaurant’s recessed speakers. The slow, heavy beat of the music made him painfully aware of his own heartbeat as he tried to keep his cool. This was another meeting, not so different than the business meeting he’d had with the West coven. He had to focus on the task at hand and not give into the worries over the escalation between the witches and the hunters. This was deep in the Uptown coven’s territory. He was probably fairly safe… assuming he was welcome.

After taking a seat at the bar counter he waved to get the bartender’s attention. “I’m looking for Jordan Henrick.”

“Business or pleasure?” the tattoo-covered bartender asked while eyeing Sam up and down.

“Business,” Sam replied, causing the bartender to adopt a slightly more professional demeanor.
“What are you drinking?”

Sam noticed that a lot of the beers listed on the large chalkboard over the bar had cutesy names related to death. He couldn’t help but wonder if the microbrewery was an actual subsidiary of the coven itself in the same way that Chinatown operated several stores and restaurants, and West at the very least ran a nightclub and some charities. He supposed having small businesses helped provide cover for their activities as well as opportunities to transfer funds without having money appear out of no one. Having a coven that specialized in necromancy involved with a death-themed bar seemed a bit pointed, but maybe it was effective as hiding in plain sight.

“I’ll take a Death’s Dram,” Sam told the bartender, then began trying to review his priorities for the meeting one last time.

As much as he’d like to keep pursuing his contracts for the intangible emotional assets, that would have to take a backseat to more pressing issues. He wanted to better understand where Uptown stood when it came to the conflict with the hunters. He also wanted to find out what more about revelants and whether it was likely to cause a problem—either itself or in the form of a rumor attracting even more hunters.

A server brought him a plate of artisanal cheeses and cured meats, then explained, “compliments of the house.”

“Uh, thank you.” Sam stared at the food and wondered whether it’d been spiked with anything or if it really was simply a gift.

He didn’t know want to think of the man he was trying to meet. At the gathering of the coven leaders, Jordan hadn’t spoken as much as some of the others. To the extent he did engage, his comments had been… if not isolationist at least prioritizing his own coven over the greater wellbeing of the region. Sam wasn’t about to assume that the guy was a jerk, he might’ve just been a very protective leader. But that impression felt odd to reconcile with a free charcuterie platter.

Beyond not having a good read on him, there was also the slightly uncomfortable issue of the witch’s appearance—specifically the fact that he had an almost distractingly beautiful face. In the last few weeks Sam had met and appreciated several attractive people: Zoya, Dahlia, Jeda, and the leader of the Little Saigon coven was also pretty cute. But those had all been women and when it came right down to it he had a noteworthy preference for men. Things were too serious with Brady and Stacy for him to actually want to do anything, but a few butterflies were tickling his stomach, which was manageable as long as the awkward sensation didn’t travel any further down his torso.

“Just a single,” said a man behind Sam.

When he turned to see who’d been talking, Jordan slipped onto the stool beside him. The witch was wearing a grey knit sweater and skin-tight pants that tragically featured a coral and pale aqua green floral print. It took all of Sam’s willpower not to let his eyes linger on Jordan’s crotch while helplessly taking in the rather bold pants.

The bartender brought over a shot glass containing a faintly pink liquid. The coven leader nodded thanks, then pulled out a joint, lit it, and took a hit. The smoke smelled like pot cut with something sweet and spicy. Sam glanced around to see if anyone would react to the blatant violation of the ordinance banning smoking in public restaurants. No one batted an eye.

“The 18-month smoked gouda is excellent,” Jordan commented.

Sam took a bite in an attempt to not offend his host. “Very nice.”
“You’re the new guy, the one Bhavya and Denny were all excited about.”

“Sam.” He held out his hand to Jordan, who shook it after a mildly uncertain pause. “I’m new, whether I earn that enthusiasm remains to be seen.”

“Malcolm seems to think you’re interesting enough to let you into his territory.” Jordan sipped on his shot, then glanced over at Sam. “I’m spying on West, not you.”

“I’m not really familiar with the…” Sam considered the fact that Jordan hadn’t explicitly mentioned covens or witches and tried to follow his discretion. “regional politics with this stuff.”

“Just because I’m spying on my neighbors doesn’t mean I’m upset that you went to them. I don’t know you. Until just now you’ve been nothing to me.” Jordan’s words might’ve come off as rude but for the fact that his expression remained somewhere between neutral and pleased. “You still might be by the end of this.”

“That’s one of the reasons why I wanted to meet you, to introduce myself.”

“Is that the business part of why you’re here?” Jordan turned his stool to stare pointedly at Sam with his intense hazel eyes. “Or are you here for the real business? The good stuff?”

“I’ve heard that you’re a specialist.” Sam tapped his finger on the paper napkin, indicating a decorative drawing of a skeleton.

“The good stuff it is,” Jordan confirmed, then grinned and pounded the remainder of his drink. He inched closer, unconsciously or recklessly making their thighs touch. “You want to see something really cool?”

The way Jordan was smiling and the lightness in his voice, it was unlike the man Sam had seen at the meeting of the covens. This was the enthusiasm of a man in his comfort zone, delighted to show off the things he was interested in. Sam decided to let his host set the agenda for a bit. Over time hopefully he’d acquire enough social credit to redeem it for a favor.

At the witch’s direction, Sam took his pint of stout with him as they exited the taproom, then began walking down the street. There were two teenage boys and a teenage girl dressed in goth clothes and makeup walking towards them. The teens smoked clove cigarettes as they went, blowing the smoke without a care for their surroundings and flicking the ash with their chipped black polish covered nails. One of the boys with fishnet sleeves stared at Sam and Jordan before muttering something to the girl.

The smug look on the boy’s face and the girl’s snickers left no doubt in Sam’s mind that they’d been making fun of Jordan and him… or maybe just Jordan’s fashion sense. For an unnerving moment Sam worried how the coven leader who was supposedly an expert in death would react to being made fun of by what he could only assume were posers.

“They’re adorable, aren’t they?” Jordan eyed the teens as he spoke to Sam. “I wonder if they’ll ever take up the craft like adults.”

“I don’t suppose you have an after school program?” Sam asked.

“I doubt the local parents would appreciate the service.” Jordan smiled. “Their loss.”

After walking a few blocks, the two of them entered a small art studio with hardwood floors and corrugated metal walls covered in paintings. The artwork had an oddly whimsical macabre aesthetic: animal skeletons with cartoonish proportions, a collection of flowers slowly melting into trash, and a
set of human portraits with hauntingly empty expressions.

They walked through a hallway and no less than three locked doors before turning into a workshop of sorts. The windowless room was lined with cupboards and contained two examination tables in the middle. There was the body of a middle aged man laying on one of the tables. The man was clearly dead based on the pasty white color of his skin, but no incisions or desecrations had been made. Sam placed his half-drunk beer on the counter, having resigned himself to not finishing it.

Jordan grabbed a pair of latex gloves from a drawer, then picked up a jar of black liquid and a small artist’s paintbrush. The witch began painting an intricate design on the dead body in black paint. Sam watched, unsure whether to break the uncomfortable silence by talking or risk the bizarre activity lasting for several minutes. He was trying to think of something tactful to say, but became derailed when Jordan leaned in and thoughtfully caressed the dead man's face. The contact wasn’t explicitly sexual, though there was enough care in the act that Sam could see where people would make necrophilia jokes.

“Many people get uncomfortable around my work,” the witch observed.

“A lot of people aren’t used to dead bodies,” Sam pointed out.

“You seem quite at home.”

Sam tried not to visibly react to the astute observation, before replying, “I’ve seen a few over the years.”

“The taboo has worn off,” Jordan speculated with a smile. “That’s a good thing.”

Sam didn’t want to disagree. All things being equal he would’ve preferred to be unfamiliar with dead bodies, but he didn’t want to risk offending his host. Instead he offered an excuse that might help explain any of his ambivalence.

“My dad recently passed away.”

“Was it unexpected?” Jordan asked, then added hastily, “I guess it always is.”

Sam watched the witch’s face, trying to decide if that was a subtle hint that Jordan knew about the nature of his powers. Death wouldn’t always be unexpected for someone who got psychic visions of death. Jordan had admitted to spying on West, which was one of the places he’d admitted to having that power. Granted, Jordan didn’t strike him as the kind of person to play coy; he was nearly fondling a corpse after all.

After a moment of hesitation Sam experimentally asked, “can you talk to him?”

He wasn’t sure what he’d do if the answer was yes. It’d be important to find out who and what had killed his dad, if only to stop Dean from pursuing it. Yet at the same time, he’d said his… well, goodbye wasn’t the right term. He’d aired his grievances and was attempting to get some closure. If communication with his dad’s spirit was possible it would certainly reopen the wounds in general—not to mention the fact that surely being violently murdered had done nothing to improve his dad’s bad temper.

Jordan abandoned working on the corpse and considered Sam’s question for a long while before asking, “how long ago did he die?”

“A few days.”
“I don’t suppose you have some of his heart and at least 12 ounces of his bones?”

“He was cremated.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Jordan offered instead of explicitly saying it was hopeless. “It never goes well anyway, those conversations.”

Sam nodded in acknowledgment of the statement. Evidently the regional necromancer was a routinely sought after resource for next of kin in the know. He appreciated the fact that Jordan had even considered performing the apparently unpleasant spell for him.

“How did he die?” Jordan asked as he got back to work preparing the corpse.

“Hunter.” Sam finally settled on that explanation. It wasn’t exactly a lie, the life of a hunter had killed his dad in the end. Anyway, it garnered a bit more understanding and hopefully fewer questions than replying that a demon had done it.

“That does seem pretty fashionable nowadays.”

“Being fashionable was basically the last thing he wanted to do.”

“Well, it was the last thing he did,” Jordan commented with a little grin at his own joke, then looked up at Sam suddenly. “I’m sorry, you’re probably grieving.”

“I’m honestly not sure at this point.”

“I’ve heard it’s a good thing to do, grieving—part of the natural order.”

There was almost a smirk on Jordan’s face as he began shaving a new stretch of skin on the dead man. Of course it was funny to him; the witch made his life’s work out of spiteing the natural order.

After a long silence while Jordan worked, Sam tried making some small talk. “Where’s the rest of your coven?”

“That’s a faux pas,” Jordan informed him without looking up.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. I’m just used to seeing more witches hanging around Chinatown and everywhere else I’ve gone.” Sam shrugged. “I just don’t know what to expect.”

“We’re mostly active at night, so I imagine the other are sleeping,” the coven leader offered the perfectly reasonable explanation for a group that specialized in the more shadowy of the dark arts.

“I hope I didn’t drag you out of bed.”

“I have to keep more flexible hours.” Jordan explained. “I don’t mind the short notice as long as there’s something exciting. Getting a visit from the Anathema who’s suddenly cropping up around the scene, that could be exciting.”

“I’d been hoping to meet with the eventually, but something—“ Sam started.

Jordan looked up suddenly, then glanced around the room as if he’d heard something. He hurried to an apothecary’s chest of drawers and began collecting an assortment of pungent herbs. Before Sam could ask what he was doing the witch ran for the door. Without any idea what was happening, Sam followed him, trying to mentally prepare himself for a fight. They hurried through two hallways, then a door which opened up to the side of the building. The witch froze and held up his hand, preventing Sam from rushing any further forward.
It was hard to see very hard in the unlit alleyway, but there was a shape roughly the size of a small person lurking by a dumpster. Sam couldn't make up whatever it was, but he sensed it- the being was in pain.

“I have a gift for you” Jordan told the creature as he held out herbs, then gingerly laid them on the ground.

The clouds above them drifted a bit, allowing a bit of moonlight to illuminate the scene. In the dim light Sam could see the faint image of... well, he wasn't sure what it was, standing in the alley. It looked like a human skeleton, draped with the tattered remnants of skin. There was no telling what sex it was, most of the flesh from its torso had fallen away long ago. The creature’s eye sockets were empty and it groping about like a frightened animal searching for something. Seeing it cautiously creep toward the herbs, Sam recognized the frail frame & the aura of pain—the creature was starving.

Sam took a step backwards as the being approached them. He had no idea what the thing ate. It certainly looked undead, which would explain Jordan’s enthusiasm. The creature crouched low to the ground and started eating the offering. Jordan slowly reached out, petting the top of its head. Even the gentle contact dislodged a tiny amount of its scalp.

“It's okay.” Jordan spoke softly, though Sam wasn't sure which of them he was addressing. “We won't hurt you.”

“What is it?”

“A hungry ghost,” Jordan offered as an insufficient explanation.

“Hungry?”

“They died while afflicted,” Jordan answered, then noticed Sam’s confused expression. “The spiritualists have all sorts of names for it—You spent time with Bhavya, right? She’d probably call it suffering or attachment or something. When souls die with too much longing they can become afflicted with eternal hunger. They're harmless. They eat garbage, dead and decaying things, corpses too.”

Sam considered everything he knew about restless spirits—up until that conversation he’d only ever heard about vengeful spirits because that’s what hunters dealt with. If hungry ghosts really were harmless, then it’d make sense that they’d go largely unnoticed by the hunting community.

“Okay,” Sam acknowledged the new information, but had no idea what to say or ask next. It’d been a long time since he’d found out about an entirely new species.

“The hungry ghosts are desperate souls that escape their Hell. They’re a symptom of a problem with the environment here on Earth and between the planes. If I can study her I might be able to figure out how she got here,” Jordan added. “If there’s a tear between the planes in my neighborhood I’d like to know.”

“A tear?” Sam didn’t like the sound of that. “Like a shadow gate, but to a Hell?”

“Yeah, very similar concept to a shadow gate, but tears can occur naturally.”

Sam stared at the hungry ghost, the creature that had been to a Hell and returned. “Are hungry ghosts the only things that can come out of those tears?”

“Oh no, all sort of spirits and fiends can come through,” Jordan answered far too calmly for the news
that he was delivering. “That’s how most benevolent ghosts get back to Earth. It’s not very
common, but it does happen.”

Jordan stared at her for a moment, then began speaking softly to the hungry ghost. “Would you like
a corpse?”

The witch started to dig through his pockets looking for something, but the hungry ghost wasn’t
paying attention to him. It sniffed the air and turned to face Sam. The ghost backed up a few feet,
seemingly agitated, then paced slight while watching him. Its shadowy eyes narrowed as its rattling
sort of heavy breathing sped up slightly.

“What’s it—“ Sam began.

“Back away.” Jordan’s voice had a slightly tense edge that was disheartening as he sidestepped to
put himself in the ghost’s path while Sam cautiously stepped backwards.

The ghost sprang forward, rushing at Sam, but Jordan grabbed her and pressed a metal coin to her
forehead. She immediately collapsed. For a moment Sam wondered if the witch had killed her... or
the equivalent, but Jordan was exerted too much care while lowering her to the ground.

“She’ll be alright,” Jordan said in a soothing voice as he started delicately fixing the ghost’s hair.

“What the hell was that about?” Sam asked. He was shaking from the adrenaline rush of nearly
being attacked. “You said they were harmless.”

Jordan looked at the ghost for several thoughtful seconds before turning toward Sam with a furrowed
brow. “You aren’t human, right?”

“I’m part human—I mean I guess it depends on how you define it.” He didn’t like the implications
of the witch’s question. “Why?”

“Hungry ghosts tastes generally start off as garbage and rotting corpses, but it’s thought that if they’re
desperate enough they will go to the source. They’ll seek out corrupting forces, like demons.”
Jordan looked at the still ample supply of garbage nearby. “Or maybe they prefer to go to the
source.”

“My type is corrupted—I don’t corrupt people.” Sam crossed his arms in front of his chest caught
between offense and anxiety. “It’s the bigger, badder demons that do that.”

“Maybe that places you closer to garbage on that spectrum?” Jordan speculated with the oblivious air
of an academic.

“Great,” Sam groaned. He didn’t know which was worse the suggestion that he resembled trash on
a cosmic scale or that he might’ve found one more group categorically interested in killing him.

“I’m guessing. I’ve never met an Anathema before. If you’d like to stay here for the weekend, I
might be able to run a few experiments.”

Even in those absurd pants while holding a rotting ghost, the witch’s devastating smile made Sam’s
stomach knot. Thoroughly embarrassed at himself, he helplessly wondered whether Jordan was
attracted to men. It was so hard to tell if men were flirting with him... well, Brady hadn’t been hard
to read. But Sam pushed the entire idea from his head. Regardless of all the interpersonal problems
with accepting the invitation, he couldn’t help but imagine Jordan holding his arm over the hungry
ghost and watching to see if it bit him.
“I’m not sure how my boyfriend would feel about that.” Sam wasn’t entirely sure why he’d mentioned Brady, either to see how Jordan would react negatively to the fact that he liked men or to preemptively establish some boundaries—two painfully contradictory impulses. He felt obvious so he added, “I’m having lunch with him tomorrow. But I am interested in your research.”

Jordan didn’t even blink at the mention of a boyfriend. Instead his face brightened subtly at the thought that someone was interested in his work.

“Do you have a few hours? I want to show you something.”

Sam considered making a retreat, but he really did want to know more about this subject that he was relatively unfamiliar with. Also, he still hadn’t gotten around to asking about the revenant or the witch-hunter politics. Lastly, forming a good working relationship with the Uptown coven was on his to-do list. Cooperating with the coven’s leader would go a long way toward establishing some future deal or alliance.

“Yeah, sure,” he agreed. “For a few hours”

“Wonderful,” Jordan replied before picking up the hungry ghost and carrying her back to his lab. “I just need to grab some supplies.”

Jordan drove them across the Bay Bridge to San Francisco in his painfully conspicuous mint green 1971 Ford Falcon. It’d been years since Sam had ridden in a classic car, but there wasn’t any risk of conflating its delicate white leather interior with the more masculine Impala that his dad—Dean owned. After politely listening to a brief lecture on the effects of wind direction on the migration of lesser wisps, Sam decided to redirect the lesson toward a topic on his list.

“Little Portugal captured a hunter the other day. He said that he was investigating rumors of a revenant in the area. Do you think there’s anything to it?”

“A revenant?” Jordan visibly pondered the question for a moment. “I doubt it. Creating those creatures requires a very large amount of newly dead bodies—more than we’ve seen in the last few months.”

“Haven’t there been break-ins at a morgue?” Sam asked.

“Eight of them, three of which were my people,” Jordan corrected. “And I wouldn’t be surprised if half of the others were non-humans with how the Market’s been since that shooting.”

“So you think the revenant rumor is just a rumor? It’s missing a spell component to be plausible?” Sam asked, earning a nod from the witch. He certainly hoped that that was the case, but he still wanted to know what other misattributed red flags the hunter community might be searching for.

“What else goes into making a revenant or might be a sign of one?”

“For a basic spell you’d need three hundred pounds of sulfur powder, five ravens, several religious artifacts that you don’t want me to get into, and an animal containing more than five gallons of blood—a human won’t do,” Jordan provided as an aside that Sam already knew. “They usually have a master, but contrary to popular believe you don’t need an entire coven powering it. They can’t cross natural waterways or enter holy ground. There’s a blight that spreads around them, maybe fifty feet in diameter, but it takes root too far below the topsoil to be obvious. Each time I’ve seen one, I don’t know why but spiders kept turning up in my food for about ten days.” Jordan’s face contorted unpleasantly. “I lost a clothing size each time just from that…. Anyway, very driven and theatrical creatures, which is why they’re so popular for acts of vengeance. Have you seen the movie Sleepy
Hollow? Think the Headless Horseman.”

Most of the details didn’t sound consistent with the local happenings he’d been hearing about, nor did they resemble the vague description he’d learned as a hunter—well, aside from the bit about holy ground. He trusted Jordan to know more on the subject than hunters who had only really seen revenants from one perspective... likely fleetingly before hopefully spending a week and a half wondering why they kept having bad luck with spiders. So Sam took the inconsistency as evidence that they didn’t have a revenant on their hands and he’d likely have to consult a less-informed expert to predict how hunters might act in the face of the rumor.

“The one with Johnny Depp?” Sam asked to confirm he was thinking of the right Sleepy Hollow movie.

Jordan nodded, then added, “delightful in spite of handicaps like that.”

They drove for ten more minutes, south along the peninsula, beyond the big city to a place Sam had never been before despite seeing repeatedly from afar. Golden Gate National Cemetery was a massive field of green grass covered with roughly 150,000 white grave markers. The blanket of evening fog was already descending from the western hill line, threatening to cover the cemetery in an eerie mist before too long. One might find the setting ominous but for the fact that fog covered San Francisco and the surrounding area most nights. So really the chilling environment was typical, if not comforting.

Regardless, Sam zipped up his hoodie and began mentally reviewing how to fight zombies and ghosts. Unfortunately he didn’t have a weapon or salt and without any gasoline his lighter was only good for burning joints. Though he supposed Jordan didn’t need those things, in fact he only carried a canvas satchel.

“I need to take some samples,” Jordan explained their agenda as he climbed out of the car and thankfully did not pull a shovel out of the trunk.

“Samples of...?” Sam wasn’t sure how many more dead bodies he could endure in a single day.

“The health of the dead,” the necromancer answered cryptically. “I need to know whether there’s a rampant illness or if the hungry ghost was an oddity.”

“You think there might be more?”

“It’s hard to explain without making a drawing for you,” Jordan replied. “But I need to check the overall health of the ghosts nearby, then that will give me a better idea of how broadly to look for tears the hungry ghosts might be getting through.”

Jordan approached the locked metal gate at the main entrance to the cemetery. Evidently trespassing was on the schedule for the night. Sam waited to see if they were going to pick the lock; it was hard to imagine his companion scaling the eight foot tall fence in skin-tight pants. But of course, Jordan wasn’t just a witch, he was a man who’d become leader of a coven at probably no more than thirty years old. This guy undoubtedly had tricks.

Sure enough, Jordan pulled a travel sized spray bottle from his messenger bag. After staring at the darkening sky for a moment and checking the direction of the wind, he sprayed a bit of the liquid onto the locking mechanism. The metal rusted then crumbled to dust before Sam’s eyes. Jordan pushed open the gate and gestured for Sam to follow him.

“Hurry up. The metal only thinks it’s dead,” the witch stated as he closed the gate behind them.
“It’ll be back before too long.”

Sam didn’t ask. There was too much he didn’t understand about the moment and his company; a particular word choice was very near the bottom of the list. Instead he opted to defer to whatever experience the witch clearly had.

“How much have you been in cemeteries?” Jordan asked in a move that Sam chose to interpret as small talk instead of the equivalent of ‘Do you come here often?’

“When I was younger I went to a few on occasion,” Sam answered as he followed his guide through the rows of headstones.

“For fun or paying respects?”

Sam tried not to raise an eyebrow at the idea of going to cemeteries for fun. Maybe for someone who dabbled in the undead this sort of thing was considered a good time, but most people weren’t fans of cemeteries—hunters arguably moreso. Of course Sam had visited many for his own work as a hunter during his youth, but there had always been the unpleasant knowledge that for people like him it was an innately dangerous place.

“Paying respects,” Sam lied.

He stared at the simple uniformly white tombstones and thought about how different they were from his mom’s... as far as he could remember. His family had only ever visited her grave once in his memory, but it wasn’t for the purpose of honoring her. The third time he’d seen bones salted and burned it had been the few remnants that had been left of his mom. Their dad had decided that it was a necessary precaution, to prevent her from becoming a vengeful spirit. Some cynical part of Sam occasionally thought of it as destroying the evidence, of the past or one of his dad’s greatest failures—though there wasn’t much left to destroy. He was seven years old at the time, so the few charred pieces of her body had decayed well beyond any recognition.

Jessica’s body had been in a similar condition, only fresher, when he’d gone to identify her corpse. The right side of her face had been unrecognizable from the burns, but there was enough left. The memory of her charred face, caught contorted in the middle of a scream, it had haunted him for the first year. Through the passage of time and maybe his traumatized mind building a wall, he’d begun to forget the image. He was grateful to forget that, but occasionally it scared him to think what else of her he might forget. Especially now that his life was speeding up and so much was changing. Would he still be able to remember how she used to put nutmeg in her latte if walking through cemeteries with witches became a new norm?

The fog started to invade the cemetery. As it slowly rolled toward them, Sam considered how much of a red flag the scenario was for him. If he’d been asked while growing up to name a dangerous situation, being alone with a necromancer in a graveyard with almost no visibility would’ve been on his short list. But he wasn’t there as the necromancer’s nemesis, he was a guest. Arguably he was one of the things in the eerie cemetery that hunters would be scared or at least wary of.... Hopefully any hunters in the area would be smart enough to not actively look for trouble that night.

“You seem uncomfortable,” Jordan observed Sam’s nervous glances around at their very exposed position.

“It’s just with the hunters in the area, this might not be the safest place.” They’d have to be hunters with a deathwish, but such things weren’t unheard of by any means.

“I’m not concerned.”
Sam wanted to agree that he could see that, but didn’t risk the insult.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what do you think about the overall conflict with the hunters? Not just the here and now.”

“They’re a threat to my people, more than with the other covens. So I want them gone, dead is fine. Whatever is fast and easy.” He stopped walking in order to stare at a new grave. “The word necromancy scares people; for some reason it really scares hunters. You’d think agents of death would be more reasonable about the whole thing. But they like to come for us and we rely very heavily on the Quiet Market for our work.”

“Anathema like me also have an extra target on us when it comes to hunters,” Sam tested the water on whether Uptown might assist him in locating and rescuing the others.

“If you’re concerned about an ambush, I can easily protect you here,” Jordan replied as he picked up some dirt from a fresh grave and let it crumble through his fingers. “Some people would love to see that show.”

“I’m happy just to have you show me your research,” Sam assured him. He didn’t need to deal with an army of undead crawling from their graves as an attempt to impress him. In all his years of hunting he’d seen some crazy things, but that would probably give him a panic attack. Instead he decided to bring up another display of Jordan’s craft, which he’d hopefully be able to arrange for after their midnight field trip. “Actually, I was wondering if I could ask… can you communicate with ghosts?”

“Oh, yes.” The witch nodded, then dug through his bag of supplies and quickly checked their position in the cemetery. “As long as you don’t have a specific person in mind it’s easy.”

“At some point could you help me talk to some ghosts? Ideally some that may have come through interplanar tears from Hells. I was hoping…” Sam started broaching the subject, but trailed off as he noticed Jordan going about his business with visible focus. He thought the witch hadn’t been paying attention, but he was wrong.

“Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?” Sam raised an eyebrow before glancing around half-expecting something obvious.

Jordan slipped on a necklace that caused his eyes to glow lavender. He looked around, smiled, then said, “oh, this’ll do nicely. The samples can wait.”

“Ready for what?” Sam repeated with an increasing sinking feeling.

“Hold still,” Jordan instructed as he pulled a carton of salt from his bag, then started pouring a circle around Sam. “This will keep you safe from the ghosts if anything goes wrong.”

In a way it was oddly adorable to see someone trying to explain a salt ring to him. It was made all the more strange by it being a witch doing it. This was how the other side truly functioned. They had their own experts teaching their own novices how to utilize the fundamentals of the supernatural. The only difference was the objective.

“Jordan.” Sam felt a bit uncomfortable addressing a necromancer and coven leader by his first name, but he was starting to get desperate in his attempt to get a straight answer out of the witch. “What are you planning on doing?”
“There are more spirits in the area than usual, some of which are beautiful specimens.” Jordan pulled what was unmistakably a human jawbone from his satchel. The air turned even colder. In the distance the street lights flickered before extinguishing.

“Jordan, get in the circle,” Sam said as something between an instruction and begging.

“That would mess up the spell,” he rebuffed the suggestion. “I’m going to allow myself to become a conduit—a vessel if you will for the spirits—“

“No, don’t do it—“ Sam started pleading with him. He’d seen people possessed by ghosts before. It was incredibly dangerous.

“Just don’t leave your circle. I’ll be fine,” Jordan assured. “Then you can have your chat.”

“I meant—“ Sam was going to explain that he hadn’t intended to hold a seance in the middle of a god damn cemetery full of corpses in the six digits, but it was too late.

Jordan touched the jawbone to his chin, then the graveyard began to shimmer. Dozens or hundreds of points around them began to glow as the cold spots crystallized the fog in the moonlight. The icy wispy drifted and flickered in images of mutilated or decaying bodies. Several lingered, watch Sam, but many more rush toward Jordan, then faded into his body.

The witch trembled for a moment as he struggled to stay on his feet. Tendrils of soft blue light trickled from his eyes, nostrils, mouth, and fingernails before floating up to evaporate into the night. He candidly observed the salt barrier between him and Sam, then offered a menacing smile.

“We don’t serve your kind.” Jordan’s speech was ragged and echoed with several voices speaking in unison.

“What do you mean?” Sam asked.

“I escaped from your Hell. I will not be bound again,” a lone voice growled.

“I don’t want to bind you. I just want to talk.” Sam’s heart was pounding. He was finally communicating with someone with intel on his Hell. “I just want to know about my Hell, so that I can avoid going there.”

The many voices laughed ominously for a few seconds before the single ghost continued. “You don’t have to avoid going there. It’s coming here.”

Sam felt like his knees might give way from shock. “What?”

“The Army of the Burning Light, their agents are already at work on Earth, making monsters like you.”

“I’m not a monster.”

“The Lord Azazel’s special children.” The ghost scoffed. “Your kind were only made to kill and die.”

“I don’t want to kill. I don’t want anyone to die,” Sam said for what felt like the millionth time. But some spirit was telling him that he was made it kill. He’d been resisting that training and upbringing for the last six years. The thought that there was more to it than just his dad’s influence was disorienting. “I want to stop the death. I want to stop these agents, this army—that Lord…” He struggled for a moment to remember the name. “Azazel. Please help me. How can I stop them?”
The ghosts studied him skeptically for a long while.

“Tell me!” Sam shouted in frustration. The five tombstones closest to him cracked and he suddenly felt lightheaded. He fell weakly to the ground, but managed to stay inside the salt ring. Never in all his years had he seen ghosts destroy property like that.

“Before he can gather his army,” the ghosts hissed. “Kill Azazel and his children.”

Jordan collapsed as the spirits visibly fled from him. He coughed for a minute before looking up at Sam.

“Did you get what you’d hoped for?”

Chapter End Notes

I'm done with the bar exam stuff (hopefully for good, but I won't get my results for another couple months). So I'm back at it. I should be back to posting regularly again :D

It's been awhile since I've worked on this story and I'm not gonna lie. I've got some butterflies. Hope you all enjoy it.
Jordan dropped Sam off at his dorm a little after three in the morning. Following a fatigued thank you and several declined offers of another imminent outing, Sam staggered back to his room, then collapsed on his bed. It was hard for him to know where to begin figuring out how he felt, but at least it had the uniformity of all being bad.

He was completely exhausted and strangely dizzy. It would’ve been understandable for Jordan to be feeling awful; the witch had allowed himself to become possessed by countless ghosts in order to humor Sam. Granted, it seemed like Jordan was into that sort of thing, both the being possessed by ghosts and nerding out over the undead to a polite audience. Regardless, it had been a very long night featuring unnerving developments.

Sam stripped to his boxers without even bothering to get out of bed. The cold sheets reminded him of the chill from the graveyard, causing him to shiver. He covered himself with a blanket, but that didn’t stop his trembling. To his minor comfort, Furcifer hopped up on the bed to join him.

“Do you know a demon named Azazel?” he asked the tabby, who just stared blankly at him, seemingly waiting for something more meaningful. “Azazel’s some sort of high-powered Abyssal.” Furcifer hissed at the mention of the subspecies. That was, at least, an informative response. “Sounds like he’s head of a house, from the Hell of Burning Light. He’s got some sort of demon army. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

The cat’s ears cautiously lowered to its head and moved to almost hide in the crook of Sam’s arm. On some level it was hard to imagine what might make a demon cower like that. Though, Sam reminded himself that Furcifer was choosing to live as a house cat. It was likely an Infernal that was in hiding—it had things to justifiably be scared of. If anyone knew what constituted a reasonable degree of fear, it was someone who probably had been tortured by the Abyssal for who-knew-how-long. He petted Furcifer, trying to soothe the cat while considering the setup.

His hell had already sent demons ahead to make Anathema, like him, Azazel’s special children. Some sort of plan was already in the works. It had likely been underway for decades, since he was a baby when Azazel had done whatever it was that had stolen his soul and given him his powers. He’d been used, just like countless others.

He didn’t want to believe that the other Anathema were potentially barriers to stopping Azazel’s plan or maybe even threats. He’d seen them in his visions. They didn’t seem dangerous. They were vulnerable and confused; many of them were dying or had been killed long ago. There were hunters after them. They were victims in all of this, caught in the middle of this whole mess... just like him.

It didn’t make sense to him. The ghost seemed to think that killing Azazel’s children would prevent the invasion, but as far as he could tell he and his ilk had nothing to do with the invasion. He’d only just found out about it through investigation and blind luck. He was technically an Anathema made by Azazel, but he didn’t see how his death would be a setback to some demon army.
Sam glanced at his reflection in the darkened window. As far as he could tell he wasn’t some evil creature. He’d been sincere when he told Dr. Neves that. Sure, he had flaws, and maybe on some cosmic scale he was close enough to trash to attract a hungry ghost, but he didn’t think he was the enemy. He wanted to protect people, to save lives. To hell with what some trigger-happy hunters or a ghost said. They didn’t know him. There was something more going on.

Despite his fatigue, he got up and began pacing the room, trying to clear his cluttered mind. It’d been an impossibly long few days and suddenly the already-high stakes had just been raised. He caught himself compulsively checking out his window to make sure no one was watching him even though it was the middle of the night, then took one of his anti-anxiety pills for good measure. After finishing his glass of water he leaned against his kitchenette cupboards and took a couple deep breaths while trying to figure out what to do next.

If some big-shot demon was going to lead an army into Earth, he had to try to warn people. The Uptown coven was already aware of the situation thanks to Sam’s recap to their leader on the car ride home. Jordan had volunteered to notify the other covens since Sam didn’t have a relationship with Tenderloin, Palo Alto, Little Saigon, or Santa Cruz—though Sam took the time to send Stacy and her dad an email detailing his night personally. That left Sam as the primary point of contact for the one other major faction that he could think of that might be able to do something: hunters.

He grabbed his cell and pulled up his brother’s number. Rather than calling him right away, he found a joint, then smoked half of it to help calm his nerves and give him a moment to think of how to explain what to say. The whole thing sounded a little crazy, and while his family had routinely dealt in crazy, news about a demon army might be a little much for Dean to take, especially so soon after their dad’s death. Some tiny, anxious voice in Sam’s head tried to convince him to put it off, to sleep on it, to call Dean in the morning... but it couldn’t wait. The phone rang three times before Dean answered. Sam could hear a woman groggily asking a question in the background and the sound of shuffling around in a bed.

“Tell me this is important,” Dean said in lieu of pleasantries.

“I think I have a lead on that demon.”

“That demon you told me to stay away from because it might get me killed, that demon?” His voice was completely unamused. After the woman said something, Dean partially covered the mic and told her, “It’s not like you don’t have jobs I don’t know about.”

“Is that Jeda?” asked Sam. It was hard to imagine his brother spending more than one night with the same woman.

“Don’t change the fucking subject,” Dean replied. “Why do you have details on some demon? You’re supposed to be careful.”

Sam cringed at the not-wholly-unexpected turn. “I wasn’t going after him. I just kinda fell into some intel.”

When Dean didn’t say anything Sam imagined his brother’s lips thinning at the obvious evasion. He took another puff of his joint, then let it out while waiting for Dean to bite at the lead.

Instead Dean asked, “Are you smoking? Are you high?”

“I’m sober,” he quickly assured him. “It was just a long day. A really long day.”

“Fine.” Dean thankfully gave him at least that. “What have you got?”
“I think his name is Azazel.” Sam hesitated. “I think he might be planning something big.”

“Sam, give me some more details,” Dean’s voice had an annoyed, sharp edge to it. “I’m trying to help you so give me something to fucking work with.”

“I heard that Azazel is a Lord of Hell.” He decided to skip the whole multiverse issue so that Dean wouldn’t mistake the story for trolling. “He’s preparing some kind of demon army.”

“An army? The fuck?” There was a few seconds of silence from Dean as he tried to work through the shock. The woman in the background asked something and he replied with some throwaway comment that Sam couldn't quite make out before returning to the call. “What’s the source?”

Dean wanted to know where he'd heard about the demon army. Understandably so.

After taking a moment to gather his courage Sam admitted, “A ghost.”

“A ghost.” Dean’s voice was blatantly skeptical and it made Sam feel a bit defensive.

“It was fucking real—”

“And I don’t doubt that, but what the hell are you up to that you’re fighting….” Dean sighed at his own realization. “You were talking; you weren’t fighting it.”

“It was benevolent.”

He felt a little awkward claiming that the ghost hadn’t been dangerous, but he wasn’t exactly prepared to categorize it as a lie. All hunters knew that benevolent spirits could exist, though Sam couldn’t recall his family ever interacting with one. He and Dean had probably not seen one because their youths had been spent pursuing ghosts that were rabid enough to have developed notoriety. And that justified wariness continued to exist in Dean.

“How do you know that?” Dean countered.

“I was safe.”

There was a long pause on the line while Dean debated whether or not to press the issue. Sam had known that the subject matter of the phone call might lead to some unpleasant moments, but it really felt like they were a few select words from an actual argument. He noticed himself rocking slightly so he finished the remainder of his joint in two long pulls, then lay back down on his bed.

“You’re playing around with dangerous shit,” Dean finally said. “You fucking understand that, right?”

“I know, but I have people counting on me. You can’t ask me to turn my back on that.”

“I’m asking you to not get yourself killed. You’re out there, halfway across the country, with no backup—“

“I have backup.”

“Listen, I don’t want to get into a fight with you in the middle of the night when you just dropped a bombshell on me.” His voice had that unreadable quality to it despite the fact that in his fatigue he was letting slip plenty of profanity. “So Azazel is a scary fucking demon and he’s got some kind of army. Anything else?”

“To stop his army we need to kill him.” Sam hesitated for a moment, uncomfortable to bring up a
category that might encompass himself and the Anathema, but he eventually told Dean, “And his children.”

“Demons don’t have children.”

“Maybe it’s a metaphor?” Sam’s mind was racing trying to come up with some other explanation when a thought clicked. “Oh, shit. Hold on.”

He hurried across his room, but got a little lightheaded and needed to take a moment to collect himself before putting his phone down beside his laptop, then booted the computer up. After logging into his flip-side account he started going back through his web browser history until he found the article on succubi. He’d read it right after meeting Zoya and had been distracted by his fear of what she might do to him so he’d barely remembered one of the paragraphs he’d hastily sped past. The article briefly mentioned that succubi and incubi sometimes used humans to breed.

Sam picked up his cell and told Dean, “Apparently they can have children.”

“What?”

“Succubi and incubi can, at least. Why shouldn’t the other Abyssal be able to do it?” He wondered if Dean would realize that he’d been using 'Abyssal' to mean something more specific than demons as a whole.

“I’m gonna make some coffee,” Dean told the woman, then groaned before turning back to the phone. “Fucking demon kids.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed, caught between concerned by the new goosechase and excited by the possible explanation that didn’t incriminate himself and the other Anathema. “We need to find out who Azazel’s are.”

“I’ll do what I can to get something, but you know how hard it is to find solid intel on demons.”

“I might—”

“If you say that you know someone, I’m coming there and dragging you out of the goddamn state.”

Sam didn’t have the willpower to get into an argument with his brother about the trustworthiness of the Sunset coven or even Zoya. It was easier just to lie, making the source of information more palatable by fabricating a middle man and, ironically, making it less reliable. “I might have access to some books.”

“Books on demon family trees?”

“How would you know what they have in college libraries?” Sam joked in an attempt to de-escalate the moment a bit.

There was a notable pause. Dean wasn’t pleased with the evasion, but he didn’t call him out on it either.

“You call me the second you catch wind of these things,” Dean instructed. “You aren’t going anywhere near this Azazel or any of his kids. I don’t care if you’re ‘just checking a lead.’ You’re out. You fucking get me?”

“I swear. I won’t get tangled up with them.”
It was almost eight in the morning before he managed to get some sleep. Calling Dean and giving him a somewhat redacted version of the events had taken longer than expected. Afterwards, Sam made notes about the new developments, including musings on potential leads. He also emailed Zoya to arrange a meeting with her, his resident Abyssal and hopefully a resource when it came to demonic genealogy. By the time he was ready to sleep, the morning sunlight was shining through his window.

After catching a few hours of rest, he barely had any time to get himself together before Brady swung by to pick him up for dinner at Stacy’s family’s place. The drive started off normal enough with Brady telling several long-winded stories about his classmates scrambling in a panic over the lead-up to finals. He always seemed to get a kick out of the spectacle of seeing others spin their wheels when push came to shove. Much earlier in their relationship, Sam had suggested that he try to instill some of his calm wisdom into other students as an act of mercy, but the lessons on cutting corners, or, as Brady called it, ‘preservation of energy,’ had only fallen on deaf, ungrateful ears. So Sam had allowed Brady to fully marvel at the show, like a bystander gawking at an inevitable car accident.

Sam had barely even noticed how close his own finals were until Brady had mentioned it. With his dad’s recent death and the news that a demon army was attempting to march upon the Earth, the whole exams thing had kind of fallen by the wayside. Despite not having looked at his textbooks in far too long, he at least felt okay in two of his classes, but that left three others that were beginning to gnaw at the back of his brain. He was behind on his reading and had recently hardly been able to focus in class. After talking to Zoya and making sure that the covens were apprised of the situation with Azael’s army, he would dedicate a little time to studying and finishing his assignments. It was part of his self-care. But first he had to take care of yet another aspect of his personal life.

“You’ve spent time with Stacy’s family before, right?” Brady asked as he changed the music on the car stereo.

“Yeah,” Sam replied, grateful to already have an established cover. “I’ve been helping them out with a few lease issues and her family likes to have me over for dinner as a thank you.”

“Any warnings?”

“They’re a functional family. Like the kind that gets along.”

“Then what are we doing there?” Brady teased.

“It’ll be fine,” Sam stated. “That’s what I keep telling myself.”

The evening was unprecedented in its level of interpersonal entanglement, and what might arguably be some showing of commitment. Jessica had never shown any interest in introducing either Brady or Sam to her family, let alone both of them in their capacity as her contemporaneous boyfriends. The three of them had always existed as an island unto themselves, apart from the complications of families or their former lives. Sam hated talking about his youth except for hinting at some of the sources of his trauma. Brady and Jessica had given him as much privacy as he’d wanted when it came to his past—probably unwilling to risk reviving some buried abuse. In exchange, he’d never pushed either of them to let him take root in some dynamic that stretched back before their time together.

But things were different now. His relationship with Brady was stronger than before. They’d started to become involved with each other’s past, trauma, and relationships with their families. They’d both briefly met the other’s siblings—and experienced an oddly symmetrical dislike of the experience. And beyond their new dynamics, there was Stacy. They both liked her and previously that might’ve
been enough, but with the threat of something unnatural befalling Sam and possibly Stacy, it was important to make sure that her family knew who Brady was in order to prevent him from doing something truly dangerous in his hypothetical grief.

“When she asked you to meet her family, what did she tell you about them?” Sam asked, curious to know just how blind Brady was flying.

“Not much.” Brady shrugged. “One older brother, who might try to beat me up—“

“Calvin isn’t gonna beat you up.” Sam almost chuckled at the thought of the accountant doing anything like that. After a moment he realized that he wasn’t sure if that was speculation on Brady’s part. “Wait, did Stacy say that?”

“No. She said he could be a bit protective…” Brady glanced at Sam. “But now I’ve got you wondering. You know, I’d feel a lot more confident about this if you hadn’t just second-guessed yourself.”

“Going forward I’ll try to be more considerate of your feelings before I experience any emotions.”

Brady smiled and pulled Sam’s hand to his lips before telling him, “You’re incredible.”

As soon as Sam had entered the Chens’ apartment, Stacy’s mom had him in a hug. He had to fight his reflexive discomfort. He wasn’t completely unaccustomed to platonic hugs, but the two middle-aged women who had most recently given him a hug had both been terrifyingly powerful witches.… He supposed that Mama Chen was technically a powerful witch, and while he hadn’t previously been scared of her, the night was still young.

“I’m so sorry about your father.” She offered her sympathies as she released him. Stacy’s grandparents and Calvin were all standing a bit further into the living room, but they each gave him a little nod or weak smile, wordlessly echoing her sentiment.

“Thank you,” Sam told her, then looked to the rest of the family to extend his appreciation.

“If there’s anything we can do, just let us know.”

He had no idea what anyone could possibly do to improve the situation when it came to his father, but that had been the case his entire life. Anyway, it would take too much effort to explain what he was actually going through. Furthermore, articulating what felt like almost a lack of grief over his dad almost certainly constituted starting off on the wrong foot for a meeting-the-parents sort of night.

“I appreciate that,” he replied.

Before proper introductions could be made, Dennis came out from one of the back rooms, intercepted Sam, and asked, “Hey, Sam, could I talk to you for a second?”

“Dad, can you lay off business for just like an hour or two?” Stacy complained.

“I just want to run something by him. It’ll just be a minute.” Dennis put a hand on Sam’s arm and began leading him down the hallway to the office.

Sam looked over his shoulder to see Brady immediately be surrounded by the rest of the family, who had likely conspired to give him and Dennis a few minutes to chat in private. He felt a little guilty about the prospect of abandoning Brady, but he thought he might know what the head of the Chinatown coven wanted to talk about.
Once they were alone in the other room with the door closed, Dennis asked, “You’re serious about this demon army talk?”

“That’s what the ghost told me.” Sam shrugged, helpless to give a better answer. “I don’t know why it’d lie about something like that.”

“Jordan seemed fairly convinced when I called him.”

“You talked to him too?”

“I wanted to see what he thought of it,” Dennis replied, tastefully avoiding explicitly stating any doubt in Sam’s account of the previous night. He rubbed the back of his neck. “I need to talk to the other covens and find out where they stand on this.”

“Where they stand?” Sam furrowed his brow. “I don’t follow.”

It was hard to imagine where someone might stand on an invading demonic army aside from firmly against it. Even Bhavya would probably be opposed to something as large and organized as an army's worth of demons.

“We have most of our resources tied up finding and fighting hunters right now. And I believe you, but there hasn’t been anything like this in…. I don’t know when there’s been something like this.” Dennis shifted with the self-awareness of a man giving bad news. “My guess is that they’ll probably need more evidence before they start redirecting their focus.”

“How much demon activity has there been? Is it increasing?” Sam asked before pressing the point. “This affects the covens too. Look at Little Portugal. They were hit by demons, not hunters.”

“There were hunters there.”

“Investigating a bad lead and the attack caused by the demons.” Sam caught himself waving his arms around, gesturing a bit too emphatically in his panic. “The covens are watching the wrong threat and it’s not just gonna endanger our neighborhoods; it’s gonna endanger everyone.”

“I’m not saying that they’re going to ignore this, but you need to understand how unusual it is.” Dennis put his hand on Sam’s shoulder. “They all have a lot of people that they’re responsible for and you’re asking them to pull resources from a known, immediate threat in order to stop something we’ve never heard of before. It’s a lot to process. I’m trying. Jordan’s trying. We’re all trying to process this, but it’s new.”

“Denny….” Sam wasn’t sure what else he could say to encourage more action. “This scares the hell out of me.”

Dennis smiled sadly at him. “That’s cause you’re smart.”

Sam and Stacy’s dad returned to the living room, where everyone else was gathered. The brief, disappointing talk about the threat of a demon army had thoroughly distracted Sam and he only barely had time to remember the reason for the dinner. Luckily, he managed to make it back to Brady’s side before Stacy drove the entire evening off a metaphorical cliff, from which there was no turning back.

“Everyone, this is Brady.” Stacy introduced him—or possibly reintroduced him for her dad’s benefit. “My other boyfriend.”
There was an awkward silence as the entire Chen family replayed her words in their heads. Both grandparents furrowed their brows, likely rechecking to make sure they hadn’t misunderstood the English. Calvin seemed to process the information faster than everyone else, making a silent ‘oh’ with his mouth. But eventually the whole family stared at Brady for several seconds, then looked to Sam for his reaction.

Sam could feel himself turning a bit pink, but he managed, “Brady is my boyfriend too.”

“The three of us are in a relationship,” Stacy elaborated.

“But… but which….” Mama Chen started trying to figure out how to frame her question, then switched into Cantonese, apparently unleashing the floodgates.

Sam watched helplessly as Stacy started having a conversation with her family. He wasn’t offended that they weren’t speaking English; there was a fair chance that they were discussing Brady’s ignorance about flip side. He’d had a leg up on meeting her family because of his involvement with the flip side and he’d been the first of the two for Stacy to bring home. Unfortunately, Brady didn’t have those advantages.

“Should we do anything?” Brady whispered to him.

“Just smile and don’t make any sudden movements.”

“Does her dad own a gun?”

“Him having a gun is the least of our concerns.” Sam subtly grinned at Brady.

“I blame you,” Brady hissed. “You got me into this.”

Sam wanted to point out that it had actually been Brady’s idea to invite Stacy into a poly relationship, but he didn’t want to risk one of the Chen’s overhearing and placing an additional target on the new guy. Instead he summoned a little courage and held Brady’s hand. “It’s gonna be fine. I promise.”

Through some small miracle they managed to all get seated at the dining table without an argument breaking out. Brady sat safely between Stacy and Sam. Dennis was on Sam’s other side, followed by Stacy’s mom, grandma, grandpa, and then Calvin, who rounded out the table to be next to Stacy. Unfortunately that left Brady seated directly across from a little old witch with eyes that somehow conveyed every ounce of skepticism she’d acquired over almost ninety years.

At least the spread was a small feast. They were all temporarily distracted by helping themselves to braised brisket, garlic chili prawns, clay pot rice, and more. Sam was taking a bite of the roast goose when Stacy’s dad broke the uncomfortable silence.

“So, Brady.” Dennis attempted to start either a conversation or interrogation, depending on one’s perspective. “What do you do?”

“I’m currently in medical school.” Brady smiled politely, fairly sure that that sort of thing would win him points. “My focus is pharmacology.”

“So you’re into drugs?” Calvin asked, taking a casual jab at the new guy. He’d understandably reverted to big-brother mode.

“I prefer to think of it as chemistry, but obviously seeing how that impacts people’s lives is a huge part of it.” Brady attempted to spin the point in his favor. “I like to look at the big picture. It’d be great to be involved with the kinds of developments that would change the world.”
The defensive play had left Calvin or anyone else unable to take another shot at Brady based on the subject. Sam felt a little tension leave him at the thought that Brady was back on safe footing. There was still plenty of room for prodding, but at least Brady was feeling up for social spared.

“Ma, you studied chemistry in college, right?” Stacy asked in an attempt to highlight common ground.

It hadn’t even occurred to Sam that witches might get a higher education, let alone what they’d study. In hindsight, he supposed that chemistry would be a particularly appealing major for an alchemist… or maybe not, on second thought. The limited worldview of scientific empiricists would probably be frustrating for many people from the flip side.

“Organic chemistry,” Mama Chen confirmed.

Sam noticed Brady’s posture shift as he prepared to take the commonality and milk it for all it was worth, but before he could speak the conversation moved on.

“Law school and medical school,” Calvin commented, then glanced at his sister. “Have you suddenly developed a taste for doctoral students?”

“They have better taste in drinks,” she shot back.

“In her defense, she thought we were high school dropouts when she met us,” Brady joked, but no one laughed.

Beneath the table, Sam gently patted Brady’s leg to offer his sympathy on the joke not landing. To his surprise, Brady subtly reached under the table and took his hand in return. It was a small gesture, but considering the context, Brady’s silent reassurance was incredibly welcome.

“I’m sorry. I’m confused. Stacy, you start dating Sam first, but you knew Brady too?” Dennis asked in an attempt to gain some clarity.

“I started dating them both at the same time.” Stacy corrected. “They were already a couple when we met and I liked both of them.”

Stacy’s mom looked to Sam, then asked, “So how long have you and Brady… known each other?”

“A little over five years,” he replied. “We’ve dated on and off throughout.”

“ Mostly on,” Brady commented.

“Five years.” Calvin’s eyes flicked from Sam to Brady to Stacy, then back to Brady.

Sam couldn’t tell which wheels were turning in everyone’s minds at that revelation. It wasn’t inherently problematic as far as he was concerned. Wasn’t that sort of sign of commitment a good thing for a significant other’s family to hear? Though he supposed that that was actually an example of commitment to a third party. He suddenly felt very self-conscious about coming off as someone who was just using Stacy. Hopefully the fact that he’d spent so much time with her and the coven would help fight that potential perception, but it was still something to keep in mind. He wanted to reach out and take Stacy’s hand, but couldn’t while Brady was sitting between them.

“How do your parents feel about… this, um, arrangement?” Mama Chen asked.

“Do you mean the fact that Sam and I are bi or that we’re poly?” Brady said in what Sam interpreted as something more than just getting clarification. He was being explicit in a way that was an affront
to the tip-toeing nature of the question. Brady was trying to test the limits of the Chens’ open-mindedness by potentially forcing them to defend themselves against the appearance of homophobia. Sam squeezed Brady’s hand a little bit, trying to signal him to back off.

“Any of it,” Stacy’s mom replied, not directly engaging the bait.

Brady glanced to Sam, considerately looking for guidance in terms of how much to volunteer and possibly even tone.

“They know about my mom,” Sam told him. The truth was that Stacy and Dennis both knew about limited details of her death. He’d told Stacy about the similarity between his mom and Jessica’s deaths, but decided against mentioning it to Stacy’s family. One of the last things he wanted was for the Chens to decide that he was a curse to all the women that he was close to and cut him out of their lives. “My dad found out not long ago and was upset, but obviously that’s not really a thing anymore.”

The family all grimaced at the reminder that his father had died less than a week earlier. Luckily, their pity seemed to somewhat quell the tension in the room.

“My mother died when I was born and my dad doesn’t know. If he knew about Sam and me he’d….,” Brady considered the scenario for a moment. “He’d be furious.”

Stacy added some information in Cantonese that earned a few sympathetic expressions. The Chens had known that Sam no longer had parents at all, but the prospect of having a bigoted parent was hardly a positive thing.

“Well,” Dennis said as he looked from Brady to Sam, “that’s not something you have to worry about here.”

After dinner the table was cleared and people spread out a bit more. Sam was grateful that the three of them were no longer being stared at by Stacy’s family nonstop. Her grandfather took up his usual spot on the couch in order to resume watching his soap operas—thankfully with the volume relatively low. Mei and Mama Chen both started cleaning up the table and refused to allow Sam to help them. Dennis stepped out for a few minutes to respond to a few texts that Sam suspected were related to the flip side. That left Sam, Brady, Stacy, and Calvin milling about.

Brady tried to busy himself by looking at the decor. He studied several paintings depicting what Sam had eventually learned were Daoist alchemy rituals. One of the traditional paintings showed a blue demon being bound in flames. He stared at the slightly macabre artwork for a while, then turned to face the large decorative mirror on the wall that had been covered with a piece of red fabric.

“Old superstition,” Stacy explained.

Sam was grateful that Brady hadn’t asked for an explanation. He knew it was something about the way demons reacted to magic mirrors, but he couldn’t remember if they were supposed to hurt demons or repel them or what. Regardless, Stacy’s grandma would always cover the mirrors when Sam came over. It didn’t make a difference that he’d repeatedly assured her that it hadn’t ever caused him any problems when he’d happened by it when Mei wasn’t around. Though, he’d never tested its effects with something that required him to stare directly at one, like using it while shaving.

Instead Brady had pulled out his phone after receiving a text and immediately became engrossed in some text conversation for what felt like almost a minute. When he looked up Mei and Stacy’s mom had returned and were watching him along with Calvin. An embarrassed smile flickered on Brady’s
face as he realized that he’d been ignoring the Chens in their own home.


“Is everything okay?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, it’s nothing.”

“A family emergency is nothing?” Calvin said as he raised an eyebrow.

“No, a family emergency is none of your business,” Stacy told her brother.

Calvin shifted a little and relaxed his posture at getting called out for being too hard on their guest. He raised his hands in forfeit, then replied, “Fair enough.”

With his phone returned to his pocket for the remainder of the evening, Brady attempted to charm Stacy’s mom and grandmother with a routine that Sam had seen him use before on women of a certain age. It involved hitting a few canned topics like baking and celebrity gossip while pivoting on preplanned segues. For a moment, Sam thought Brady might’ve been thrown off his path when he hadn’t accounted for Mei’s dislike of the British Royal family, but he quickly recovered by switching the topic to the British occupation of Hong Kong, something Mei was eager to talk about at length.

Despite having fallen into Brady’s carefully-woven diplomatic web, Sam was still amazed to see that Mei’s polite reactions were completely void of warmth. After all, she’d been fairly kind to Sam ever since their first meeting when she’d helped him try to identify the source of his demonic aura—even after deciding that he was marked by a demon, the matriarch of the family had allowed him to join them for dinner.

As Sam watched the spectacle, Calvin leaned over to him and hooked his arm. “I’m borrowing you for a minute.”

“You sure...?” he started while Calvin began walking him toward the apartment’s small hallway. Brady spotted him once again being taken to another room and gave Sam an almost imperceptibly concerned face, to which Sam apologetically mouthed, “Divide and conquer.”

“He’ll be fine,” Calvin assured him.

They entered the family’s home office, then shut the door behind them. Calvin woke up the computer, then opened up a minimized web browser and gestured for Sam to take a look.

There was a photograph of a knife with a rough wooden handle and an unusual blade. The cutting edge of the knife had a very large serration pattern and there were runes engraved along the flat side. Its overall appearance was vaguely menacing.

“This is one of the adamiliel blades,” the witch explained.

“A what blade?”

“Adamiliel,” Calvin repeated. “They’re effective against demons and things that come from different planes.”

For a moment he considered asking if adamiliel was some sort of element that was unknown by mundane science, but that raised many unsettling questions about the limits of science in a reality that apparently was more complex than he’d been led to believe. Growing up he’d known about magic,
but somehow that was easily reconciled with, or more accurately dismissed in deference to, some more fixed, less-nuanced idea of the world. Seeing magic up close, crossing into alternate planes, having no fucking clue how almost anything really worked anymore—he was willing to believe that there were countless things that muggle scientists had no idea about. Whether adamiliel was a type of mineral or the product of a spell or just a fun nickname, that was one of the million questions he’d get to someday, but didn’t seem particularly pressing. No matter what, Calvin seemed to think it was rare enough that even just locating one weapon was noteworthy.

“How much does it cost?”

“It’s listed as unavailable. I emailed to see what that means. Apparently, it belonged to a private collector in New Orleans, but the thing was stolen about a year ago,” Calvin said apologetically. “There’s actually a bounty out on the thief.”

Calvin pulled up another photograph, this time from a security feed. There was a woman with long, straight, blonde hair in a greyish-purple leather jacket and dark skinny jeans. She was holding a security guard that could’ve easily moonlit as a defensive linebacker by his throat, lifting him several inches off the ground.

“What is she…?” Sam started, but he already had his suspicions. “Why would a demon want a demon-killing knife?”

“Killing other demons or keeping it out of other people’s hands?” Calvin suggested. “How badly do you want this knife?”

“Some demon stole my soul and is assembling an army to invade the Earth.” Sam stared flatly at his colleague as if to ask ‘Need I say more?’

Calvin gently rocked his head from side to side at the point, then moved on to the next issue. “Are you gonna go after her?”

Sam studied the contorted expression of agony or distress on the guard’s face. It was strange to see such a small woman lifting a man who was probably almost twice her weight with one hand. Of course, if she was strong enough to do that, there wasn’t any doubt in Sam’s mind that her vice-like grip on his throat and whatever wholly-justified fear the guard seemed to be experiencing validated such a reaction. Upon closer inspection, a dark discoloration down one pant leg made Sam wonder if the guy had actually pissed himself.

“Go after her?” Sam echoed the suggestion as he thought about all the ways that that could go wrong. He shook his head and answered, “No, thank you. I really don’t want to fuck with her.”

“So I’m guessing that knife is out of the question then,” Calvin speculated. He moved the computer cursor to close the window, but hesitated a moment, then bookmarked the page before closing it. “I mean, I agree. She certainly looks powerful, like on a whole other level.”

She could’ve been a demon, some other type of non-human, or even some witch using a spell to enhance her physical abilities. Any of those options were unappealing. He was too damn busy and in no shape to be pursuing someone himself—and he sure as hell wasn’t about to send Dean after her. His brother might’ve been an experienced hunter, but he still had a fractured vertebrae. For now, and possibly for good, the woman was a dead end.

“Yeah, taking her on seems like a bad idea even if you could find her.” Sam paced a bit. “You said the weapon was adamiliel. Are there any others? Or other types of weapons that kills demons?”
“Not that I know of.” Calvin shrugged. “There are a few corners of the Market that I haven’t explored. I’ll keep looking, but I don’t have a ton of hope.”

“Thanks for checking for me.”

“No problem. If I find anything else that’s effective against demons I’ll let you know,” Calvin said while starting to save more research in advance of shutting down the computer.

Sam stepped out of the office to rejoin the others when he saw Brady just around the corner from the office door, hiding by the bathroom, having temporarily escaped Stacy’s family. They both stared at each other for a moment. The walls weren’t exactly paper-thin, but Brady had been incredibly close considering the fact that he and Calvin had been speaking at their normal volume. Sam wasn’t sure how to explain that conversation if Brady had overheard it.

After a slight, almost-embarrassed hesitation Brady said, “I didn’t know you play video games. What is that, like Vampire: the Masquerade?”

He had no idea what game Brady was referring to and opted to err on the side of vague agreement. “Um… Calvin’s into them. I’m just dabbling—more like feigning interest. You know, making nice.”

“Is that how I get him to not blindside me every few minutes?”

Sam started guiding him away from Calvin for fear that Brady would actually try to utilize the in and end up discovering the lie. “I think he’ll lay off you once the initial shock is over. Maybe just give him some time and space.”

“Fine. Come on. I’m not letting you out of my sight. I don’t want you leaving me alone with her grandma again.” Brady muttered. “It’s like that woman can see into my soul.”

On the walk back to Brady’s car, Sam noticed Brady texting with an alarming amount of focus. He was barely looking at where he was heading and stopped occasionally to send something before hurrying a few paces to catch up with Sam and Stacy.

“Seriously, are you okay?” Sam asked him. “We can stop for a sec if you need to take care of that.”

“Yeah. What’s the crisis?” Stacy added with a raise of her eyebrow.

“It’s not a crisis, just a pain in my ass.” Brady groaned, then ran his fingers through his blonde hair. “Meg wants my help with something.”

“Meg is…?” Stacy asked while rocking on her heels.

“My sister. She’s… I wouldn’t wish her upon my worst enemy.” He chewed his lip, reconsidering the statement. “Actually, maybe my worst enemies.”

“She’s something else,” Sam confirmed. “What kind of help does she want?”

It was hard for Sam to imagine a scenario where he’d want to help her or even be able to. His plate was already overflowing with urgent matters to attend to, some of which had actual lives at stake. Despite having no real intention of doing anything for her, he wanted to let Brady know that he cared about the nuisances arising in his boyfriend’s life.

“She’s trying to track down some people we know. They’ve kinda dropped off the map recently.”
“I know some people who’re good at finding people—” Sam was thinking either the diviners at Little Portugal or maybe even Dean could get some hunters on it if it was an emergency.

“The family’s old loan sharks?” Brady joked, earning an unamused expression from Sam.

“Do you want help or not?”

“I’ll get back to you on that. This is Meg’s project.” Brady stuffed his phone into his jacket pocket with the enthusiasm of a man attempting to ignore a problem until it went away on its own. “Personally, I don’t want to get involved, but if she decides to insist and I don’t help her out a little, she’ll…..”

“Make your life hell?”

“Exactly.”

Stacy affectionately petted Sam’s arm with her fingertips before moving to walk beside Brady. She grabbed the side of his jacket, pulling him to her until he wrapped an arm around her. Sam smiled at the sight of them.

Sam let them get a few paces ahead of him out of habit. Historically, he’d unconsciously tried to make them pair off in public so that they wouldn’t attract attention. Brady and Stacy didn’t seem to care or notice, but Jessica had helped him in his effort to be discreet and delegate whoever drew the short straw to third wheel. At the realization of what was happening he almost hurried to catch up, then he hesitated.

They were still in Chinatown, Stacy was still a witch, and one of the hunters that had been at the church was still on the loose. There was value in not standing out. He continued to follow Brady and Stacy at a slight distance in order to watch for threats. Despite Stacy’s magical training, he didn’t see her routinely carrying spell components and doubted her ability to spontaneously cast defensive spells. That meant that it was on him to protect them if things took a turn. He still remembered his unarmed combat training, but he was weaker than he would’ve liked. Thankfully they made it back to the car without incident.

When they reached Brady’s car, Sam opted to sit in the back, allowing the two of them to continuing petting each other or holding hands up front. Stacy took shotgun, then leaned over in her seat and resting her head on Brady’s shoulder. “My grandma doesn’t like you.”

“I noticed,” Brady replied.

“I’d’ve thought that she’d be cool—well, less weirded-out by—the poly thing,” she explained. “She grew up in a house with like three wives.”

“Did the wives all date or was it just a guy balling?”

“They didn’t date each other. But even in that scenario I’m the one that’s balling. She should be happy for me.” Stacy grinned back at Sam. “Her granddaughter grew up into a better life, where she can have two handsome, white sex-slaves. We’ve finally made it in America.”

“We aren’t your sex slaves,” Sam corrected.

“Speak for yourself,” replied Brady. He reached over and slid his hand playfully up her dress.

“Do you think she’s homophobic?” Sam asked. The thought reopened some of the wounds related to his dad. He hated the idea that Stacy’s family, the nicest family he’d ever met, might contain even
a hint of that familiar form of hate.

“I doubt it. My cousin’s a lesbian and there’s never been a problem.” Stacy gave a little shrug. “She’s probably just weirded out by the whole thing. If it was something specific she would’ve been going on about it all night.”

“I’m allowed to occasionally not win people over,” Brady said in his own defense.

“Dean.” Sam noted the obvious example. He smiled, then added as a joke, “Maybe you’re losing your touch?”

“You touch is just fine,” Stacy reassured Brady as she took his hand and slid it along her thigh towards her crotch.

“It probably doesn’t help that you just left with both of us to go spend the night away,” Sam pointed out.

“Honestly, I think I might want to double-team you just to spite your brother,” Brady interjected.

“You really don’t like Calvin, do you?”

“I don’t like people who don’t like me.” Brady’s voice had a little more snark to it than usual. “Last time I read the human handbook I saw that listed on page four. You might want to up your self-preservation game, Sammy.”

“I don’t know,” Stacy chimed in, then told Sam, “I like your hopeless helpfulness.”

The next thirty-six hours were woefully unproductive. Sam had tried to arrange a meeting with Bhavya, Malcom, or Melinde regarding the demonic army, but only an hour before he was set to leave for his first meeting he’d received a call from Stacy warning him to stay home. There had been a handful of hunter sightings scattered across the Bay Area, including one battle in Oakland that hadn’t made the news. One witch had been killed and several witches and hunters had been injured. The result was that the covens had entered states of high-alert, hunkering down to see if the situation would continue to escalate.

He was temporarily blocked on making much diplomatic progress with the covens so he turned his attention to researching the Hell of Burning Light online. Unfortunately, most of his searching was hindered by the association between popular monotheistic interpretations of Hell and fiery imagery. Part of him wished that he was bound to a hell with a more unique name like Zoya’s Hell of Frost and Whips, though on second thought that would likely lead to an entirely different sort of inaccurate search results.

After several futile hours, he finally allowed himself to look away from the attention-grabbing crisis and instead face his more personal issues. He still technically had a life that needed some amount of care. His finals were coming up and his health wasn’t spectacular to say the least. He pulled up his calendar and began trying to figure out how he would manage to budget some time for studying and self-care.

When he emailed Dr. Neves to schedule an appointment, he was met by an automated out-of-office reply indicating that she was at a conference and wouldn’t return for five days, which left him without professional help for almost the entire week. In some ways he didn’t mind the time to sort through his feelings to craft a redacted version of what had become his life. For a fleeting moment he wished that he could tell her the entire truth, but that was drowned out by the hope that she never faced anything that would cause her to learn about the existence of the flip side and all its unsavory
corners. He tabled his emotional health for the moment and sent her a quick follow-up message assuring her that he would be okay while she was at the conference and that she shouldn’t worry about him if she saw that he’d reached out to her.

Checking the calendar he noticed a cryptic “DR - HS” written on the current day. He furrowed his brow, trying to recall what had been so important that he’d noted it, and yet he’d played it so close to the chest by abbreviating it that heavily. After a few minutes, he realized that the note was for “diviners ready - hunt starts.” When Calvin was giving him a ride over to see the captured hunter, he’d mentioned that the diviners assigned to finding the local hunters would likely start getting intel in a few days. Now that time was approximately up. The hunters were about to start feeling the heat.

Sam opened up a new tab on his web browser and searched for local breaking news. At first glance he didn’t spot anything that screamed ‘dead hunter.’ There were an unusually high number of animal attacks, which struck him as potentially the work of hungry monsters who’d been cut off from the Quiet Market thanks the the local hunter drama. He quickly checked to make sure weren’t in any neighborhoods that he or his partners frequented. But after a little reflection on the nature of the covens’ offensive against the hunters he realized that it would probably be more subtle than a dozen hunters dropping on the street like flies. Bhavya had suggested using something like a poison or curse with a delayed effect in order to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Things might very well be escalating right then and the hunters wouldn’t be able to spot the trend for a long while—possibly after a significant number of their people had already become afflicted.

He pulled up a map of the area and considered the actual magnitude of the area. There were seven million people living in the territory of the covens. He had no idea how many hunters might be in the crosshairs in that very moment. As of when he’d left for Stanford, there had been somewhere in the order of a few dozen active hunters that his family had known. Scaling that up to a national level or thinking beyond his own little corner of the culture…. He just wasn’t sure how many might be out there.

Sam tried calling Brady, but was sent to voicemail, then texted, “Are you around?” He stretched out on his bed and covered his face with his hands. It was the third time since the night of the Chen family dinner that Brady hadn’t answered his call. Rationally he knew it was silly to read anything into it. People were busy and missed calls all the time—hell, they were approaching the end of the semester and Brady could’ve been busy studying…. Not that he’d ever really been much of a studier in the past. It seemed like half the time he only studied so that he could play the flashcard game with Sam. The guy was just naturally gifted at basically everything he did.

Switching back to his laptop’s calendar, a new, unpleasant thought crossed Sam’s mind. Brady had been texting a lot with his sister right before going radio silent. Maybe the distance had to do with the looming possibility of his dad visiting? Brady might’ve been trying to minimize their time together for fear of having his dad find him with Sam, like what had happened with Meg. Or worse, maybe his dad was already in the area?

At first he was only imagining scenarios where Brady was stuck showing his dad around while pretending to live some sort of fake life. It would be dull and uncomfortable, but largely harmless. Yet as the time stretched on, Sam kept finding his mind drifting away from studying and he began checking his phone compulsively. The longer he went without hearing from Brady the more unpleasant the scenarios running through his brain became. What if Brady had somehow gotten caught in the middle of the witch-hunter tensions? Maybe Sam’s paranoia walking back to the car two nights earlier had been justified? He quickly checked the local news, then texted Stacy and Calvin to see if there’d been any attacks on the Palo Alto coven or in that general area. And even if it wasn’t danger coming from hunters—or witches—there still might’ve been a serious problem. What if Brady’s dad had come for his visit and somehow found out his son was bi?
He unconsciously rubbed his cheekbone while texting him, “Call me. I’m serious.”

Sam didn’t like the idea of using such an ominous message, but he wanted to shake something loose while being vague enough that it wouldn’t raise any red flags if it was seen by a homophobic father. He was shaking from all the nervous energy running through his system. To his relief, after a few minutes his cell phone started ringing. It was Brady.

“I’m not angry,” Sam started, trying to mitigate any concerns Brady might have.

“What’s wrong?” Brady’s voice was strained and lacked its usual playfulness.

“I was worried about you.” Sam felt like he might’ve turned pink, caught between concern and embarrassment at his apparent over-reaction. “You just fell off the world for the last day. I was thinking maybe your dad was around and…. I just got worried.”

“I’m okay.” He could hear Brady cover the phone, then walk a little ways and through a doorway to get some privacy. “My dad isn’t here yet. I’ve just been busy trying to… I guess get ready.”

“Can I help?” Sam asked without even thinking about his already-overwhelming attempt to juggle school, his personal life, and a fucking demonic invasion.

“Thanks, but it’s okay. This is just something I need to do on my own. It’s a family thing.”

For a moment Sam was struck by disappointment that ‘a family thing’ was beyond his ability to reach, beyond his help. He understood; on multiple occasions his own family activities and drama had been kept far and away from Brady. Granted, Sam’s family had a few more secrets than Brady’s.

“I’m serious. If I can be there for you, just let me know.”

“Thanks, but I don’t want to risk Meg getting anywhere near you again. I decided to try helping her out with her little project. See if I can earn a little favor; maybe have her help run interception on Dad.” There was the sound of some movement on Brady’s end of the line. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“I’m here for you.”

“I know,” Brady replied before hanging up.

Sam stared at his cell phone for several seconds and noticed that his hands were shaking. He put the phone down on the nightstand, then held his hands up to watch their involuntary movement. He couldn’t will them to stop. The only thing he had going for him was his mind and he couldn’t even make it control his body. It was just like nearly everything else in his life, something he couldn’t control or make better. The symptoms of his failing health painfully echoed greater helplessness…. He thought about Stacy describing his ‘hopeless helpfulness’ and felt ashamed for all the people he’d eventually let down.

As he ruminated on all of his past and inevitable future failings, he held himself and curled up into the fetal position. It didn’t make sense how he could hold himself so tightly while his limbs felt so unwieldy and heavy. The last remnants of his composure gave way and he started sobbing. It was all he could do. After nearly thirty minutes he’d run out of tears. The fears that he’d been rerunning over and over in his head had turned to static. It took him several more minutes to convince himself to get up. As emotionally exhausted as he was, there was too much to do. He assembled a cocktail of pills that in theory might slow his illness, or at least mask the symptoms, then got back to work.
Sam sat at his card-table-turned-desk with a textbook open in front of him and a roughly-sketch flowchart that probably needed at least two more revisions. He tapped his pencil on the book a few times while rereading a particularly dense paragraph. After his third attempt to follow the case’s logic, he put down the pencil and rubbed his face. For some reason it just wasn’t clicking with him. It was possible that he was distracted—he had plenty of justifications for that. But there was a sort of wrongness that he couldn’t place.

He scrolled through his notes from Business Organizations and saw a little collection of words apart from the rest. It read ‘Defense, Offensive use, Easy preparation, Targeted effect.’ For a moment his over-studious brain was trying to remember what lessons related to hostile corporate takeovers that applied to, but then he remembered that he’d made the notes in class while thinking about what sorts of spells he’d like to learn. If there was one thing that his outings with Melinde and Jordan had taught him, it was that he was ill-equipped to defend himself against flip-side threats.

He inserted a piece of paper into the textbook to serve as a placeholder, then closed the book and examined its thickness. As much as he enjoyed reading about the structures and legal issues associated with different types of businesses, he was grateful that there were only two more chapters assigned for the entire semester. The school year was almost over and he certainly felt like he was reaching his limit. He decided to check his email to see if there were any new developments with Brady, Dr. Neves, or on the flip-side front. There was an email from Zoya patiently waiting in his inbox. It had taken a little finagling in order to accommodate her schedule, but she was able to meet him briefly at a hookah bar near campus.

It was still the early evening before the after-dinner crowd had landed on the scene, though she was already hard at work when he arrived. He found her reclining on a pillow-covered couch, admiring her spoils. Two men were sitting on pillows on the floor in front of her and a third had just returned from fetching her a martini. She smiled at Sam, took a pull from the hookah in front of her, then beckoned him over with a curl of her finger.

“I don’t want to interrupt,” he said, then nodded to what was undoubtedly some mixture of business and pleasure.

Zoya reached out and caressed each of the men in turn. Knowing the kind of creature he was dealing with, there was no doubt in Sam’s mind that she was drugging them. Her voice was a particularly luscious tone as she told the men, “Be dears and go find out if there are women out there who could use a little company.” The guys obediently wandered over to the bar in a slight daze. When they were out of earshot searching for prey, she explained, “Another Twisted Heart has been having a run of bad luck with the ladies and I’d like to take the opportunity to get myself out of his debt.”

“Is three guys a big pull for you?” Sam asked while watching her victims from afar.

“Even with my delicate touch, I doubt I can convince all of them to get it over with at once.” She sipped her cocktail. “Men are such boys when it comes to group play.”

“Maybe some of them,” he corrected a little defensively. He was trying to get more comfortable with the fact that he was poly and participated in group sex. Sticking up for his affiliations would undoubtedly become part of that personal growth—within certain settings at least. Surely if there was someone who wouldn’t hassle him for fucking multiple people it was a succubus. Though as soon as he said it, he’d realized that he’d spilled a bit of blood in the water.

“Oh, my.” Her plush lips curled into a grin and she dragged her fingertips up her leg to pull up her already-short red dress a few inches. “Sweetness, do you play well with others?”
“A select few.”

“You’re one of my select few. We’re such good friends after all.”

“We aren’t friends,” Sam corrected. “We’re business partners.”

“Have I ever hurt you?” Zoya asked with false innocence.

“Yes,” he said flatly.

“I meant irreparably.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “That remains to be seen.”

At his retort, she beamed up at him with a strangely almost-sincere expression of admiration that made him shift. He didn’t want her to actually like him. He didn’t want to be her friend. His life was already too complicated. It was hard to process the idea that a demon like her, an Abyssal, might see something in him. The whole thing didn’t bode well.

“How about you tell me what was so important that you wanted to talk in person.” She played with the rim of her martini glass. “I’m guessing it’s something more than another appraisal contract.”

Sam glanced around the hookah bar to see if anyone was close enough to be listening in on their conversation. Zoya’s three victims were hard at work on the other side of the room charming a few women. Aside from that small crowd, there were two tables of patrons a ways off, but they seemed distracted eating a variety of appetizers and smoking. Despite the apparent privacy, Sam moved closer and took a seat on a cushion next to her.

“Can demons have children?” he asked quietly. The way her face lit up he had no doubt that she was about to hit on him again, so he added, “It’s for work, not pleasure. I need a serious answer.”

“You seem tense.” She considered him and a bit of her lightheartedness faded. “Something really did spook you.”

“The demon that holds the contract on my soul, I think he’s making an army to invade Earth. I’m trying to stop him—”

Zoya held up her hand to silence Sam before he go too far ahead of himself. She sat quietly for a moment processing the information. Her face had lost its normal playful charm. She looked more concerned than he’d expected from someone who seemed to specialize in her unique brand of destruction.

“When?” she asked.

“When what?”

“When are they invading?”

He was relieved that she wasn’t expressing disbelief or hesitation. To that point everyone he’d informed had been rather ambivalent about the whole thing. Most people had been inclined to doubt what he’d been told as implausible for one reason or another. But she was giving him her full attention. Considering the fact that this was the first detailed reaction he’d seen from a demon, someone more capable of assessing the situation, it made him all the more worried. Sam’s stomach dropped a few inches at the thought.
“His people have already started their operations on Earth, but I don’t think the army is here yet,” Sam replied. “I’m trying to figure out more, but that’s all I’ve got so far.”

“You’ve put me in a difficult spot,” she finally said. “You see, I’m obliged to notify my House about this potential overstep. My home might have to do something about the Hell of Burning Light.”

“You’ll stop them?” he asked, stunned that it might be as easy as that.

“If necessary, we’d fight them.” She didn’t seem happy about that prospect. “We’d fight them here, on Earth. And it would be very bad for business.”

He could picture it now: Azazel’s army showing up on Earth to make some sort of power play and in an attempt to stop it armies from the Hell of Frost and Whips, and maybe other hells, would come to challenge them. As much as it would be nice to have someone else fight his battles, the fallout from demon-on-demon warfare would undoubtedly take out numerous humans.

He could barely speak through the shock of what she was saying. “You… you can’t be serious.”

“Deadly.”

“Don’t tell them. Don’t tell your superiors,” he begged.

“Sorry, sweetness. I’m bound by covenants.” She looked genuinely disappointed in her predicament. “You said something about stopping him? I hope you meant preemptively.”

“I was told that the way to stop it is to kill him and his kids,” he told her, desperate for help averting that whole mess. “I need to find out about demon kids so that I know what we’re dealing with.”

Zoya pursed her lips as she thought about what he was asking of her. She finished her martini in one long, surprisingly ungraceful gulp, then signalled for one of her victims to bring her another glass. Once her drink was delivered, she sent the man away again with some vague promise of rewarding him later. When they were alone again, having had a moment to collect herself and restock her intoxicants, she turned back to Sam.

“It’s a faux pas for us to talk with humans about it.”

“Then this evening I’m an Anathema,” he suggested as a way to lighten her burden. When her lip curled a bit, he pressed again. “Please. Help me find a way to stop this.”

“All demons can have….” She chewed her lip a bit as she reconsidered something. “Well, they claim to have kids. Infernal can’t really make a new Infernal, but they’ve been known to adopt each other and form little cliques.”

“They’re allowed to make family units in Hell?” The idea of something so wholesome happening in Hell was hard to process.

“It makes them easier to torture and control if they have something to lose.”

“Fair enough.”

“Anathema can have kids.” She raised her cocktail to him in a toast. “Congratulations.”

“Not my immediate concern,” Sam reminded her. He hadn’t really considered what his status as not-entirely-human might mean in the long term, as far as things like having children. Curiosity got the
better of him. “But—just so I know—do Anathema, do their kids, are they—”

“It’s hereditary.”

He nodded slightly, acknowledging the news. Over the last month or two he’d gotten used to the idea of being different and in some ways the thought wasn’t devastating, but at the same time being an Anathema wasn’t just about having visions or being less-than-human. It certainly felt like his status or powers were killing him. He didn’t want to risk cursing a kid with those sort of problems. If he ever did get a chance to have a family, he could adopt, or maybe Brady could be the biological father. Regardless, it was a bridge to cross or burn on another day.

“If Azazel’s powerful enough to have an army,” Sam continued before she could press the subject of his non-existent progeny, “he’s got to be an Abyssal, right? What about them?”

“Some Abyssal can make Cambion—”

“What?”

“Half-human kids,” she explained. “They’re really rare except when Twisted Hearts—succubi and incubi as you might call us—make them. But the other houses don’t like making them. They’re not as strong as a full Abyssal kid. So why waste the effort?”

“Why do your kind waste the effort?”

“Because it’s fun.” She smiled at him, then added, “And we know better than most how much humans have to give.”

He couldn’t really write off Cambions as threats, but this Azazel didn’t sound like an incubus. It seemed more likely that his children would be purebred. It felt more in line with the leaders of a demonic army. The idea that the army might be somehow dependant on anything less than an Abyssal felt unlikely.

“How about full Abyssals?”

“All decently powerful Abyssal can make new Abyssal.” She sipped her cocktail. “Twisted Hearts do it through sex. Crossroads do it through shared pacts. But most Abyssal, they do it through a sort of ritual killing. They have to prime a sacrifice—”

“What kind of sacrifice?”

“Usually a human that’s the opposite sex from their vessel.” She waited a moment to see if Sam had a follow up question, but he was silent. “There’s a sexual torture process, all mess and no fun. Drinking each other’s blood. The Abyssal gives up a small amount of their power, then kills the sacrifice. The sacrifice’s soul is destroyed and an Abyssal is made.”

“So I should look up sacrificial killings to try to find Azazel’s kids?” Sam speculated.

“You’d be counting every new Abyssal, across every House and every Hell.” She pouted slightly and shook her head.

Even if he could find reports of that particular type of ritual killing, he’d still have to find each murderer, which was an ordeal all its own. From there, he’d have to hunt down the demons, which might’ve been long gone, then take a fucking census to figure out which Hells and houses they belonged to—and that would only tell him who the Abyssal parent was, not who the child was. He let out a sigh at the dead end.
“It’d be easier to find more information on this Azazel’s House,” she said in an attempt to be helpful. “There can’t be that many Abyssal in it and all his kids should be on the list.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?”

“Ask demons from your Hell,” she suggested. “It’s not like we keep a phone book on Earth.”

For months he’d been aware that it’d be helpful to have access to a demon from the Hell of Burning Light. Unfortunately, he had no idea where to find one. Though maybe Zoya just wasn’t being as imaginative as the problem called for.

“What about escaped souls, ghosts?” he asked while making a mental note to give Jordan a call about the potential project. “There are some interplanar tears. One of them let a ghost out from my hell. If it got out, maybe others did? Could they tell me about the houses?”

After thinking about the question for a few seconds, she nodded. “It’s possible. I guess it depends on how much your ghosts saw while in Hell, how much they gossiped. But it’s something.” Zoya raised her empty glass, gesturing to one of her victims that she wanted yet another, then looked back to Sam. “Talking to ghosts, contracting with witches and demons—has anyone told you that you’re a very strange man?”

“You don’t know half of it.”

The next morning Sam was sitting cross-legged on his bed in his boxers with Furcifer nestled in his lap. Despite the fact that his companion was mute, he was reading part of his term paper on piercing the corporate veil aloud to the cat when his phone started ringing. He attempted to gently relocate the demon off of him, but Furcifer rolled onto its back and stretched across his legs. On the fifth ring, Sam managed to actually reach the phone on his nightstand. Calvin was calling him.

“What’s up?” he answered as he finished saving the latest draft of his paper.

“Can you do a favor for me?”

Sam slumped back against the headboard, readying himself for what was probably unwelcome news. “Maybe. What do you need?”

“I’m going to a Quiet Market location to make a deal and I want someone to cover me.”

That sounded like a bad idea if he’d ever heard one. Not only had he never been to the Quiet Market or directly interacted with it, but he was still barely dabbling in the flip side. It was true that he was curious about how the other side lived, but ‘eager to learn’ was far from the preferred state of a guard while entering a tense and dangerous situation. Especially when he was years out of practice at fighting witches… though maybe witches weren’t the only thing he should be worried about at the Quiet Market. That combined with the handful of witch-on-hunter fights that had occurred across the region during the last few days gave him pause.

“There have got to be better options than me,” Sam pointed out, rebuffing the suggestion. “I don’t know if I could fight decently—“

“I meant giving me a second opinion on the deal, not security,” Calvin corrected. “With all the covens chipping in, the Quiet Market locations are probably the safest places in the Bay.”

That made things a little bit better, though he was still a bit surprised by the prospect of going there. Only a week or so earlier he’d heard that the Market’s business was only operating at about half. “I
thought everyone was still scared to go there with the hunters prowling around?"

"Yeah, local business is still down. We’ve improved security, but it can take a while for people to feel safe going back."

That seemed in line with what Sam knew of human nature. News of tragedy or threats had a way of spreading quickly and staying in the forefront of the mind for a long time. Meanwhile, reassurance that subsequent remedial measures had been taken was often accepted with a largely undue amount of skepticism. Anyway, it didn’t seem like the Quiet Market maintained a mailing list.

Hypothetically a werewolf could’ve learned about the shootout on the news, but who was about to tell him that it was safe to come back to purchase hearts?

Sam glanced at the pile of textbooks on the bed beside him. He only had a week before finals started and there was still a fair amount of work to do. Unfortunately, his focus wasn’t quite what it used to be, even with trying dynamic approaches such as explaining the material to someone—albeit, that someone had four legs and a tail. The imminent invasion of a demonic army and/or his deteriorating health seemed to have a way of depleting his focus. But maybe moving around, getting some fresh air, and scratching his curiosity-inspired itch was just what he needed to leave him more productive when he returned?

He fully dislodged Furcifer, got up and dug through his backpack to find a bottle of low-grade painkillers, then asked, “What kind of deal?”

“Loaning rare goods in exchange for services.”

“Do you already have the contract drafted?” He popped two pills in anticipation of his low-grade headache getting worse.

“Mostly. There are a few terms to fill in, but it’s like 95% done.”

Sam pursed his lips. He hadn’t reviewed the contract—not that Chinatown had to run everything by him. He wasn’t like their in-house counsel or anything…. He just liked to know that they weren’t setting themselves up for future problems. “How long do you think it’ll take? I have a paper I need to finish by tomorrow night.”

“We should be in and out in maybe three or four hours.” Calvin chuckled to himself. “Unless you get distracted by all the shiny objects.”

He tapped his fingers on the top of his desk while looking around the room, quickly assessing his workload. His paper was already researched and outlined, with the meatiest parts filled in. All that was left was fleshing it out enough to hit the minimum word count. He was in law school; the quality of the prose was barely on the grading rubric. The task would be tedious but easy and predictable. Taking a few hours away to do the favor shouldn’t cause a problem with meeting that deadline.

“When are we going?” he asked Calvin.

“How fast can you get up here?”

On the train ride up to San Francisco Sam considered what he was about to do. He was a former hunter, walking into the kind of place that hunters only ever dreamt of glimpsing. Not only was it a bazaar frequented by witches, but non-humans might be there too. Hanging out with covens was one thing, traveling between the planes was another—but entering into an institution of the flip side was a whole other odd facet to his journey beyond everything he’d previously known.
Calvin picked him up from the train station, then drove him a dozen or so blocks to their destination. During the short drive he explained to Sam some of the basics of the deal and let him look over the paperwork. It was a relatively straightforward agreement. Chinatown was hiring someone to provide protection for a cache of magical artifacts that would be stored outside of the state. The idea was to safeguard certain valuable but impractical items where they were less likely to be found during a hunter raid. In exchange for protecting the goods, the bailor would be allowed to use several of the magical artifacts within predetermined limits. The contract didn’t look bad considering its unusual nature, though Sam made a few tweaks here and there to help avoid ambiguities. He wasn’t sure how flip-side contract disputes were settled, but he preferred to not find out the hard way if at all possible.

They found a parking spot, then walked half a block until they were standing in front of a small hearing-aid repair shop. Its windows were covered in posters for products that had probably become obsolete during the 1980s. An envelope that was stamped with ‘Past Due’ was hanging out of the mail slot. On any other day Sam would’ve silently wondered how long ago the owner had died and then made a prediction of how far out the looming foreclosure sale would be…. Maybe two months had the location actually been as abandoned as it appeared. But he knew better than to fall for appearances on an outing like theirs.

Calvin touched the door jamb a few times where the paint was flaking, then opened the door and stepped inside. Sam followed him into the poorly-lit retail showroom. Behind a display counter featuring various hearing aids stood a middle-aged man wearing a necklace that Sam recognized as being a charm worn by some of the Sunset witches. Calvin gave the other witch a little nod of acknowledgement before leading Sam to a sketchy-looking elevator on the back wall. When they were inside the elevator, Calvin waited for the doors to close, then checked his watch rather than pressing a button. Sam waited patiently for the elevator to move, spatially shift, or otherwise defy physics in some sort of headache- or nausea-inducing manner.

“These damned timed security systems are always screwing things up,” Calvin complained. “But it’s better to keep too many people out than let too many people in.”

“Did the location that got hit have this much security or is this a new—“ Sam started, but stopped when Calvin held up a hand to silence him.

The witch placed his finger on the emergency stop button without taking his eyes off his watch. When the second hand hit fifty-five, he pressed the button. The elevator began moving down despite the ground floor being the lowest floor listed of the bank of buttons.

“The other location didn’t have nearly this level of security. This place was upgraded last week. Before there wasn’t the timed system and there wasn’t a magical lock on the front door either,” Calvin answered, then turned to look at Sam and spotted him fidgeting while nervously glancing around the elevator. “You need to relax a little more. You look….”

“I look like what?”

“You look nervous.“

“To be fair, I am.”

“Well, yeah. But try to loosen up. You’ve got this antsy vibe to you. You look as spooked as a hunter—“

Sam staggered to the side and stared at Calvin, exasperated. His heart was hammering, making him suddenly a bit lightheaded. “Fucking—don’t tell me that.”
“I was exaggerating. I just meant that you should relax. You’re one of the good guys. No one’s gonna bite.” Calvin reassured him, then added with a smirk, “Maybe the demonic aura wouldn’t have been the worst for your street cred.”

“I can’t just turn it on,” Sam replied, but he was barely thinking about it. He was too distracted trying to figure out how to pretend to be calm. He immediately regretted leaving his weed and pills at his dorm.

“I’m kidding. You’ll be fine. You’re with me.” The witch gripped Sam’s shoulders in an attempt to ground him more. “Just take some deep breaths. There aren’t any hunters in there. We’re past the scary part. Okay?”

“Oh, okay,” Sam echoed. When Calvin released him, he tried to take a few calming breaths, which helped a little… until his companion attempted some small talk.

“So….” Calvin paused ominously. “Is Stacy really into that Brady guy?”

“I mean… as far as I can tell. They… they go on dates.” Sam stared straight ahead at the elevator doors, painfully aware that he was temporarily trapped in a small, metal box with his girlfriend’s older brother. “I’m really uncomfortable right now.”

Calvin smiled to himself. “Don’t worry. I’ll grill you later.”

“You aren’t helping.”

“Don’t you have a sibling? This sort of joking around is normal.”

Sam tried to imagine having the sort of relationship with Dean that included good-natured teasing. They barely even engaged in bad-natured teasing. For the most part they kept it professional, occasionally spiced up with blatant hostility or even less frequently with emotionless expressions of concern. Playful teasing was the territory of friends, and they were far from friends.

After a moment’s hesitation, Sam explained, “He and I don’t have that kind of relationship.”

“Oh….” Calvin nodded as he processed the implications of that particular familial relationship. “Shit. Sorry if I scared you.”

“It’s okay. I’m just a little stressed,” Sam replied while shifting awkwardly. He was dying to get out of that tiny room and walk off some of his nervous energy. “How far down does this elevator go?”

“I don’t think ‘down’ is the right way of thinking about it. We go somewhere else.”

“I didn’t feel us shifting planes.”

“They wouldn’t have the Quiet Market on another plane. Nobody wants to feel like shit every time they run out to get materials. The non-humans would starve to death or riot.”

“So when you say ‘somewhere else’ you mean…?”

“Somewhere else,” he repeated with a shrug. “I don’t know. All this stuff has been around for centuries in one form or another. The technology and spellwork might improve, but I don’t know who built or oils the machinery.”

Right on cue, the elevator dinged and the door opened. The first thing he noticed was the warm breeze that rushed into the elevator. It carried the smell of raw spices and the sound of many voices
speaking over each other. When the door opened fully, it revealed a short corridor lined with grey stone on either side under the shade of a red awning. The elevator doors seemed to be recessed into the alcove of a building that Sam knew couldn’t have been the same one that the hearing aid store had been located in. Stepping out into the corridor, Sam got his first glance at the Quiet Market manifested.

He hadn’t been expecting an open-air market located on a street between two city blocks. The buildings around them were made in a variety of dull stones or concrete and appeared to vary in height between three and six stories tall. Instead of an asphalt road with sidewalks, the ground was uniformly cobblestone that had been worn down from use. The few unilluminated street lights he could see peeking above the merchant stalls looked almost like gas lights. Above it all was a clear, sunny sky—the elevator really hadn’t gone ‘down.’

“This is Market Hub #7,” Calvin explained. “It’s the physical location connected to access points in San Francisco, Hong Kong, Montreal, Beirut, Chennai, and Cusco.”

“Wait. Hub?” He was still too much in shock to process Calvin’s casual tone and insane information. “I could walk out another exit and end up in India?”

“You need to buy a permit to access a new exit. I have a permit for Hong Kong and Montreal, but the others are too rich for my blood right now.” Calvin moved closer and lowered his voice. “It’s meant to keep non-humans from migrating too easily, but it makes it so that almost everyone who isn’t a high-power dealer only has two or so permits.”

Sam raised his eyebrows at the thought. “It’s flip-side immigration?”

“More or less.”

“I have so many questions and we’re only ten feet into this place.”

“Yeah, welcome to the magical side of life.” Calvin gestured to the market. “And its beautiful bureaucracy.”

Sam stared at the strange scene and his brain began racing through countless curious tangents. There were people of different species from different countries engaging in trade in some sort of neutral territory that had regulations. Was the entire system based on bartering for goods and services or was there a uniform currency? Were there actually authority figures in the market or was the pressure of mutual reliance sufficient to keep everyone mostly in check? Were sales subject to taxation? Suddenly he could see why Wren had fallen in love with the Quiet Market and dropped out of college to pursue it full-time.

Sam could hear several people speaking Spanish nearby and was reminded of the simple multicultural aspects like basic communication.

“I’m guessing that the writing isn’t actually all in English.”

“It’s your most proficient language.” Calvin looked less than thrilled. “Makes me wish I wasn’t bilingual. All the text is like half-sized in English and Cantonese.”

The outdoor stalls contained a dizzying variety of fresh and dried plants, live and dead animals, minerals, magical trinkets, clothing, bones, and more. Sam stopped briefly to gawk at a collection of twenty different types of eggs sitting under heat lamps to incubate them. The merchant was a stout woman with white frayed hair, wrinkled skin, and a nose that looked like a prosthetic. She began speaking to him in French, but Calvin dragged Sam away while deflecting her sales pitch with what
had to have been only a single-semester understanding of the language.

“Come on,” Calvin told him. “If you look at something for more than five seconds the vultures are gonna try to sell you a nixie egg and sweeten the deal with a persian carpet.”

“What?”

“Don’t ask.”

“I know Wren was gonna make a deal with diamonds,” Sam said as he followed Calvin through the thin crowd of people, “but if I wanted to buy something…. I’m guessing they don’t take cash.”

“In terms of universally accepted tangible currencies there are natural gems—not that lab-grown stuff —platinum, adamiliel, gold, and blood ore—”

“Blood ore?”

“It takes blood magic to make and it smells awful. Never trade for it. You can’t wash that smell out of clothes.” Calvin frowned at an unpleasant memory. “Less tangible currencies are power and time, but you have to get a quality rating and the denominations are so small that it’s a headache unless you’re making a really big purchase.”

“When you say time…. Is that buying and selling time that you’re alive?” Sam asked, painfully aware of the fact that he might be dying.

“It can keep you young, but it won’t keep you from dying of anything aside from old age,” Calvin explained. “Don’t dabble in that stuff. Most people who can afford to trade in time are wealthy enough to control that commodity. There are horror stories of deals and wagers gone bad. You think you’re on a good roll, then one day you find out the hard way you’re a novice and end up an eight-hundred-year-old skeleton.”

“And are sold on this street,” Sam commented as they passed a table of mummified limbs.

“Gotta keep the Market moving,” Calvin agreed. “Power is a similar concept, but it’s closer to spellpower or magical ability. Again, watch out for the big fish.”

Calvin guided him between two stalls and into a large building made of coarse tan stone. The interior reminded him of a shopping mall packed with more well-established stores than what was outside. In addition to signs listing the names of various shops, there were also simplified images that reminded him of the informational signage for restrooms or stairs, but the symbols were unfamiliar.

A long stretch of the hallway above the doorways was covered in a strange assortment of displays that gradually evolved from magically changing text on chalkboards to split-flap displays to pixelated LEDs to high resolution monitors. Regardless of the sophistication, each display depicted simple sets of numbers and letters that seemed to change every few seconds.

“Those are the international auctions,” Calvin explained when he saw Sam watching the indecipherable readouts. “Each display lists a lot, its current bid, and the time remaining.”

“How do you know what’s in a lot?”

“Some are kept private, but you can do a blind bid. I don’t recommend it though. That’s a good way to either end up with a lot of stuff that you don’t know what to do with it, or you might swoop in on something really valuable and make some enemies.” The witch kept them moving while continuing his explanation. “Most lots you can find listed on a handful of dedicated websites or if you find an
on-site indexer wandering around here they can help you find what you’re looking for.”

There were people whose job was to know the contents of hundreds or thousands of flip-side auctions. The thought made that little part of Sam that had longed for a boring, civilian life wither slightly. His curiosity flared and he imagined he could’ve spent days studying the lots if it wasn’t for his more pressing responsibilities.

He barely managed to get out of the way of a group of five men carrying metal suitcases that were attached to their wrists. One of them appeared to be entering information into his cell phone, which made Sam realize the opportunity for more intel. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket in hopes of seeing what time zone he was in, but the time was still Pacific Daylight Savings time. Based on the climate, the only place the hub could’ve been located was in the southwestern United States, but he couldn’t imagine where the marketplace could’ve hidden there. He blew off the attempt to solve the mystery of where they were and decided to just take in as much of the experience as he could.

While they moved through the building, they walked by an archway with a sign above it depicting a fanged mouth with a coin resting on its tongue. When Sam peeked inside he saw a lobby filled with half a dozen lush chairs and a reception desk attended by a woman dressed in a black and plum uniform. She looked at him, waiting to see if he was there with purpose, possible even for an appointment of some sort. As his eyes reflexively moved to evade hers he spotted one of the establishment’s services.

Beyond the lobby was another room with its door partially ajar. Inside a woman dressed in one of the uniforms was straddling a man on a chair. She was holding his arm up in front of him while licking blood from his palm. As Sam watched the receptionist walked over and closed the door the remainder of the way, providing the couple privacy. She leaned against the door jamb seductively, then snapped her teeth at Sam, causing him to hastily catch up to his guide.

“That’s a dark den,” Calvin explained. “A recreational club with all sorts of non-human services.”

“Was she a vampire?”

“Probably. Dark dens help keep non-humans off the street. They get paid and can buy what they need.”

“Is it a brothel?”

“It’s a lot of things,” Calvin replied, avoiding admitting to knowing where to find non-human prostitutes. “They used to employ a djinn, but last year she took a job at some private retreat up in Napa. I have no idea what rich wine-snobs fantasize about.”

The whole thing made Sam a bit uncomfortable. It was dangerously close to his feared scenario of private collectors capturing non-humans for their powers—people like him. The discovery was a stark reminder of one of the dangers of that place. After all, Wren had once found potential buyers for psychics through the Quiet Market.

He looked back at the dark den with a new gnawing sensation in his stomach. His lips moved a moment before he could summon his voice to ask, “Are they slaves?”

“Most of them don’t have all the same job opportunities as humans,” Calvin gave as an unsatisfactory answer. “They get some protection, time off, and pay—but no, it’s not what you’d think of as real freedom.”

The two of them continued through the maze of interconnected buildings until they reached a small
atrium filled with dozens of utilitarian, metal tables. Calvin guided them over to a woman with dark brown skin, tight braids that draped to her mid-back, and a pantsuit made of yellow linen. She was briefly introduced as the coven’s business partner, Ms. Busia. Sam had merely been introduced as a colleague and was there to be a fly on the metaphorical wall unless he had any contributions. They had hardly sat down at one of the free tables before Calvin was pulling out the paperwork.

A waiter delivered a metal tray that held a simple stainless steel teapot and three handleless tea cups, but didn’t bother to pour their beverages or ask if they wanted anything else. Calvin filled the tea cups himself, then began drinking his while talking with the woman. Sam picked up a cup and cautiously sniffed the liquid. It was some sort of mint tea. He took a sip before looking around at his surroundings while listening to the negotiations.

There were a dozen other parties seated at their own tables discussing business transactions. To his surprise, despite being objectively within earshot, he couldn’t manage to eavesdrop on any of the other groups. There must’ve been some sort of magical or acoustical design that allowed them their privacy while avoiding all the potential headaches of providing dozens of private rooms. Sam certainly didn’t want to go into a secluded place in that bizarre location—and he would imagine the woman they were meeting with would’ve been equally opposed to being cornered by two strange men.

As he watched Calvin and Ms. Busia negotiate in such an odd environment, Sam began considering the cultural aspects of contracts. For all he knew, he wasn’t in the United States anymore. Practically speaking he was probably in the equivalent of international waters, some place between nations where the law was something else entirely. He didn’t know enough about those sorts of situations. Law school had always assumed that he’d be under some jurisdiction with laws written into books. Looking around, he had no idea how the place even held itself together.

He supposed that that was a recurring theme of the flip side. To say that it was lawlessness was an oversimplification. Technically, all people existing on Earth, interacting with human society engaged with law and at least order to some extent. Hunters still feared the law. Witches still tried to work around it. Demons seemed to ignore it as beneath them, and predictably so—but Zoya had mentioned that she was bound by covenants, so demons adhered to rules and laws; they just weren’t human ones. The thought struck him as important, but he wasn’t sure what to do with that information. It tickled the back of his mind throughout the contract discussion and even after Ms. Busia had left with her copy of the signed contract.

Before Calvin could stand up, Sam put his hand on the witch’s arm, tilted his head at the scene around them and asked, “Are there demons here?”

“Even here they’re pretty rare.” Calvin leaned in to speak quietly to him despite the acoustical privacy. “Earlier joking aside, I wouldn’t have asked you to come if your demon aura was still visible.”

“The fact that I could disguise my aura with so little time and resources—you might want to reconsider how rare they are. Especially with what I heard.”

“Point taken.”

After getting up from their table, Calvin led Sam on another errand. They went to a small merchant stall in one of the outdoor areas. Calvin began conversing with the shopkeeper in Cantonese and their speech quickly picked up the unmistakable rhythm of haggling over a price. Eventually, Calvin pulled a dime baggy containing half a dozen diamonds from the inner fold of his wallet. He carefully withdrew two gems from the bag and placed the on the corner. The merchant examined them with a jeweler’s loop for a couple of minutes, then extended his hand to Calvin, who shook it.
The merchant began digging through a cupboard and produced what looked like a small leather satchel. Calvin took the satchel, nodded thanks to him, then guided Sam away to somewhere a bit more secluded.

“With everything going to hell, we thought you could use something like this,” Calvin said, then handed Sam the satchel.

He opened the leather bag to find a pistol and a small box of bullets.

“What?”

“You need to be able to defend yourself. If you’ve ever played arcade games, it’s like that, but obviously, you know, more so.”

In a way it was cute that Calvin felt the need to explain to him how to fire a gun. Yet at the same time it was a bit unsettling to be holding a weapon that wasn’t a knife again. It’d been roughly five years since he’d used a firearm. The weight and feel of it in his hand reminded him of his childhood, specifically moments of intense violence. His skin became goosebumped and his heart pounded a bit faster, but he tried not to let it show. There was obviously something noteworthy about the weapon for it to be purchased in such an odd location.

“I thought you were having trouble finding weapons against demons?” he asked.

“This isn’t effective against demons. It’s just unregistered and enchanted so that it won’t hold prints.” Calvin patted Sam’s arm, then resumed guiding him through the marketplace.

Sam didn’t immediately follow. His brain was still trying to wrap itself around the unusual gift. He looked down at the essentially-untraceable gun that didn’t seem to be particularly effective against monsters. His chest tightened and he felt a bit faint at the realization of what it was meant to be used against:

Hunters.

Chapter End Notes

Fucking finally got this chapter posted. Sorry for the big dry spell. After taking the Bar Exam* my life kinda got crazy for a few months and there was so much change that I just couldn’t focus. Things are starting to stabilize and I feel like I’m getting a grip on my life again. Back in May I’d had this chapter about 50% done, but I was just mentally not there. I had a few fleeting moments of writing little blurbs on different projects, but not much that was too substantive (aside from the Sam at Stanford deleted scene). But a little over a week ago I was telling a friend about this iteration of Sam and I got super excited about him. That lined up with me just being in a better place overall, so everything started flowing again and I managed to finish this chapter off without any hiccups.

I’m hoping that I’ll continue to be in a good place going forward and that that will allow me to update regularly.

*Also, for anyone who cares and didn't see it in a comment somewhere, through some fucking miracle I passed the Bar Exam :D
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!